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Crossing the Sound Barrier: Communication of LSP in Audiovisual Translation for the Deaf

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ABSTRACT

Global communication between peoples has accelerated exponentially since the digital revolution of the eighties. Better and faster technological channels for communicating information across the globe, have led to a handful of languages taking centre stage, with English holding the lion's share in the fields of international business and science communication. We communicate through written and spoken modes of discourse via telephony, the Internet, DVDs, CD-ROMs and the media. Much of our communicative frenzy is conducted through the production of written text typologies directly accessible only to those able to read and to understand the major languages involved in the global exchange of information and ideas. Alternatively, the translation of kilometres of script provides the rest of humanity with access to the realities of our multilinguistic, multicultural, modern world. Likewise, babble in many tongues crosses oceans and the ionosphere in a constant cacophony of sounds; but it is not accessible to all. Across the world, it is estimated that there live around 70 million deaf or seriously hearing-impaired people who experience a constant state of silence and are cut off from much communication by an invisible physiological barrier: deafness.

The profoundly deaf and hard-of-hearing live and work like their fellow citizens, but constantly have to adjust to sound deprivation in order to communicate beyond the self. If properly trained, they can learn to lip-read and speak the language of their country of residence or they may resort to sign language amongst themselves. But how do deaf people cope with international communication, for example the use of English as a foreign language? Deaf people can and do learn foreign spoken languages, but only a minority of them reach high levels of competence, whereas the rest, rely on written translation like hearing people. How is the barrier of spoken English dialogue crossed? How do deaf people gain access to information through English and how is LSP, so commonly encountered in international communication, transferred to deaf people?

An attempt is made to answer these questions through the author's experience of Italian deaf people's contact with English. In particular, research will be outlined in the area of access by the Deaf to feature films and television through audio visual translation via subtitling or on-screen sign language interpretation. Research in progress is reported within an Italian National Research Project (PRIN) entitled *Identity and Culture in English Domain-specific Discourse* (coordinated by Prof. Maurizio Gotti). The domain-specific discourse in question is of socio-political nature and more specifically legal, medical and institutional terminology found in two multimodal corpora:

- a corpus comprising three well-known contemporary American feature films on DVD covering different socio-political themes from which two parallel written corpora have been compiled for comparison and analysis: the transcribed spoken-English dialogues aligned with their Italian subtitles;
- a small corpus of video recorded Italian TV news bulletins in spoken Italian, together with simultaneous interpretation in Italian Sign Language (LIS), related exclusively to Anglo-American news events of socio-political interest.

These two text typologies are predominantly narrative or hybridized narrative, constructing stories and reports. Analysis of the corpora has centred on the investigation of how Anglo-American cultural and identity traits are constructed and transferred through languages for special purposes and how their 'image' is 'reflected' in Italian or LIS to reach the deaf target audience. Findings are reported, revealing to what extent international anglocentric textual models cross the international sound barrier through the Italian visual media and whether they are compatible with deaf cultural norms, or rejected, or are conversely adapted in some way through textual recasting.

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