Linguistic Accessibility for Small Language Cinema

Marijo Deogracias, University of the Basque Country UPV/EHU, Leioa, Spain
Josu Amezaga, University of the Basque Country UPV/EHU, Leioa, Spain

ABSTRACT

Audiovisual accessibility is considered as a basic right. In a world where audiovisual material is more and more present, several measures have been taken in order to facilitate the access to it by people living with sensory disabilities; some of them at the regulatory level and others at the technological level. As a part of a wider project, this article addresses the issue of the accessibility to the audiovisual material from another perspective: that of the small languages. From this point of view, language is a barrier which prevents potential viewers from watching cinema in small languages. This is a major concern especially in contexts where dubbing is the norm for language-transfer. This paper presents and discusses some results of the analysis of the regulation and practices of audiovisual accessibility, as well as the outcome of some experiments conducted by applying the technology for the audiovisual accessibility in the field of the linguistic accessibility. The case of cinema in Basque language is considered for this purpose.

KEYWORDS

Audiovisual Accessibility, Basque, Cinema, Language-Transfer, Minority Languages, Mobile Applications, Small Languages

INTRODUCTION

Funding is one of the most evident obstacles faced by anyone who wants to produce cinema. In a field dominated by big production companies, it is necessary to search for markets wide enough to generate a minimum profitability for cinematographic products. In the case of cinema produced in small languages (whether these have a minority character or are simply languages with a low number of speakers), language can be an obstacle for achieving such minimum market quotas, especially in those places where there is a strong tradition of dubbing films produced in foreign languages. Cinema has become a highly monopolized industry and a small number of companies concentrates the greatest part of production and distribution. In this context, language diversity is considered as an obstacle for globalised markets, and minority and small languages are viewed as niche markets (Guyot, 2012).

In Europe, the tradition of dubbing is very deeply rooted in many countries, affecting regions in which there is a slight production of cinema in minority languages. This is, for example, the Basque case in the context of Spain and France. In comparison to subtitling and voice-over, the tradition of dubbing imposes two economic difficulties on cinema in small languages. On the one hand, it is more expensive than subtitling. On the other, unlike subtitling, it does not allow screening in two languages simultaneously, since both require the same audio channel. This becomes a handicap for the productions in small languages; indeed, these companies face the problem of how to target greater audiences whose linguistic skills in that language are low or null.
In this article the authors try to address this problem from the perspective of accessibility. This concept has been largely applied in order to ensure that people with sensory disabilities have access to audiovisual productions. Similarly, it can be useful to deal with the issue of accessing contents in a language in which several potential viewers have not enough linguistic competence. In this case, the main difference with the paradigm of audiovisual accessibility is that, while this term has been mainly understood in one direction (i.e., how to facilitate the access to mainstream culture for the minority living with disabilities), the problem can be approached from the inverse perspective, that is to say, how to guarantee the access to the minority culture to the majority (i.e., those who cannot understand the small language). This approach addresses also one of the main problems faced by minority languages in contexts where the speakers are usually bilinguals: the impermeability of hegemonic languages towards minority—or minoritized- ones (Jones, 2013).

From this start point, in the following, firstly, the context in which some minority languages must face the issue of widening their audiences will be analysed. The focus will be on the case of Basque cinema in Spain as a good example of a country of hard dubbing tradition where some experiments are being conducted. Secondly, the concept and the practice of audiovisual accessibility will be considered, in order to find out which theoretical ground and which good practices could be implemented in the field of linguistic accessibility. The regulation of audiovisual accessibility in the European and Spanish contexts will be also focused, as well as the outcomes of such regulation. To this aim, data collected from an exhaustive account of the main Spanish television channels’ practices (subtitling and audio-description, as well as second audio channels) will be presented, as well as the results of some tests conducted in cinema showings, where two films were screened in different linguistic versions and viewers were allowed to use a smartphone application in order to hear the film in the language of their choice. Finally, the results of the analysis will be discussed and some conclusions drawn.

DUBBING AS A PROBLEM FOR MINORITY LANGUAGES: THE CASE OF THE CINEMA IN BASQUE

Like other European countries, Spain has a long tradition on dubbing as the preferred system to address the issue of language transfer of audiovisual productions. Figure 1 illustrates this fact. According to a report that was published in 2007 (Media Consulting Group, 2007), at the time the main traditions in Europe were dubbing, subtitling, and voice-over. Dubbing and subtitling were used in television broadcasting and cinema screening, while the technology of voice-over was not used in cinema theatres. Practices in television seemed to be more homogenous than in cinema screening, since here different techniques coexisted into the same country. Moreover, the report remarked that at that

![Figure 1. Language transfer on TV (left) and in cinemas (right)](image-url)
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[www.igi-global.com/article/mind-gap/2781?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/mind-gap/2781?camid=4v1a)

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