

# Technology in audiovisual translation practices and training

## *Las tecnologías en la formación y las prácticas de traducción audiovisual*

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### ABSTRACT

Technologies such as speech recognition and machine translation are starting to change the audiovisual translation landscape, both in terms of the skills linguists need to successfully compete on the language services market and in how training needs to adapt to this change. This interview highlights how certain technologies have impacted audiovisual translation training, focussing specifically on subtitling and captioning.

### INTERVIEW

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**Alina Secara:** First of all, thank you very much for the invitation. It is really lovely to be here and thank you for the opportunity to talk to you and your listeners. My journey, if you want, started about two decades ago in my home country, which is Romania, where I was studying French and English at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iași. In my final year I did a translation specialization and I quite liked that aspect, so I

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thought, «Yeah, I'll give this a go!». In my final year of BA studies I also started working as a technical writer and translator for a large telecommunications company. What was I doing there? This was not a language service provider (LSP) offering translation or localization, but a technical company hiring in-house linguists. This used to be the preferred method of managing linguistic needs. Nowadays, more and more is outsourced to large, or small, LSPs and in-house translation departments are rarer. My job there involved writing technical documentation for telecommunications solutions developed and implemented by the company. For example manuals for engineers, but sometimes also for the general public, instructions on how to use the respective commercial products or implement a specific solution. Those instructions and manuals were then translated into different languages. We were a fairly small team of translators working in this company, writing technical documentation and then translating it. It was quite an ideal way of working because we were surrounded by engineers and IT professionals who were building the tools that we were then writing the documentation for. It was a great collaboration between very technically-minded individuals and linguists. We were using, even at that time, quite a lot of technology to help us in this dialogue in our work. It also made me aware of how important it is to know who the other players in the localization workflow are, and establish a dialogue with them early on in the process. That is how I started. Then I moved to the UK. First, as an Erasmus student – like I'm sure most of your listeners will do in the future, or maybe they have already benefited from this wonderful program. So there I went and I began my studies at MA level and later on at PhD level. Then I started applying for different roles and jobs and for 13 years was in charge of an MA program in Audiovisual Translation Studies. I mainly train students, but also staff from international organizations and colleagues from other universities, on how to use translation technologies and, more specifically, audiovisual-translation technology.

**DDL:** That is very interesting and very technical experience related to translation. In the seminar, which has been held in the faculty of translation in Salamanca, you have addressed the topic of the interrelation between technology, translation and communication in general. In our modern society we often hear that translation and communication cannot be mentioned or addressed without technology coming in at some point. Do you agree?

**AS:** To a large extent I do agree because for the last decade, I would say, technology has been more and more present in what we do as linguists. I am not of those believing that technology will or is automatically replacing professional translators. I believe that technology has its role to play in our work and I believe technology is providing support in the fields that we operate in. For example, in my field, subtitling and various types of audiovisual translation, technologies such as speech recognition and automatic speech recognition engines have been used successfully for quite a while to produce and provide services such as live subtitling to an extent that simply wasn't

possible before. Before this, it was either not done or it was mainly done using techniques and methods such as stenography that requires a much longer training process. Therefore there were not many individuals who could offer this service. When European accessibility legislation was introduced and different countries started to impose quotas on services such as subtitling for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (SDH) there was a big demand which simply could not be met by the techniques used before. Therefore, technological solutions such as speech recognition started to be used by trained respeakers to provide, for example, live TV captioning. So, next time you switch on your TV and put on the SDH subtitles, if it's a live event – for example rugby or another live sporting event you enjoy watching here in Spain – the SDH subtitles appear then on the screen are produced live. It's not an automatic process per se, so it's not the machine that automatically produces those subtitles, but actually there is a linguist in between who works with very sophisticated tools to reach that final result. These individuals are called «respeakers» in the UK or «live subtitlers» and in effect, they work with speech recognition technology and they listen to the input, from the TV in this case, and then they re-speak what they hear, almost verbatim, almost word for word, into a speech recognition engine they trained in advance to recognize the characteristics of their voice. This is then turned into the text that appears on the screen. These professionals also, sometimes, have very little time to correct any errors that might appear – and errors will appear in the process – but in effect what you see on TV is the result of individuals working in partnership with dedicated tools to provide the service that is needed by the audiences out there. It's not an either/or problem, it's always you work with the tools at your disposal.

**DDL:** Very interesting explanation on speech recognition that you've provided. Personally, I wasn't familiar with this field but I'm sure we'll hear about it more and more as we progress in our studies. So, let me ask you then, you're not one of those afraid of technology and mainly audiovisual products taking over written material books and those types of concerns that seem to circulate out there.

**AS:** It is true that the consumption practices are changing, it is true that people are consuming more audiovisual material than it was the case in the past. But this doesn't mean that, all of a sudden, books will disappear or all the other media will stop being used. It simply means that organizations in general, and a lot of them have already started doing this, have to present information in a variety of formats. This means that they will look more and more carefully at what needs to be presented and in which format. Sometimes a video is better suited for a certain audience in certain contexts, whereas in other contexts it is better to have, if you want, the old-fashioned PDF. One doesn't negate the other. Also, we live in a society that consumes more and more information, which is great. For example, you have a lot of online training material now that even 10 or 20 years ago you definitely didn't and this is available sometimes in one language only, sometimes in several. In this and similar contexts, it is true that technology can be

seen to be replacing humans because, in some cases, it is doing this. We live in a world where content is not created equal. Foreign companies and also large institutions are very much aware of this and are analysing their content in a process called «content profiling and leveraging», where they are saying: What kind of content do I have? Who accesses this content? How many people use this content? What types of formats are the most appropriate for my content? As a result, they design strategies for having the content that it's most frequently read, let's say, or consumed, set as a priority when it comes to human translation? And maybe leave content that it's not accessed that often untranslated or simply translated using a machine translation engine left unedited, or they introduce a rapid post-editing process, or maybe a mixture of these things. A lot of content is being created and today not even 1% of what is created can be translated uniquely using human translation. So there is a huge volume out there to be translated. The other thing that I would like to really stress is the need to have linguists, and we talk about translators here, who really know their mother tongue and who specialize in certain fields. Because, and we hear this frequently especially from members of international organizations we are in touch with, well prepared linguists are very much needed and are very much in demand. But you need to be able to always invest in your education. Invest in terms of the material time you spend, the interest you put into what you learn, the interest in developing your mother tongue, because don't forget that as a linguist, as a translator, your mother tongue is the most important asset you have. Of course, you work with other languages but, for example, in the context of subtitling, those are passive. You need to be able to understand what they say, you need to be able to read the script, and then render that into your mother tongue. There you need to pay a lot of attention. So, if you want to try, as an exercise, to see how comfortable you are in your mother tongue, take a text and then try to provide two different translations for two different audiences. You can, maybe, provide a formal translation for a certain context and a slightly more informal, summarised one for another context. You have to work at your mother tongue and at your ability to play with your language, also in very restricted and technical fields. Know what is of absolute importance there. If I am to go back to my example of technical translation, when I was working as a technical writer and translation, it was really important to get the terminology right, so we would put a lot of effort into creating and maintaining databases. The same is done today. Translators will tell you that sometimes they are lucky to work with terminologists who can do a lot of the work for them. However, the majority of translators need to prepare terminologically before embarking on a translation task. And, of course, there is technology to help you do this. You have, for example, text mining tools and tools that will allow you to extract terminology automatically. Of course this result then needs to be checked and validated, but tools can help you make sense of very big collections of texts. That's my belief.

**DDL:** I see. I suppose that this relates to another field of your fields of expertise, which is subtitling activity. We would like to know a little bit about the particular characteristics and, particularly, about the constraints of the subtitling activity.

**AS:** Subtitling is a very exciting activity, but also sometimes there is this misconception that as a subtitler you only work on wonderful art-house films, and shows that you enjoy watching. Which you may well do. But at the same time, you have to consider that you can also be subtitling commercial materials, you might be subtitling training videos, you might be subtitling very terminologically-dense training materials for hairdressers, for example. It is not something that you think about when you think about subtitling. It is a field where you have to transfer something that is expressed orally and put it into a written form. That is where the challenge comes from, because, as you probably know, we speak faster than we can read and, therefore, in particularly dense videos, you will have to cut some information or you will have to rephrase things so that your viewers have time to read the information you are providing. That's why sometimes when I teach this in my classes the students are very frustrated at the beginning. Because you spend a bit of time to understand what they're saying in the video, then you try and come up with a beautiful translation, but then your translation doesn't fit. It's like, «Oh, no! What do I do now? This is a disaster». Not really. Subtitling is about finding that translation, and finding sometimes the middle ground. Maybe it's not going to be the most beautiful thing that you would have come up with in a more traditional type of environment, but it's something that has to work in that medium. Because there's no point in putting your beautiful translation on the screen if your viewers can't read it. So the constraints are coming from this side. Again, you have to work with your language and you also have to work with the technical space in which we are operating to be able to allow yourself some flexibility to create the translation that your viewers can access later on.

**DDL:** I see. Moving on towards the end of the interview and related to this, we would like to know more about theater-plays subtitling. I think you have big amounts of experience in this field. How it differs from other subtitling activities?

**AS:** I've been a certified theater captioner for about 10 years. I provide captioning mainly for theaters, from English into English, monolingual subtitling or captioning or surtitling as it's sometimes called, mainly for the benefit of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing audiences. However, these are not the only members of the audience potentially benefiting from this service. For example people who don't have English as their native language were shown to find this service useful, too. There, again, you use technology to prepare the script you are given and, on the night of the performance, you go to the theater, you are part of the technical team, and you time your captions in sync with what happens on stage. Usually everything that you have in the script has to appear in your captions so you have no liberty in theater of taking lines out or improvising. Everything needs to appear on the screen and it needs to be in sync with what the

actors are saying. You are there part of both the creative team and the technical team and provide the service as open captioning, so everybody can see it in most theaters, but you don't know who is using it.

**DDL:** So, we can see that nowadays, and maybe from now on, translators will be required not only to master their mother tongue and the languages they work with, since many I believe many translation students are often said that «Oh, you are a translation student then you will be very fluent in English or in French and German». You are also required to master technology and to know what is out there in the market.

**AS:** That's true for all industries. It's part of our job and it's our duty as professionals to continue to update our knowledge, to continue to invest in continuous professional development, to continue to have a certain type of curiosity towards what is new in our field and to always try to see what is out there that can help us, that can support us in providing an excellent service for whoever that that may be. It's quite important to know how these tools work, what are the pitfalls and how to avoid them, and also what are the functionalities that we can explore and exploit to help us maybe become faster, maybe become more accurate, and sometimes to avoid doing boring things. For example, in subtitling there are certain functionalities in certain tools and for certain languages that help you do the timing of your captions automatically or semi-automatically, again, using speech technologies. And then of course you check it. Again, there are things that technology can help you with and we all need to retain a level of curiosity to explore them.

**DDL:** OK so thank you very much professor Alina Secara. It's been a real pressure to have you here today.

**AS:** Thank you very much and all the best to your listeners, and thank you for listening.

**DDL:** Thank you. Muchas gracias, de nuevo, a Elena Villegas y a Víctor y Pablo una semana más.

Os recordamos que esto es Don de Lenguas. Nos podéis escuchar todos los miércoles a las 6. Nos podéis seguir en Facebook, en Twitter y en iVoox. Hasta la semana que viene.

Entrevista: «Don de Lenguas»

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## BIOGRAPHY



Alina Secară is Visiting Fellow at the University of Leeds in the UK and Senior Scientist in the University of Vienna Centre for Translation Studies, where she investigates accessibility practices and technologies, and teaches subtitling, captioning and multimedia localisation processes and technologies. A UK Stagertext accredited theater captioner, she has also worked with theaters across the UK to integrate captioning for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing and provided customised hands-on training in subtitling and captioning to EU and UN in-house linguists. She managed the UK University of Leeds MA in Audiovisual Translation Studies for over a decade and was part of a variety of EU-funded e-learning translation technologies projects such as eCoLoTrain, eCoLoMedia and DigiLing.



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