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Amateur subtitling and the pragmatics of spectatorial subjectivity
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Developments in communication technologies have brought about the proliferation of self-mediated textualities and empowered networks of non-professional translators to engage in participatory subtitling practices. These subtitling agencies are often part of a movement of cultural resistance against global capitalist structures and institutions, whether for aesthetic or political reasons. This article gauges the extent to which participatory subtitling challenges assumptions underpinning traditional scholarship on intercultural communication, as instantiated in the pragmatics of audio-visual translation. It is argued that affectivity emerges as a powerful non-representational force behind amateur mediation. Rather than simply aiming to deliver ‘accurate’ representations of the source text meaning, amateur subtitles seek to performatively intervene in the articulation and reception of the audio-visual semiotic ensemble. Drawing on selected examples of aesthetic and political subtitling activism, this article examines the relevance of non-representational theory, originally developed within the field of human geography, to the study of the expressive or transformational role of amateur subtitling. It is suggested that the epistemological and political dimensions of this non-representational phenomenon are symptomatic of a wider trend towards a radical model of democracy.

Los avances tecnológicos han facilitado la proliferación de textualidades a cargo de consumidores de contenidos audiovisuales y la creación de redes de subtitulación colaborativa. Estas nuevas instancias de mediación se oponen a las estructuras e instituciones del capitalismo global mediante la producción de contenidos subtitulados desde una perspectiva intervencionista. Este artículo revisa las premisas de estudios anteriores sobre comunicación intercultural, específicamente sobre la pragmática de la traducción audiovisual, ante los cambios provocados por el fenómeno de subtitulación participativa. La afectividad se erige en una variable de carácter no representacional que juega un papel importante en la subtitulación amateur. Éstos subtítulos no tienen como principal objetivo trasladar de forma ‘exacta’ al espectador el significado del texto de partida, sino intervenir performativamente en la codificación y recepción del complejo semiótico audiovisual. Utilizando ejemplos de activismo estético y político, sugerimos la conveniencia de adoptar la teoría no representacional desarrollada en el campo de la geografía humana para estudiar el carácter expresivo y transformacional de la subtitulación amateur. Asimismo, postulamos que las dimensiones epistemológica y política de este fenómeno no representacional son sintomáticas de una tendencia generalizada hacia nuevos modelos de democracia radical.

Keywords: activism; affectivity; amateur subtitling; digital participatory culture; fansubbing; pragmatics

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Introduction

Originally conceived as the linchpin of Hollywood’s strategy to claw back its beleaguered dominance of the international film markets following the advent of sound in the late 1920s, subtitling became a catalyst for motion picture exports across linguistic and cultural constituencies in the early 1930s (Forbes & Street, 2000). Understandably, given the centrality of subtitling to the commercial fortunes of the major studios, Hollywood has been actively involved in moulding professional subtitling practices ever since (Chothia, 1979). The dogmatic search for maximum synchronicity between the temporality of diegetic speech and the temporality of subtitle presentation on screen has been one of the main drives behind technological developments in film subtitling during most of the twentieth century (Ivarsson, 2002). Admittedly, the value ascribed to synchronicity has significantly constrained the viewers’ experience of the original text. In so far as the cognitive ability of viewers to process spoken language is far greater than their capacity to comprehend written language over a given period of time, subtitles can only aspire to deliver a very condensed version of the spoken dialogue.¹ Synchronicity, however, is central to the stability of the narrative conventions underpinning the classical cinematic apparatus. Under the watchful eye and tutelage of the film industry, subtitlers have traditionally adopted a ‘self-effacing’ (Nichols, 1991, p. 165) mediation approach, bound by a ‘conception of cinematic textuality . . . that close[s] the story off from the space of the audience’ (Nornes, 2007, p. 115). The fact that subtitlers can only translate diegetic speech while it is being delivered allows the industry to hide their involvement in the production of the filmic text. This aesthetic of objectivity – which would appear to facilitate ‘unmediated access to reality’ (Minh-ha, 2005, p. 129) – has been criticised for shifting the viewers’ attention away from the processes of interlingual and intercultural mediation that take place outside the boundaries of the frame (Sinha, 2004).

Although the second half of the twentieth century witnessed the gradual emancipation of subtitling from cinematic textualities and its generalisation as a major form of audio-visual transfer in the television industry, mainstream subtitling continues ‘to rely on a decades-old system [of conventions] that dates back to the 1930s’ (James, 2001). Over the last ten years, however, the gradual shift towards a digital culture has brought about radical changes in subtitling practices, not least the appropriation of this form of translation by amateur individuals without formal training in translation – let alone subtitling. I have elsewhere explored amateur subtitling as a site for the articulation of different interventionist and monitorist practices, whether prompted by aesthetic or political activist agendas. ‘Aesthetic activism’ (Pérez-González, 2006, 2007) is best illustrated by ‘fansubbing’ – whether this is understood as the prolific global subculture surrounding the amateur subtitling of Japanese anime or, in its broader sense, as any instance of subtitling produced by fans or amateur enthusiasts (Barra, 2009). This interventionist mediation of commercial media content is driven by a desire to undermine and tamper with the industrial context of production responsible for what fansubbers regard as ‘culturally odorless’ (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 27) translations of their favourite films or television dramas. Fansubbing thus involves experimenting with the formal presentation of subtitles; carrying out a foreignising translation of the text to provide viewers with a ‘closer’ understanding of the original dialogue; and playing an intercultural brokerage role between the text producers and users – with translators
utilising their enhanced expertise of genre-specific conventions to maximise their fellow fans’ enjoyment of the narrated culture (Dwyer, 2012).

‘Political activism’, on the other hand, designates the work of amateur subtitlers who set out to resist the ideological and institutional foundations of neo-liberal capitalism and the politics of globalisation by intervening in the reception of their cultural manifestations (Pérez-González, 2010, in press). This can be achieved, for instance, by subtitling television broadcasts that were intended for circulation only in specific ‘mediascapes’ (Appadurai, 1990). These ‘re-narrations’ are then distributed within other sociolinguistic constituencies, where they serve to promote the activists’ political agendas. As was also the case with aesthetic activists, politically engaged subtitlers ultimately work with their viewers towards the co-construction of affinity spaces for the negotiation of their individual and collective identities.

Whether it is driven by aesthetic or political aspirations, the interventionist engagement of amateur subtitling with the dynamics of the global audio-visual marketplace undermines the control of global corporations over the distribution and consumption of media flows. Capitalising on the affordances of communication technologies, these new amateur subtitling agencies are part of the wider phenomenon of ‘self-mediation’ (Chouliaraki, 2010) that lies at the heart of the digital culture. By reflexively assembling and distributing audio-visual representations of their own experiences and/or actively engaging in the manipulation of media content that circulates in their environment, ordinary people are establishing new participatory sites for the expression of subjective spectatorial experiences.

The relevance of such sites to this article is twofold. On the one hand, participatory subtitling transcends the confines of fictional dialogue translation. Mediating new forms of spoken interaction such as news interviews and other genres of ephemeral interest – whose commercial distribution is hardly viable – calls for the development of new subtitling conventions and provides further momentum to the emancipation of subtitling from the constraints of the classical cinematic apparatus. On the other hand, these new practices are often developed collectively, as amateur subtitlers tend to work within more or less structured networks of committed individuals aiming ‘to elaborate and practise a moral order in tune with their own narratives of the world’ (Baker, 2006a, p. 481). The collective dimension of amateur subtitling therefore represents a unique platform to articulate new processes of civic engagement at cultural and media interfaces.

This article conceptualises the pragmatics of amateur subtitling against the background of new contexts of cultural production ‘where new media technologies…invent novel discourses of counter-institutional subversion and collective activism’ (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 227) and producers-consumers or ‘prosumers’ (Denison, 2011) jointly create virtual collectivities of ‘co-creational labour’ (Banks & Deuze, 2009). It is argued that the public visibility of the ordinary in participatory subtitling calls for a re-theorisation of the interpersonal relations between mediators and viewers clustered around virtual networks that deviate from traditional ‘discourse communities’ (Swales, 1990). In the era of networked communications, these new, geographically dispersed communities of practice are conceived by social self-organisation theories as dialectically constituted socio-technological arenas (Fuchs, 2006). On the one hand, technology-mediated communication facilitates the emergence of conventional forms of interaction, common interests and recurrent topics within a given network. On the other hand, the development of a shared narrative location – i.e. the set of common values, beliefs and agendas – through the
processes of socialisation within the virtual community fosters participation and strengthens cooperation between its members. It is through multiple iterations of this dialectic that virtual communities of amateur subtitlers have self-organised to posit new forms of spectatorial subjectivity and collaboratively redefine traditional forms of media production and consumption.

Of particular note is the fact that these new transnational communities of interest formed by amateur subtitlers represent an important challenge to established scholarship on intercultural communication. Mainstream subtitling practices fostered by the classical cinematic apparatus have been and continue to be informed by what Pratt (1987) labels as ‘linguistics of contact’ between cultures. Under this paradigm of audio-visual mediation, subtitled films and television programmes represent sites of contact between the narrated characters and their audiences, i.e. two distinct ‘cultural subgroups existing separately from each other’ (Pratt, 1987, p. 59) and bound together by their respective homogeneous identities. Inhabiting the interstitial spaces between these discrete cultural communities, professional subtitlers act as detached mediators entrusted with bridging intercultural gaps (Pym, 1998). By contrast, media content subtitled by engaged or reflective amateurs can no longer be conceptualised as a site for interaction between two stable, idealised cultures. Individuals participating in amateur subtitling activities are indeed driven by aspects of their identity that have been traditionally theorised as constitutive dimensions of culture – including nationality, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, religion or postcoloniality, to give but a few examples. But unlike their professional counterparts, amateur subtitlers attend primarily to the affinities that exist between members of what have traditionally been regarded as different cultural subgroups. This shift of focus from the linguistics of contact to the ‘linguistics of community’ (Pratt, 1987, p. 59) seeks to capture the relationality of networked constituencies and brings to the fore the intersectionality and fluid nature of cultural identities. In this paradigm of audio-visual mediation, subtitlers are not located within spaces in between cultural groupings; instead, they explicitly show their commitment ‘to real people caught up in real contemporary conflicts’ and relish the possibility ‘of using language and translation as a tool for [aesthetic or] political change’ (Baker, 2009, p. 223).

This article argues that affectivity emerges as a powerful non-representational variable in amateur mediation, where subtitles performatively intervene in the articulation and reception of the audio-visual semiotic ensemble as it unfolds, rather than being simply static superimposed signifiers. My argument develops as follows. In the next section, ‘Re-theorising the interpersonal dimension of media production and Consumption’, I explore the limitations of traditional approaches to the pragmatics of subtitling against the proliferation of new amateur subtitling subcultures and practices. The following section, ‘Non-representational insights into participatory subtitling’, defines affectivity and examines the extent to which it is taking over representational accuracy as the main drive behind non-professional subtitling practices. Against this backdrop, it is argued that non-representational theory, originally developed within the field of human geography, provides the conceptual network required to account for this expressive or transformational role of amateur subtitling. Drawing on a set of examples from aesthetic and political subtitling activism, the final two sections of the article examine four key features of amateur practices that, I suggest, instantiate the affective, non-representational dimension of engaged subtitling in the context of the digital culture.
Re-theorising the interpersonal dimension of media production and consumption

Existing research on the pragmatics of audio-visual translation is informed primarily by the ‘translatorial habitus’ (Simeoni, 1998) of professionals subtitling filmic dialogue. These studies thus report on practices of mediation deployed by subtitlers who have internalised norms of training based on conduit models of language and discursive practices favoured by the industry. Drawing on applications of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, Hatim and Mason (1997) and Mason (2001) argue that the by-products of professional subtitlers’ adherence to industry validated standards – notably the need for condensation and synthesis of the original spoken dialogue – often jeopardises the interpersonal pragmatics of subtitled interaction. By streamlining the pragmatic complexity of the original speech, Hatim and Mason (1997) argue, the subtitled dialogue can create a substantially different interpersonal dynamic from that intended by the film-maker. As the loss of certain elements alters the interactional context negotiated by the characters, ‘the purpose of the communicative interchange can be “read” in a much clearer way in the subtitles’ (Hatim & Mason, 1997, p. 89), which promotes a single linear narrative in the eyes of the viewers.

Based on the apparatus of conversation analysis, Aline Remael’s (2003) analysis of subtitled interaction in Secrets and Lies (1996) corroborates that a simplification of interpersonal pragmatics prevails in professional subtitling practices. On the surface, the omission and condensation of parts of the original dialogue in the Dutch subtitles would appear to enhance the viewers’ comprehension of the narrative. A closer examination, however, reveals the effects that tampering with the interactional organisation of the English encounter has on the target audience’s perception of the film. The excerpt reproduced in Table 1, one of Remael’s examples, presents Roxanne arguing with her uncle (Maurice) about her mother’s decision not to reveal that she had another daughter in her youth. The right-hand column displays the translation segmented into the series of subtitles used in the Dutch version.

As Remael (2003, p. 242) notes, the Dutch subtitles create ‘a different sequential text . . . that addresses the viewer directly, over the heads of the characters, enhancing narrative movement’. The audience’s focus is thus shifted away from the ‘horizontal dimension’ of interaction between the fictional characters (Vanoye, 1985, quoted in

| Maurice: | Well, I always . . . | Ik dacht dat ze’n jongen had. |
| Roxanne: | Thought she’d ad a boy . . . | Gloss: I thought she had a boy. |
| Maurice: | She’s a slag. | – Ze is een snol. |
| Roxanne: | No, she’s not. | NO SUBTITLING |
| Roxanne: | Yes, she fucking is. | NO SUBTITLING |
| Maurice: | She loves yer. We all love yer. | Ze houdt van je. Wij allemaal. |
| Roxanne: | You comin’ back? | Kom je terug? [idem.] |
| Maurice: | No. | NO SUBTITLING |
| Roxanne: | Why should I? | NO SUBTITLING |
| Maurice: | You gotta face up to it! | Je moet ’t onder ogen zien. |
| Roxanne: | Face up to what? | NO SUBTITLING |
Remael, 2003, p. 227) to its ‘vertical’ counterpart – pertaining to the interaction between the diegetic world and the audience. The subtitler, according to Remael, deletes lines that challenge Maurice’s representation of events and minimises Roxanne’s confrontational and uncompromising stance, thus propelling the main narrative forward. Insights derived from the analysis of other examples from the same film confirm that this dramatic streamlining often jettisons secondary narratives and voices, particularly those which subscribe to less mainstream values and narratives. ‘By clarifying and concentrating on the narratively relevant gist of the conversation’, Remael (2003, p. 237) contends, ‘the subtitler starts producing generalizations that fit the circumstances’.

Research on the pragmatics of commercial subtitling appears to be based on two main premises, the first of which is articulated in the following passage:

The particular constraints under which the film subtitler works make it impossible for all of the meaning values perceived in the source language soundtrack to be relayed… Meaning is then to be retrieved by cinema audiences by a process of matching this target text guide [the subtitles] with visual perception of the action on screen, including paralinguistic features, body language, etc. (Hatim & Mason, 1997, p. 68)

It is implied that professional subtitles ultimately aim to convey approximate linguistic representations of pre-existing verbally encoded meanings or communicative intentions from the source text into the target language. The emphasis is therefore placed on the original message that the film-maker intended to articulate via the characters’ speech. When translating all the information encoded in the dialogue is not feasible, the interplay between condensed text and visuals should assist viewers in retrieving that original meaning or communicative intention. The assumption underpinning this formalisation of professional subtitling is therefore that translators still privilege the ‘primordial’ meaning expressed in the film dialogue – which subtitles must seek to represent.

The second premise behind prevalent theorisations of the pragmatics of subtitling is dialectically interconnected with the previous one. Although the contribution of visual and acoustic semiotic resources to the overall meaning of an audio-visual text is increasingly acknowledged by audio-visual translation scholars (Desilla, 2012; Taylor, 2003), the scope of the subtitlers’ mediation is confined to one meaning-making type of signs, i.e. written language. As Ortabasi puts it:

The literature on A[udio]V[isual] translation… automatically assumes that the target of translation is the verbal soundtrack and, possibly, any text that appears onscreen… While the complex relationship between the verbal and visual channels of film has undoubtedly bedeviled many a subtitler, it seems that actually addressing the non-linguistic realm is something of a taboo. (2006, p. 280)

The growing body of scholarship on emerging forms of amateur subtitling suggests that these premises no longer hold outside the audio-visual industry. In a recent overview of developments in participatory subcultures driven by the desire to effect aesthetic change (covering both anime and other genres), Dwyer (2012) formalises these subtitlers’ resistance to the industry’s norms into a set of subversive practices. These include, for example, the interventionist nature of amateur approaches to audio-visual mediation (e.g. superimposing additional textual elements on the frame that complement and interact with the content of the
traditional subtitles by way of clarification or gloss); experimental attempts to alter
the multimodal configuration of the audio-visual text (for example, by replacing or
altering part of the original visuals); or the general disregard for the mechanical
demands of diegetic synchronicity. Participatory networks of translation setting out
to challenge aspects of the status quo, on the other hand, have been found to turn
subtitles ‘into sites of narrative negotiation that allow for the ongoing co-
construction of an affinity space with online audiences’ (Pérez-González, in press).
A lack of concern over their perceived objectivity is often exhibited by these political
activists-turned-subtitlers, with their ‘translations’ tending to signal explicitly the
processes of re-narration whereby the original meaning is framed to better suit the
mediators’ agendas. Given the extent of the transformations that are under way in
the form and nature of amateur subtitling, traditional approaches to the study of the
pragmatics of subtitling are becoming increasingly less relevant. This departure from
traditional mediation practices that tended to privilege the source text is not to be
necessarily regarded as the lack of translation competence, but as a deliberate attempt
to foster new forms of social engagement with media content – whether by projecting
viewers immersively into the subtitled text (aesthetic subtitling), or by deploying
subjective filters in the representation of the narrated reality that pander to and
reinforce their activist disposition. In the sections that follow, I set out to examine
alternative conceptualisations of the role that subtitling plays in the construction of
new spectatorial experiences in the digital culture, focusing on the potential relevance
of non-representational approaches to the study of social practices developed outside
the disciplinary boundaries of translation studies and pragmatics.

Non-representational insights into participatory subtitling

Given the entrenched conceptualisation of subtitles as approximate linguistic
representations of the meanings and intentions that were verbally encoded in the
source text, it is understandable that much of the literature on subtitling has tended
to gravitate around discourses of representational accuracy and fidelity (Pérez-
González, 2009) as a means of generalising over aspects of form or interpretation.
Although they do not adopt the meta-language I am using here to build my
argument, this is evident even in recent subtitling textbooks. Diaz Cintas and Remael
(2007), for example, tacitly build on the proposition that the interplay between
different levels of language representation – e.g. the deep/surface structure levels of
syntax, on the one hand, and the denotational representation systems of semantics,
on the other hand – can assist subtitlers in deciding how best to condense and
transfer the meaning and/or communicative intention of the original dialogue into a
instance, note that ‘subtitling is a communicative translation . . . much less concerned
with the words of the speaker than with the intention of what the speaker wanted to
say’, while Pérez-González (2009, p. 15) confirms that subtitlers are expected to
‘prioritize the overall communicative intention of the utterance over the semantics of
its individual lexical constituents’.

The crisis of the ‘representational’ or ‘referential’ dimension of language that the
proliferation of amateur subtitling practices is exposing in the media marketplace
ultimately challenges the industry’s assumption that each audio-visual text contains a
single reality waiting to be deciphered or understood – particularly when amateur
subtitlers’ approach to the mediation of such texts is driven by their aesthetic and
political allegiances. Non-professional translators do not use subtitles as ‘signifiers of narratives which seemingly are pre-existent to or transcend [a] film itself’ but ‘as spatially affective- and expressive-movement[s] intimately involved with and inseparable from’ the viewer’s involvement in the co-creation and experience of the audio-visual text (Curti, 2009, p. 202).

I would argue that this shift towards a conceptualisation of translation as a non-referential expression of subjectivity and social engagement is reflective of scholarly developments in a number of disciplines. Writing from the field of visual geography, Aitken and Dixon (2006, p. 326) eloquently express this idea by noting that ‘we can no longer talk of film representing, or mimicking, reality, because we can no longer assume that there is a single, coherent reality waiting out there to be filmed’. Within the field of translation studies itself, Baker’s (2006b) theorisation of narratives is the scholarly strand that has contributed most significantly to challenge the widely held perception of translators as neutral and apolitical mediators with the capacity to apprehend and convey ‘the’ single reality that underpins each source text. Translation as such, Baker argues (2012, p. 1),

\[\text{does not mediate cultural encounters that exist outside the act of translation but rather participates in producing these encounters. It does not reproduce texts but constructs cultural realities, and it does so by intervening in the processes of narration and renarration that constitute all encounters, and that essentially construct the world for us.}\]

Baker’s conceptualisation of narrative departs from traditional approaches to the study of narratology, where narratives were understood as forms of ‘representation’ embodying a stable empirically knowable ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ that can be separated from the narratives that claim to represent it. Baker, in sum, regards the notion of representation as problematic, and opts instead to define narratives as the main means of constructing reality through dynamic human agency and behaviour. As far as the specific domain of audio-visual translation studies is concerned, the growing importance of affect, expression, agency and subjectivity as the main forces behind the expansion of participatory subtitling signals the extent to which non-representational agendas are beginning to supersede the referential practices of professional subtitling, traditionally articulated around discourses of accuracy and fidelity.

By promoting ‘new forms of playful citizenship, critical discourse and cosmopolitan solidarity’ (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 227), amateur subtitling is therefore party to the processes of reality construction through translation. Unlike most of the instances of translation that have been studied so far from a socio-narrative theoretic perspective, the agencies behind participatory subtitling are groupings of engaged ordinary citizens driven by ‘self-referential properties in that certain values, beliefs and practices are preferred over others’ (Deuze, 2006, p. 71). Through their participation in networked virtual communities, these emerging subtitling networks engage in forms of ‘affective labour’ (Banks & Deuze, 2009, p. 424) to build ‘affinity spaces bound together by mundane or ordinary aspects of collective identity which often escape traditional conceptions of collective recognition’ (Pérez-González, in press). The centrality of affectivity to engaged subtitling posits overtly mediated spectatorial experiences and therefore cannot be accounted for in terms of conventional theorisations of subtitles as approximate linguistic representations of meanings and intentions. In what follows, I argue that the study of participatory subtitling can benefit, at this incipient stage of development, from theoretical insights
that provide alternative ways of engaging with the production and interpretation of meaning.

Non-representational theory, a framework developed within the field of human geography by Nigel Thrift (1996), has emerged from a concern over what scholars working in a range of disciplines regard as the overvaluation of the 'representational–referential' dimensions of life. Broadly speaking, non-representational theory seeks to respond to two basic questions. At a more abstract level, this approach to the study of dialectic processes of meaning negotiation aims to 'disclose and attend to life [including communication processes] as a differential, expressive process of becoming, where much happens before and after conscious reflexive thought' (Thrift, 2009, p. 503). The emphasis on expressivity over referentiality as a force driving the realisation of life experiences acknowledges, I would argue, the increasingly crucial role ascribed to affectivity in new paradigms of civic engagement in the digital culture. From a more practical perspective, non-representational theory explores 'how to foster types of description or presentation that attempt to co-produce new events by engaging with and intervening in the practices that compose life [including communication processes]' (Thrift, 2009, p. 503). I contend that amateur subtitling practices can be regarded as instances of such non-referential processes of textual co-creation. They are commonly produced by individuals without any formal training in translation (let alone subtitling) whose work is not informed by professional standards (conscious reflexive thought), but by intuition and a desire to effect change (expressive process of becoming). It could also be suggested that amateur subtitles amount to a co-production of the original text – which, in the context of subtitling, has been referred to as 'co-creation' (Barra, 2009) or 'augmentation of the original text' (Denison, 2011). Finally, as has been noted above, this non-referential co-production of meaning responds to a clearly interventionist agenda.

Providing a comprehensive overview of what non-representational theory sets out to achieve falls outside the scope of this article. The remaining sections will thus explore four key features of amateur practices that instantiate the affective dimension of engaged subtitling in the context of the digital culture. Although this article is largely theoretical in its arguments, these final sections will draw on examples from a corpus of commercial and amateur subtitled media content that the author has been compiling since 2009 to examine (i) the prominence of the politics of recognition between the amateur subtitlers and their audiences; (ii) the performance-oriented understanding of non-representational mediation; (iii) the centrality of the semiotics of materiality/corporeality to amateur subtitling; and (iv) the transformational effect that the discursive constitution of public selves through subtitling has for viewers. In illustrating these four features of non-representational subtitling practices, I will address the extent to which emerging participatory textualities are moving beyond existing means of analysis and critique for intercultural communication scholars, as media encounters become networked platforms for the exploration of emerging intersectional identities that cut across more crystallised social, linguistic and cultural constituencies.

**Affectivity and politics of recognition**

Enhancing the visibility of amateur subtitlers as exponents of a collective identity shared by these reflective mediators and their audiences is central to the proliferation
of participatory forms of media production/consumption. The politics of mutual recognition (Thrift, 2009) between subtitlers and viewers enable the display and perception of mutual affectivity; more importantly, they empower amateur translator networks to adopt interventionist approaches to mediation, and hence mould media experiences to fit their viewers’ expectations. With its capacity to draw attention to the politics of recognition between translators and viewers, engaged subtitling represents a constitutive dimension of idiosyncratic, more or less radical, forms of citizenship, whether these are driven by the search for playful or ideological affinity. As far as the manifestations of these politics are concerned, the visibility of mediators is often enhanced in the eyes of their audience through the use of subtitles that incorporate extra-diegetic material in the audio-visual text. The display of this additional material on the frame aims to redress the over-reliance on linguistic rationalism and facilitate associative relations among members of geographically dispersed virtual audiences, and prompt recognition of collective identities associated with the search for aesthetic or political change.

Hypermediated textualities are particularly effective in ‘possibilising’ mutual recognition in participatory subtitled texts. As explained by Littau (1997), the fact that hypertextual environments enable multiple textual arrangements, foster intertextuality and challenge the seriality of translation opens up new spaces for expressivity and interventionist mediation. In hypermediated contexts, Littau argues, translation ‘can no longer be conceived of as the reproduction of an original, but has become subject to reconceptualisation as the re-writing of an already pluralised “original”’ (1997, p. 81). In the case of fansubbing, one of the two amateur subtitling subcultures examined in this article, hypertextual environments have a twofold impact on translation practices. On the one hand, they are used to combine the delivery of traditional subtitles situated in the diegetic dimension of the audio-visual narrative – thus acting as representations of meaning conveyed exclusively through spoken language – with ‘headnotes’ that incorporate a non-diegetic dimension into the subtitled text. As the example represented in Figure 1 shows, the text of the

![Image](image_url)

Figure 1. Fansub glosses as cues for recognition of collective identities (*Detective School Q*).
headnote complements the traditional subtitle and calls for ‘connective’ reading practices (Landow, 1992) between both textual segments. In this case, viewers processing the subtitle are presented with elements (‘pit viper’) that prompt them to figuratively follow the link to the extra-diegetic dimension embodied by the headnote (‘Pit vipers are not found on Honshu, the largest island of Japan’), or vice versa. In overstepping the boundaries of the diegetic world, fansubbing abandons the traditional allegiance of professional subtitling to the voice–title synchronisation principle. More importantly, headnotes open up a new space for the interaction between the translator and the viewer of the audio-visual text in question, where the former gains maximum visibility (Pérez-González, 2007) as a mediator with genre expertise, in tune with his audience’s demands.

In amateur subtitling, particularly in those instances revolving around aesthetic activist causes, actual hyperlink navigability is being increasingly used to provide audiences with a ‘thicker translation’ of the text. Ortabasi (2006), for example, advocates a wider use of hyperlink navigability in the era of digitisation, extending it beyond the function of chapter selection into the actual track, along the lines of the example described by Cubbison (2005, p. 51, quoted in Ortabasi, 2006, p. 288):

The recent DVD edition of Akira allows for a ‘capsule’, an icon of a drug capsule that appears on the screen, at which time the viewer can press the enter button on the remote and receive additional information, while the series Excel Saga allows for a similar inclusion of cultural references through an optional popup, much like VH1 Network’s 1990s Popup Video series.

The contribution of hypertextuality to the articulation of relevant politics of recognition, however, is not confined to the mediation of audio-visual texts within the track itself. Broadcasts and films subtitled by engaged mediators are often made available and distributed via hypertextual environments such as dedicated websites. Subtitled media content can thus be consumed in combination with transcripts of the original dialogue, earlier translation drafts, message boards posting viewers’ comments on and reactions to the translations, as well as downloadable tools and software applications to disseminate their translation – including video embedding codes or subtitle files (cf. Pérez-González, in press). These websites foster recognition by acting as hubs of affective clustering, prompting fans to engage in ‘shovelwaring’ – i.e. ‘the repurposing or windowing of content across different sites, media, and thus (potential) audiences’ (Deuze, 2006, p. 70) – as a way of strengthening the internal coherence of the virtual community. But developments in digital communication technologies are facilitating even more extreme forms of interaction between mediators and their audiences. Whereas early forms of participatory subtitling undermined the representational monopoly of the diegetic by enhancing the visibility of the mediator within the audio-visual text, new amateur subtitling collectivities are facilitating the viewers’ access to the frame (Figure 2). The website interface of the Korean site Viki – an Internet crowdsourced platform of fansubbed drama – is an excellent case in point. It incorporates a subtitle editor enabling multiple users spread all over the world to create subtitles at the same time. It also features ‘a “discussion” band that viewers activate by clicking on a button that appears when the mouse rolls over that part of the screen’ (Dwyer, 2012, p. 231). When enabled, it displays fans’ comments that are ‘overwhelmingly devoted to celebrity gossip, and emotional responses to onscreen characters, fashions and narratives’. As Dywer notes, this
‘formally and textually disruptive device . . . is used more as an emotive community-building tactic than to increase awareness of the role and production of translation itself’ (2012, p. 231).

In sum, their reliance on hypermediated textualities showcases the resolve of engaged subtitlers to enhance their own visibility as mediators, intervene in or frame the viewer’s interpretation and, ultimately, reinforce the mutual perception of collective recognition among members of the same community of interest.

Spectacularisation, materiality and transformational effects of amateur subtitling

Recent applications of non-representational theory to film studies (Curti, 2009) acknowledge that, in today’s contexts of cultural production, the dynamics of public communication are being shaped by the ever more expressive resources afforded by the latest digital technologies. Amateur subtitling is a form of public communication that exploits and stretches the semiotic resources that have been traditionally available to subtitlers. As I have shown in earlier work (Pérez-González, 2007) on the multimodal scope of amateur subtitling practices, their mediation transcends the boundaries of written language to intervene in the visual modes of the audio-visual text. In so far as amateur subtitlers’ practices place particular emphasis on the affective and spectacular dimensions of public communication, participatory subtitling can be said to ‘thematise’ performance. Indeed, one of the most idiosyncratic rhetorical features of fansubbing is the growing intrusion of subtitles
within the visuals of the frame and the concomitant erosion of the representational role that such written texts play within audio-visual communication. In the fansubbed version of *Das Leben der Anderen* (Figure 3), for example, the Chinese characters conveying the translation of the bookshop’s German name are styled to highly sophisticated standards, ensuring that the chosen fonts and colours blend, to some extent, with the overall visual semiotics of the scene at hand.

The instrumental role and referential function of this and other fansubs in the film become thus subordinated to the performative nature of amateur subtitles. There is a tacit acknowledgement that viewers might not even notice the presence of the subtitle and, even if they do, they may need to pause their players to be able to read and make sense of such stylised text snippets. Drawing on their genre expertise and familiarity with their audience preferences, amateur subtitlers enhance the pictorial dimension of the overall semiotic gestalt by foregrounding a spectacularised and aestheticised approach to mediation. The deployment of colour, fonts, perspective and other compositional variables thus turns titles into spatially affective spaces within the audio-visual ensemble, ultimately providing an immersive spectatorial experience for their viewers.

Experimenting with the spectacular dimension of publicness, as illustrated by the previous example, reinforces the role of materiality or corporeality of subtitles within audio-visual semiotics. The expressive force that amateur subtitles carry as physical artefacts, and the centrality of their physical dimension to the constitution of the overall meaning of audio-visual texts brings to an end the traditional view of subtitles by film purists as ‘tainted representations trespassing into the pure or original filmic spaces of image and sound’ (Nornes, 1999, p. 18). The contribution of subtitle movement, one of most effective expressions of materiality exploited by amateur mediators, is illustrated in the next example. Figure 4 displays two frames of an activist documentary submitted to the 2010 ‘Israel Apartheid Video Contest’, sponsored by Stop The Wall and the itisapartheid.org collective. The documentary,

![Figure 3. Screen shot of performative fansubs (*Das Leben der Anderen*).](image-url)
entitled *Israeli Apartheid*, is structured through a montage of images of the Israeli West Bank barrier – ‘the most visible manifestation of Israel’s apartheid regime’ – against which moving subtitles are displayed. Travelling horizontally or vertically across the frame, these subtitles are used to affectively accentuate the dimensions of the wall.

The affective aspects of materiality in amateur titles are brought into particularly sharp relief in audio-visual texts where subtitles do not deliver a translation of what is ‘said’ by a diegetic voice – thus further minimising their representational role. In *Israeli Apartheid*, titles take on a central narrative role, similar to that played by intertitles during the era of silent films. But unlike traditional intertitles, which could rely only on ‘the punctuation, typeface, type size, and layout of the text on the screen [. . .] to suggest, symbolize, or emphasize’ (Dick, 1990, p. 47), subtitles in the era of self-mediation capitalise on the expressive affordances of movement to take on expressive salience. Such subtitles intervene in contents, not to ‘represent pre-existing selves, individual or collective, but [to] constitute such selves in the very process’ (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 229).

By positing this form of subjective spectatorial stance, watching subtitled media content can become a transformational experience. As Curti (2009, p. 205) explains in discussing similar examples of affective subtitling:

As part of the creation of something different subtitles are not (or are no longer) signifying superimpositions of static representations, but intimate living components of a(n) (un)folding filmic assemblage(s)cape… No longer simply about approximate or pre-existent meanings or representations statically superimposed onto pure or original territorial images, through animation subtitles become living and affective forces and performances univocally, yet heterogeneously, pushing the audience towards filmic content. The living subtitle moves the spectator by its own movement to what is present and immanent in and to the film itself.

In the context of non-representational theory, subtitles are acts, events, happenings, and they should not be primarily evaluated according to their referentiality or degree of correspondence with pre-existent meaning or communicative intentions, but on the basis of their affective contribution to the materiality of audio-visual texts and their transformational impact on the audience’s experience of self-mediated textualities.
Concluding remarks

In the second half of this article I have explored four features of participatory subtitling that ultimately bring into sharp relief the contingency of representation, both epistemic and political. Amateur subtitling practices thus call attention to key parameters of the ongoing debate on politics and difference within non-representational theory (Saldanha, 2010) that will inform this concluding section. Examined from this angle, commercial subtitling conventions are predicated on objective forms of epistemological representation by ‘rational’ mediators that aim to deliberately bypass the ‘corporeal, cultural and political-economic differences’ (Saldanha, 2010, p. 290) among audience members. Subtitling – as originally conceived by the industry – papers over the cracks of partisan interests and competition within society as a means to build a universal audience with uniform sensibilities, expectations and demands. Standard forms of mediation are viable inasmuch as society accepts forms of representation that exclude points of view, subjectivity and relative conceptualisations of communication where language can be ‘conditioned by geography and history’ (Saldanha, 2010, p. 289). As audiences themselves are becoming more involved in steering the processes of aesthetic and political expression in the media industries, pre-existing discursive or ecological backgrounds are beginning to influence the way in which such heteronomy is represented. Amateur subtitling is therefore non-referential to the extent that it uncovers the differences that commercial subtitling tries to gloss over, bringing to the fore the expression of competing desires by individuals and collectivities.

As noted earlier in this article, the centrality of essentialist identities to traditional conceptualisations of cultural subgroups as distinct and homogenous camps is being eroded. In the digital mediascapes, audio-visual texts are no longer sites of contact between the narrated and narrating cultures, with translators acting as disinterested mediators between them. New self-mediated textualities revolve around the negotiation of affinity and antagonism between members of virtual transnational collectivities, who explore and share aspects of their identities on the basis of shifting configurations of relationships across linguistic and national borders. The shift from the linguistics of contact to the linguistics of social relationality has brought about new forms of audio-visual translation, where amateur subtitlers do not mediate cultural encounters, but actively intervene in their very production. In view of the growing importance of antagonism in today’s mediascapes, future research on amateur subtitling should examine its role within the ever evolving radical-democratic project (Mouffe, 2005). Participatory practices are currently playing an important role in redressing the balance between representation and deliberation in democratic life. Traditionally, democratic societies have favoured the competitive representation model, where ‘political outcomes result from differential capacities to mobilize popular constituencies’ and ‘from narrow interests capturing the portions of government [or industry] that most concern them’ (Cohen & Fung, 2004, p. 26). Reacting against the representation bias that favours powerful and wealthy individuals and institutions, the deliberative model builds on the practical competence of citizens, driven by individual and collective biases, priorities or grievances, to identify problems and collaborate in their resolution. Digital communication technologies are making it possible for radical democrats to involve more individuals and collectivities in the processes of deliberation, without undermining the quality of the latter. While most large-scale decisions remain in the hands
of the elites clinging to the competitive representation model, ordinary citizens are beginning to articulate their views directly, conferring and negotiating with other members of the virtual (sometimes transnational) networks or communities of interest that they are part of. Only future research will be able to gauge the extent to which a sustained and increasingly interventionist involvement of ordinary citizens in processes of self-mediation – within the wider radical-democratic project – succeeds in extending their influence beyond the informal public sphere, allowing them to play a more decisive role in the democratisation of mainstream values and discourses.

Notes
1. Quantitative studies conducted by de Linde and Kay indicate that ‘on average, subtitles contain 43% less text than the original dialogues’, which involves ‘a mean editing rate of approximately three words per subtitle’ (1999, p. 51).
2. The notion of ‘thick translation’, introduced by Kwame Anthony Appiah and discussed extensively in Hermans (2003), designates the use of supplementary textual material, traditionally in the form of footnotes, to provide the reader with key information on the context of production of the primary text, normally with a view to enhance his/her reading experience.
4. Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0I-wFyQg32Y
5. As Baker (in press) argues, the definition of translation is being extended ‘to encompass a wide range of activities and products that do not necessarily involve an identifiable relationship with a discreet source text’.
6. For a detailed account of the narrative function of ‘calligraphic’ elements, including subtitles, in diasporic films, see Naficy (2004).

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References


**Filmmography**


