The narrator’s voice in science documentaries: qualitative and quantitative analysis of subtitling strategies from English into Italian

The current study offers a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the Italian subtitling of the narrator’s voice in two science documentaries for the general public. Specifically, it outlines the strategies used to translate the narrator’s spoken lines, identifies the linguistic elements that were manipulated, and suggests possible explanations for such manipulations.

For each video, the Italian subtitles were first compared with the English audio. This comparison aimed to identify the subtitling strategies adopted in this particular type of video material. The subtitles were classified depending on the type of strategy applied. Furthermore, for each strategy the type of linguistic element involved was observed (e.g. modifier, adverb, downtoner, etc.). This two-layered analysis showed that while some of the instances of text manipulation corresponded with the well-known needs in subtitling of shortening and simplifying on the one hand and clarifying on the other, the remaining instances were a voluntary attempt to increase the level of formality of the text.

Subsequently, in order to verify whether such a shift in the tenor of discourse simply depended on the shift in mode due to subtitling, where speech is rendered in the written form, the Italian subtitles were compared to the corresponding Italian dubbed lines. It was thus observed that the Italian dubbed version featured exactly the same strategies and linguistic devices as the subtitles. This led me to conclude that the observed shift in the tenor of discourse represents the translators’ attempts to adapt the text to Italian culture and that achieving greater formality should be considered a driving force in the subtitling of science documentaries from English into Italian, on a par with clarifying, simplifying and shortening.