



Dubbing as Another Art of Failure: Re-Reading John Ciardi

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Abstract

The idea that translation is a process under the constant risk of ‘failure’ was forwarded by translator-editor John Ciardi. Walter Benjamin also understood translation as an incomplete form of production. This paper borrows this idea of ‘failure’ to explain dubbing, which in the field of audio-visual translation has been critiqued for imperfections which arise due to the discrepancy between the physical act of speaking by the acting body and the speech production by the speaking body; imperfections which cannot be done away with completely, despite synchronisation. The unnaturality of this discrepancy has been pointed out by Antonin Artaud using the folkloric figure of the *dybbuk*. Given that for the audience, dubbing involves not merely the mind, which understands the relation between languages but also the eyes, which discern the non-relation and the non-cohesion between the singular body and the multiple languages, the paper postulates the rejoicing in imperfection as another cinematic “suspension of disbelief” by the audience.

Keywords: Translation, Dubbing, Failure, Cinema, Body, Language, Synchronisation.

Introduction

This paper builds upon John Ciardi’s dictum that the act of translation is an ‘art of failure.’ It attempts to extend and extrapolate the views onto the process of dubbing, which as a kind of audiovisual translation (AVT), is a more immediate act and offers lesser chances of retraction and correction due to the speed of its distribution in the present world of globalisation. In describing ‘failure,’ the paper proposes that it is constituted by discrepancies and gaps, which being

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integral to the corpus of a work, become un-formed parts of the same work, that borders on being interpreted as deformities.

John Ciardi's 'Translation as Art of Failure'

John Ciardi titled his 1961 essay as "Translation: The Art of Failure," in which he describes the process of translating *Divine Comedy* by Dante in an American English verse rendition. His distress about the translation was that he undertook it to find a sense that best fits his understanding of the work. But it was also an effort to find a better version than those by others for, as per Ciardi, the other translators seemed to "*fall* into literary language, the very sort of thing Dante took pains to avoid" (18; italics mine). He used what he calls the 'dummy *terza rima*' which has proximity to American English, than the *terza rima*, calling his version "reasonably English, reasonably poetry, and reasonably faithful" to Dante's original (18).

While acknowledging the 'essential failure' of his translation in his dissatisfaction with it, Ciardi finds it reasonable to invest in it because he believes in it being "a good enough failure" (18). His reasoning is that a translation is usually the result of the translator's 'feel' of the translated work. For Ciardi, no theory sustains a translator. Rather, it is "by itch and twitch" (19). His thesis is that translation begins at a point where it looks forward to be completed and attain a final structure in the likeness of the source text (ST) and hopes to be acknowledged and received as a 'text' in and of itself. The likelihood of a translated text (TT) to find completion is bleak almost amounting to Roman Jakobson's untranslatability (1959).

In explaining his act of translation, he acknowledges that he let 'the rendering remain ragged' when the intent was intact. But it was difficult when the 'law' of poetry was not being followed in principles like when a passage is written as poetry, it must be rendered within metre, rhyme, and in a language sufficient to its emotional intent; and that when a rhyme the translator wants has been used in a preceding tercet, it may not be repeated too soon. Therein he calls this an "essential failure," but with it, that version "feels enough like the original, and feels enough like English poetry (or at least verse)" (19) which makes it some sense 'final'.

Ciardi's dictum has been used by Anthony K. Webster for the translation of a Navajo poem by Rex Lee Jim. Webster notes the three focal points which become the points of orientation for the translation to be rendered in its final version— register, history, and muscularity — that create the 'best possible failure' (10), or as Ciardi calls it "a good enough failure to be worth investing in" (18).

Referring to the discussion of the 'untranslatability' of poetry begun by Roman Jakobson (1959), Webster refers to him again to define 'failure' as Jakobson did, as a 'creative transposition'; an 'interlingual transposition'. Webster reasons for the untranslatability to happen at all by citing Rosemarie Waldrop (2009), for whom the impossibility of translation of sound in poetry happens "because the union of sound/sense will not be the same in any other language" (11; Waldrop 60), reiterating that translations are either exuberant or deficient. Yet the idea of the physicality of expression has long been a concern in the literature concerning ideophony and expressives.

In identifying particularities and peculiarities of sound's rhyme, assonance, and symbolism to the context, translation has to either give up the rhythm invoked by the source language's (SL) sound entirely or substitute it with an unfamiliar or strange rhythm of the target language (TL) for the ruptured rhythm of the original. The idea by sociolinguists like Dell Hymes (1960) is that there needs to be a "[r]ecognition of a social-identifying function [of speech acts] motivates an independently controllable articulation [which would] otherwise [be] left unintelligible" (70). Moreover, "the rights and obligations, roles and statuses, of the participants" (70) in a communicative context informs the status of a sentence whether it is a speech act or not.

Walter Benjamin understood translation as that which can only represent purposefully the intimate relationships among languages through its incomplete form of production. He wrote, "no translation would be possible if, in accord with its ultimate essence, it were to strive for similarity to the original" (155). Even fidelity to ST's words could not possibly bring TT any closer to ST's meaning, and fidelity to ST's form renders TT's meaning incomprehensible. His proposed solution was to make them look as fragments of a larger language, as fragments of a broken vessel that fit together but not looking similar.

Dubbing and Translation

Dubbing is a major revoicing practice in AVT, involving replacing the original soundtrack (OST) containing the actors' dialogue with a target language (TL) recording that reproduces the original message, while ensuring that the TL sounds and the actors' lip movements are synchronised in such a way that target viewers are led to believe that the screen actors (SA) are actually speaking the TL. Dubbing, was nicknamed as *traduction totale* (Cary 1960; quoted in Díaz Cintas and Orero 442) because of its nature, technique, and approach towards translation. Itsvan Fodor (1969) gave the three types of synchronies: lip synchrony, character synchrony and isochrony (quoted in Díaz Cintas and Orero 443).

Though countries and studios differ in the way they carry out dubbing, the standard industrial practice is that first, a rough translation of the script is carried out by a translator who knows the SL and then, a dubbing director adapts the script to be enunciated by the voice actors (VA) cast for the roles. Then, it is passed on to a sound engineer, who is responsible for synchronising the translation with the audio and the visual cues of the ST. Given that the OST is delinked from the visual track, the viewers do not usually have the possibility of comparing the ST and the dub. So, the professionals involved need not make the translation as literal as is done for subtitling. Therefore, they have, in principle, more latitude to play with the matter and form of dialogues.

For VAs, the task is not always an on-the-spot translation. They are often cast for roles as per the script according to the voice categorisation done by suppliers and managers. Only few projects, which are often on a very small-scale and often only meant for artists who are also translators, require VAs to translate and dub the dialogues for a product. In case of dubbing for advertisements, VAs often attempt a spontaneous translation according to the ST to save on production costs. For larger projects, the amount of fidelity to the ST is often determined by the clients who have commissioned the project (Díaz Cintas and Orero 442–43). Companies may either allow an audience-friendly translation, wherein the cultural references are accordingly either literally translated as per the equivalence theory or are substituted for a familiar reference, or companies may give out a

list of cultural referents to be either retained as they are or are to be translated only as the words which they provide.

In dubs, the first translation happens on the literal and verbal level done by the script translator. Then, the dubbing director turns the translated script into a lively dramatisation and conversation so that it becomes like ST in its treatment of the message that the audience receives. Then, the VA brings the dubbed script into enactment and enunciation. This is the phase visible to the audience when they pay attention to the difference or discrepancy which is present in the spoken-ness of the dialogues by the VAs and the lip play done by the SAs. In this phase, the sound engineer edits out rough edges and makes the dubbed soundtrack overlap ‘seamlessly’ onto the visual track of the original.

In the last phase, the smoothening process or synchronisation has been made easier by the digitalisation of the audiovisual (AV) texts. Early processes included manually cutting and pasting of the ‘tracks’ in specially designated rooms. Lea Jacobs outlines “how the functions of dubbing [that] evolved within studio practice across the 1930s can help explain how the track was gradually reconceived as a synthetic compilation of sounds rather than a straightforward recording of an event or performance” (6). Now in the digitised track, the cutting, separating, and rejoining has been optimised by and for the engineers using the binary language of the computer. Software possesses inbuilt options to separate the sound and video track, to re-record the soundtrack to another language as per the video timing, and finally to rejoin the two tracks to convert it into a final file format.

The dubbed track is thus a composite track wherein the audio and the video are integrated to function as one. In early soundtrack, this integration was actual because there was no technology which could capture sound separately from the video being shot. So, there were simultaneous shoots by various VAs and sometimes with changed SAs for each language. Over time with the improvement in sound technology, the separate recording of the OST made merging of tracks an important post-production stage. Again, a change in filming occurred with digitisation, when not merely separation of the two tracks is possible by replacing one with another, but there is also a possibility of tweaking the image or the sound as per requirements.

Dubbing as an act and form of AVT has undergone transformation over cinematic history, like silents turning talkies, image turning colourful and change in the formats of recording. Yet dubbing, being an act of translation and of creating cultural proximity, has been as an 'art' of translation.

The Art of Failure in Dubbing

The idea borrowed from Ciardi is that translation is incomplete and insufficient; despite being a deformation and failure, it is final. This can be extrapolated to dubbing, making it too a work always in progress and always remaining unfinished from its limits within the verbal nature of AV texts. Despite its popularity, dubs are critiqued for the discrepancies it engenders between the physical act of speaking by the acting body and the speech production by the speaking body. These discrepancies or imperfections can never be done away with completely, despite advanced techniques of synchronisation. The argument is to view the imperfections as deformations and rename them as Ciardi's 'failure'.

The discrepancies include those made at the cultural, the oral, and the linguistic levels. At the cultural level, dubbing involves verbal translations of phrases, idioms, and words which might not have any direct equivalent in the TL. Instead of making quirky translations through equivalence, translators choose to adapt cultural metaphors, phrases, or idioms. Retaining direct translations oddly distances the spectator from the dialogue and makes them look for explanations in places other than the cinematic text.

To address the oral aspect of dubbing, it is necessary to address the term 'muscularity' used by Ciardi. The argument is that it is the feel of the spoken-ness of the poem that is impossible to be translated, rather merely the sense of it is carried over through the words. The 'physicality of expression' is an important part of the musicality, and very difficult to recreate through the TL.ⁱ This muscularity or physicality which arises in the recitation is understood as based on the orality of words and the smoothness which is once achieved in the ST and is mimicked or imitated insufficiently, incompletely, and crudely in the orality of the TT. It is a result of speech patterns which make a speech act rhythmic in one language but not such in another.

As per classical theories of translation, to be rhythmic in TL, the speech act of translation needs to conform to the rules of speech and utterances of TL for its own sounds to produce the rhythm of their own, rather than borrow sounds and rhythm from SL. C S Venkiteswaran notes it in “Dubbed out” (2015) as proliferation of Hindi serials as pan-Indian takes over local definitions in the Tamil domestic sphere. Discrepancy in the flow of the speech production and in the muscular changes around the mouth are an intrinsic part of the act of dubbing – agreeable or not.

As Jessica Taylor writes in “Speaking Shadows” (2009), for the film audience, a “unity of body and voice was a desirable thing, but only when there was a ‘match’ between the social meanings of the voice and those of the image” (2). Thomas Rowe too, in his “The English Dubbing Text” (1960), proposed that film audiences are “concerned more with lip movement than with high-quality texts” (39) while traditional “translation standards [are] of fidelity and quality” (116). Dubbing stresses on the synchronisation of the timing of the SA’s voice and presence with the VA’s completion of the dubbed dialogue. Itsvan Fodor (1960) called this ‘lip synchrony’ which constitutes the belief that the spoken voice belonged to the SA integrally and is not a cinematic trick on the audience.

At the linguistic level, dubbing involves two distinct languages which are foreign to each other in many physiological terms, but are presented physically in TL, despite the speech organs enacting/ enunciating the speech production of SL. Lydia Hayes writes that “[d]espite best efforts, ideological and psychological demands are imposed on dubbed-version viewers who must reconcile the visualisation of foreignness (people, places, cultures, and labial movements pertaining to another language) with the acoustics of domestic language (invoking a new setting and giving rise to imprecise lip synchrony)” (4).

This discrepancy between physical act of speaking which seems to produce sounds—a physiological act done by SA—and the actual speech production heard in the final AV product—a speech act done by VA—is understood as a failure. The act is not merely one that is attempted and made possible at the verbal or linguistic level, but is attempted and must be made possible at the physical/ physiological

level, by involving speech organs of both SA and VA. For speech production, dubs attempt to balance TL's spoken aspect and SL's muscularity and expressiveness.

In "Problems of Translation," Samhita Sunya refers to an argument forwarded by Martine Danan in the 'dubbing versus subtitling' debate that "suppressing or accepting the foreign nature of imported films is the key to understanding how a country perceives itself in relation to others, and how it views the importance of its own culture and language" (34). Following Antje Ascheid, Sunya notes that a break in "cinematic identification, the suspension of disbelief and a continuous experience of unruptured" (36; qtd. in Ascheid 33) would not happen in dubs "whose aural properties – including, of course, the language(s) of audible dialogue – are successfully naturalized to the films' visual properties" (36), which happens in films that are racially, linguistically, and, in some ways, culturally closer. But he posits that there would be a 'marked different turn' in the effect where differences vary in ways in which mouths speak.

According to Robert Spadoni (2007), it is only the 'medium-consciousness' of the audience with the advent of 'talkies' that led to the development of the gothic genre of cinema, made possible by the newness of the sound element in cinematic viewing experience. A similar turn occurred with the availability of dubs in official and unofficial/ fan versions. Dubs offer a transcoded version of AV products in a language chosen by viewers. The uniqueness of dubbing lies in viewer's use of mind-eye co-ordination, particularly to accept the possibility of a 'strange' body speaking a 'familiar' tongue.

This is especially true for English films and drama series in dub for a homogenously defined Indian audience that speaks in colloquial Hindi. In Ganti's interview with Shakti Singh, the veteran VA reveals that audience needs to believe that the screen actor can speak Hindi, and stops being seen them as racially different (54). I propose in section 5 that this 'suspension of disbelief' is a notable point in the commercial success, popularity, and continuity of demand for dubs inherent in the 'acceptability' of synchronisation.

Not only films and drama series, but advertisement,ⁱⁱ cartoons and animated films are dubbed for an explicit purpose of reaching the

local audience or a viewer base which is not particularly literate or old enough to read (Ganti 49). Despite commercial success due to global reach, dubs in their ontological buildup and production techniques are not monolithic. Rather, they are an amalgamation of two channels – the audio and the video of the AV – making their constitution as a Frankensteinian product.

The unnatural nature of this discrepancy has been pointed out by Antonin Artaud using the figure of *dybbuk*. *Dybbuk* was a living person's body inhabited by the spirit of dead person who speaks through the mouth of the 'living' person. This ghost engages in actions to torment the living, forcing him to blaspheme against his will. In the figure of the *dybbuk*, the voice of the deceased continues to inhabit a living body. For Artaud, as Yampolsky simplifies, in dubbing, "the film star divests the live actor of his voice" (58) and the voice continues to reside in someone else's body.

In using the monstrous metaphor, involving "the snatching of the personality, of the soul" (58), Artaud directs attention to the inherent discrepancy in the physical translation of the language of voice and the language of the mouth. The voice is, in one way, a metaphor of human agency; in another, as Weidman suggests, the voice in its materiality, relates to "sound itself as well as with the bodily processes of producing and attending to voices" (235). Dubbing is immediate and apparent, given that, the audience involves not merely the mind, which understands the relation between languages, but also the eyes, which discern the non-relation and the non-cohesion between the singular body and the multiple languages.

Dubs bring a linguistic shift and a vocal shift—in the enunciation act. There is an actual disruption in the audio and the video which is only overcome using technical means to achieve synchronicity. Given that, in AV media, audio forms as important a part as video, a reason that makes the viewing experience 'unnatural' is when the audio is turned 'off.' In dubbing, the OST is separated from the video and attaches a new soundtrack. This disjoint and conjunction is seen as unnatural, presuming only the OST goes 'naturally' with the video. Dubs are considered inherently not smooth—and thus, un-natural—in their critical audience receptionⁱⁱⁱ due to this technical mismatch.

Discrepancy, Popularity, and Suspension of Disbelief

Mismatch or discrepancy is a significant failure of translation in dubbing. Dubs retain a meaning closest to the ST and allow the simplest transition of the meaning onto the syntax of the TL, while aiming to most closely imitate the syntactical formation of the ST. By technical standards, a lack of synchrony at any of the three levels given by Fodor (1969), and especially of lip synchrony, would be a matter of disorientation and confusion in meaning-making of the text.

In cases, where the video or the audio plays a second or half fast or slow, dubbed dialogues do not match the lip movement of screen actors. This discrepancy is visibly disruptive with humans on screen. In animations, lip movements are different as the drawings of the characters only involve two simple mouth positions which are of open or close. In human characters, mouth movements are complex and involve different manoeuvrability for producing specific speech or non-verbal sounds. These movements, informing the ‘muscularity’ or physicality of expression, are not easily reproduced in dubs due to differences in speech production in different languages.

As Ganti (2014) notes in English to Hindi dubs, the process involves an actively pursued “effacing of the traces of dubbing” (54) to make it “appear as natural and conversational as possible” (53). There are attempts to make it “closer to a Hindi sensibility [so as] to reduce that sense of rupture and disjuncture caused by dubbed film” (54). Her discussions with screenplay and dialogue writers suggest that whether the dub becomes a transliteration or a transcreation, it must carry over the emotion with the regional cultural flavour of TL. The garnering of social elites which has the ‘choice or preference’ to watch the original and the dub is determined by what I propose is the continuity of the ‘suspension of belief’ as the narrative demands.

When the original happens to evoke and appeal to the disbelief, it is assumed that the audience has a particular set of sensibilities (often following logic or not) about certain possibilities and realities in a space-time continuum. So, the success of dubs is determined by the socio-cultural constitution of the viewership. For a dub to come to pass, the condition is that the socio-cultural constitution of its viewership is different from the original audience imaginary.

For commercial success, relevance and popularity, dubs cater to a bilingual audience that needs to make a conscious choice—economic and linguistic—of viewing the dub. It also needs to appeal to the monolingual audience who depends solely on the dub for their understanding and enjoyment of the narrative. Therefore, the struggle is mainly of retaining the ‘sense’ of the ST while plating it (to use a culinary metaphor) in the cultural slang and nuances of the TL.

It is the carryover of the willing suspension of disbelief of the narrative from being in one linguistic parlance to other. Ganti (2021) remarks that dubbing or ADR (automatic dialogue replacement) work in similar ways to playback singing in its production of a single character which requires its distribution over three physiological entities, namely, the speaking voice, the singing voice, and the actors’ on-screen body (76). The suspension of disbelief necessitates the belief that the acts on screen as not implausible, allowing meanings to emerge in the symbolism of the actions. Coleridge’s term allows an entrenchment and involvement in the narrative which might often defy or negate scientific or moral laws.

In dubbing, the suspension must happen, in addition to the special effects in audio or video, at the linguistic level. For instance, in crowd scenes, Debashree Mukherjee (2014) writes, efforts are to make plausible what the crowd was picturised as doing while ascertaining the sound quality of such large groups on the shooting ground. VAs fill in gaps in the cacophonous or unclear audio and give it a superimposed linguistic clarity, demanded by the video, making the scene relevant to the audience. Dialogues, in their overlap and confusion of simultaneity, are each translated in its entirety.

Failure as a Kind of Rejoicing

There lies a rejoicing in the imperfection of dubbing as a cinematic “suspension of disbelief”. Though translation rejoices in incompleteness and non-imitation of ST, it is important to ask how acceptable the rejoicing is in dubbing, specially while analysing dubbing as a process, where despite inaccuracies in lip syncs, the purpose of globalisation is served by bringing cultures in aural-oral-visual proximity of each other. Dubbed dialogues offer familiarity despite the foreignness inherent in the physicality of speech.

As Nan Hu writes in context of 1950s Soviet films dubbed for a Chinese audience, foreignness is not an obstacle to understand the narrative of a 'strange' film always. It changed "the audience's way of interacting with the film, and encouraged the workers' transnational identification" (27). He brings to attention the ways "[t]o overcome this split and make the spectators believe that the voice comes from the actor on the screen, or in other words, to achieve audiovisual realism, sound films must try to match the moving image with the voice" (27). AV realism requires the viewer to follow the Coleridgean principle.

If dubbing "sutures the voice back to the body," then despite the improbable and overly visible nature of the "weld," a kind of semblance to what is *really* possible. Despite this imperfection or incompleteness or de-formation, which seems unnatural, and which further renders translation itself unnatural, dubbing as an art of failure becomes an imperfect work; it is an incomplete, and thereby, a de-formed project. The incompleteness brings out that what was too foreign and by turning it into something familiar, however inappropriately dressed (to use a sartorial metaphor), the failure turns into "the best possible failure" which Ciardi proposes as the aim.

In re-reading Ciardi, who advocates for the 'best possible failure' so that their readability or musicality carries forward into the target language's linguistic rhythmic meter, the interpolated proposition is to measure the success of the literal translations and of dubbed cinematic texts using this. The determination of such a success is in acceptability; in the rejoicing in the production of a non-literal and a non-equivalent translation wherein the original is as much part of the broken 'vessel' as the translation. The ontological acceptance of the imperfection inherent in the final allows it to find its place alongside the original. The postmodernist rejoicing and celebration of semantic surplus, present in the imperfection and de-formation of dubbing as translation, is part of the consumption process. Without it, the ontological continuation of dubbing would be superficial and taut.

Dubbing allows the imperfect and the un-/de-formed to carry on forward into another culture to bring about a communicative continuity. As Leonardo de Vinci said, that art is never finished, only abandoned. The layer of meanings which become a part of the

translation via the script translator is one among many and, in this semantic surplus, there are many layers which get only an imperfect inclusion. In re-reading Ciardi, we extrapolate it to the translational aspect of cinematic dubbing. In hailing dubbing, the point is that the act of dubbing in being an art of translation brings in a sufficient rejoicing in its discrepancy and imperfection.

Endnotes

- i. The physicality of expression has been dealt with in vocal anthropology and linguistic anthropology according to Webster. Readings are Amanda Weidman's "Anthropology and Voice" (2014) and John Leavitt's "Words and worlds" (2015).
- ii. Two instances are the advertisement for DOVE in Punjabi on YouTube (youtu.be/KOUZkCvnS8Q?si=2grTpicZty9Wwvse) and Maitreya Bapat's dub for Meesho's ad in Gujarati available on her Instagram page (www.instagram.com/reel/Cfntg7WKVWt/?igsh=dDdpMml4cGxpOHY5).
- iii. Studies conducted on various linguistic and national groups provide an insight into the critical reception of dubbed versions focusing on the un-natural aspect of translation for dubs. Some are Ameri and Khoshsaligheh (2019) – Persian; Nan Hu (2020) – Chinese; Ganti (2014), Venkiteswaran (2015) – Hindi.

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