Translating Screenplays

By Christine Kretschmer

It would be tempting to view screenplay translation as a sub-genre of literary translation. After all, many screenplays are based on novels, are usually designed to tell a story, and contain dialogue, descriptions, and even poetic language—all of which are commonly found in novels. However, there are several aspects that distinguish a screenplay from a literary work and that have a bearing on its translation, both on the overall approach the translator needs to take and on specific translation choices.

In contrast to a novel, which is written to be enjoyed by the reader (the end user), a screenplay is the blueprint for a film, and its translation will, either immediately or after additional editing or rewriting, be retranslated, or to some degree interpreted, by the creative personnel involved in making the film. Thus, the translated screenplay is not only a target text, but simultaneously becomes a source text for this retranslation into the audiovisual medium. Like the screenwriter who uses the most precise language available to him or her to guide the future interpretation of the screenplay, the translator should create a precisely written source text so that it reflects as closely as possible the totality of the screenwriter's intentions. And these intentions can only be understood by the translator through an awareness of the underlying dramatic structure of the work—character, plot and genre, audiovisual elements, and even, at times, psychology. The following examines the main challenges of this modality and provides some hints and tips on getting started.

Basic Layout

A screenplay is an industry document and must adhere to a standard layout, formatting, binding, and structure. Screenwriters tend to use professional screenwriting software that determines automatically the font, point size, and page layout, including the width of the dialogue columns, capitalization of the headings, numbering of the scenes, length of the lines, and the number of lines on a page. This very precise formatting is aimed at predicting the running time of the finished film: one page equates to roughly one minute of screen time. The most commonly used software is probably Final Draft, which allows users to choose the American or U.K. format (the latter is also used in the rest of the world). These formats differ in that American and Canadian screenplays are printed on 8.5 x 11 paper, whereas U.K. and European screenplays are printed on A4. Also, American screenplays use three screw pins in the script binding, whereas European screenplays use

two. The producer or commissioner of the translation will probably take care of the binding, as the translator is likely to deliver the translation electronically. There is, however, one conundrum that needs to be addressed before the translation process starts: the overall length.

Length

Screenplays are usually 90-120 pages long, and the expectation is that they are tightly structured, so much so that Hollywood executives are known to flick through them to find certain events (such as inciting incidents, act breaks, and turning points) on certain pages. It is commonly acknowledged that translations can expand or contract by up to 20-30%, depending on the language combination. Hence, the initial negotiation between client and translator should touch on whether or not page numbers should be matched between the original and the translation. If they are required to match, then the translator needs to ask how to proceed without creating unnecessary constraints imposed by the limited space that here stands for the defined running time. In subtitling, the viewing public has come to accept that the time and special constraints imposed on subtitles means that the latter tend to be an edited version of the film's dialogue and a more or less acceptable compromise. However, it would be unwise to subject a screenplay translation to potentially severe editing, given its status as a source text on which the work of the creative contributors to the film is based. Reducing the point size (in agreement with the client) may be a better solution in such cases.

Why Translate a Screenplay?

There are a number of reasons a screenplay might be translated. One reason may be that a writer in the target country may wish to adapt the screenplay for that particular market, or even the international market. This may require changing some of the settings, characters, and storylines. In these cases, all the target content writer requires from the translator may be the totality of the work without any need to worry about the overall number of pages of the translated work. If, however, the work is translated for the purpose of financing a film or television series, then there may be a good reason for matching the page numbers of the translation to that of the original. Other reasons for translating screenplays may be to seek permission for filming in other countries, to translate screenplays of well-known films for publication in book form, or to facilitate the work of creative contributors who are not fluent in the language in which the project is filmed. While English is spoken by most film professionals, there are occasionally complex co-production arrangements (usually to enable the financing of the film) that may result in the need for translations into one or several languages within the context of filming for cast and/or crew.

Main Components

The three key components of screenplays are the scene headings, the stage directions (or scene descriptions), and the dialogue.

Headings: Scene headings are usually numbered and capitalized, giving information on the lighting conditions required (exterior/interior), the location, and the time of day. It is worth bearing in mind that scene headings should be translated consistently, as they may later be used to sort locations within film scheduling software.

Dialogue: In film, screenwriters tend to follow the rule "show, don't tell": they try to tell the story through visual means rather than relying too much on dialogue to impart information. Hence, dialogue lines are usually kept short and to the point—in other words, they are highly edited versions of spoken language. In her book *Creating Unforgettable Characters*, Linda Seger compares good dialogue to a piece of music that has "a beat, a rhythm, a melody" and can be easily spoken.[1] Each line of dialogue usually runs for no more than two or three lines, and the translator should take care to keep it as succinct as possible and to ensure that there is cohesion between the exchanges. Seger compares good dialogue to a tennis match that moves back and forth between the players, conveying "conflict, attitudes, and intentions. Rather than telling about the character, it reveals character."[2] Good dialogue shows how a character deals with a specific dramatic situation that has already been set up. The translator should be sure to create dialogue that sounds authentic and idiomatic in the target language, and that reflects the speaker's age, social standing, and, very importantly, any subtext conveyed, without allowing the latter to become explicitly stated. Screenwriters try to avoid dialogue that is "on the nose" (i.e., openly stating what their characters want). Translators of screenplays should try to retain any ambiguities in the target text and to use explicitation with great care.

Stage Directions: Arguably the most challenging aspect of screenplay translation is the translation of the stage directions/scene descriptions. These tend to be written in short, mostly active sentences in the present tense that describe the action and sounds in the most economical way possible, and often in a kind of shorthand, but not necessarily in grammatically complete sentences. The translator should replicate ➡

the syntax of these short sentences, as they impart information in a specific order that parallels the intended visual language of the film. For example, in Anthony Minghella's *The English Patient*, the sentence "An officer, German, focuses his field glasses." should not be translated as "A German officer focuses his field glasses."[3] This is because the source text intends the audience to receive the information in small chunks. For example, we see the image of an officer, and only a split second later we realize that this officer is in fact German (the enemy), and (worse) that he focuses his field glasses in order to find our protagonist. Thus, this small sentence contains three separate pieces of information that build up the drama by slowly creating anticipation in the audience (and the reader). The following are some other important elements of stage directions the translator needs to keep in mind when working on a screenplay.

- **Maintain Order of Information:** The order in which information is given can also define an image. For example, in *The English Patient*, the sentence—"A web of scars covers the Patient's face and body"—creates a visual statement. It should not be translated as "His face is covered by a web of scars," as the focus would then shift onto the factual statement of where the scars are and lose the focus on the image of the scars themselves. In this case, there are two reasons for this. First, screenwriters often use so-called "active questions" to arouse curiosity in the viewer, and the unusual image of the web of scars suggests a close-up before revealing the remainder of the information—that the scarred face belongs to the English Patient. Second, in this particular scene, we see the world from the point of view of the English Patient, bearing in mind his psychological and physical state. Having sustained severe burns in a plane crash, he is being carried across the desert on a stretcher and can only see fragments of the world around him because his face is covered by a protective mask: "His view of the world is through slats of reed … He glimpses camels …" etc. The screenwriter has created a very clearly defined image here that suggests how the scene should be shot and possibly also edited, and seeing the action from the English Patient's point of view means that we identify with him as our main character.
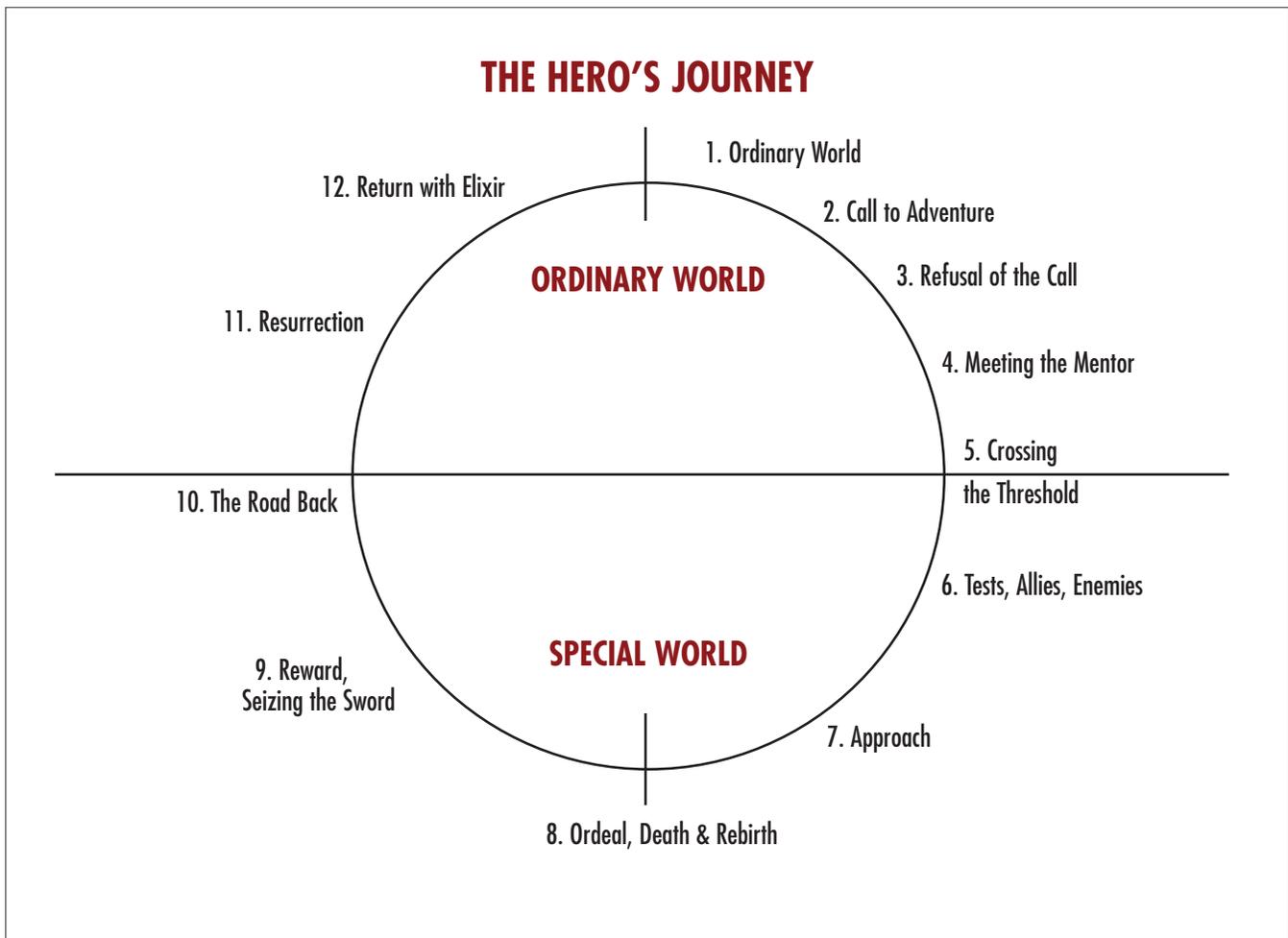
- **Maintain Capitalization:** Stage directions usually contain some words that are capitalized, which the translator must replicate. Capitalized words roughly fall into four categories: 1) all of the characters' names are capitalized when the character is first introduced, 2) any important or main images are capitalized, 3) as are important sounds, and 4) camera instructions. In *The English Patient*, the description picks out a "SILVER THIMBLE" from a larger image and emphasizes it through capitalization. This thimble is important later on in the narrative as it comes to represent the intimacy and connection between the main character and his lover, Katharine. Capitalization signals to the director, cameraman, and editor (as well as the prop person) that this object must be seen clearly by the audience, either through a close-up, careful lighting (the thimble glints in the sun light) or, most likely, both.

- **Maintain Full Meaning of Verbs:** Another very important aspect of stage directions is the use of verbs. It is commonly said that adaptations from novels to screenplays involve the translation of descriptions into actions, and for screenwriters, action shown on screen is the currency of their craft. Hence the translator needs to pay particular attention to the verbs used and should try to replicate the full meaning of the original action as closely as possible. For example, in the adaptation of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the early scene during an air raid describes how a family rushes to the shelter after the siren "blares" (it does not just sound), and the characters grab (not just take), pluck (ditto), rush (not just run), scramble, shove, shepherd, yank, and tumble—all of which suggest the pacing of the action, the psychological state of the characters, as well as the chaos surrounding them.[4] Verbs can also be used to describe the characters in the screenplay efficiently. For example, the reader will draw different conclusions about the character's personality or the story at that point, depending on whether Johnny marches, saunters, or shuffles into the office, so these actions need to be portrayed with the same precision.

Technical Elements

The technical language contained in screenplays relates to different elements, including camera instructions, special or visual effects, sound or voice-over, or the pacing of the action. For instance, the words "A BEAT" usually signify a short pause (either in the delivery of dialogue or pacing of the action) to allow the audience to assimilate important

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THE HERO'S JOURNEY

- 12. Return with Elixir
- 1. Ordinary World
- 2. Call to Adventure
- 3. Refusal of the Call
- 11. Resurrection
- 4. Meeting the Mentor
- 5. Crossing the Threshold
- 10. The Road Back
- 6. Tests, Allies, Enemies
- 9. Reward, Seizing the Sword
- 7. Approach
- 8. Ordeal, Death & Rebirth

ORDINARY WORLD

SPECIAL WORLD

information. Special effects (SFX, usually created on set) or visual effects (VFX, usually created during post production) are marked as such, as are voice-overs (VO) and the off-screen sounds of dialogue (OFF). In terms of camera instructions, screenplays vary depending on whether they are American or British. American screenplays make liberal use of camera instructions such as "PAN DOWN," "CLOSE ON," etc., whereas U.K. screenplay conventions do not allow these. Instead, U.K. screenwriters are taught to suggest shots indirectly though descriptions of images. An example of this is the close-up suggested by the description of the scarring on the face of the English Patient mentioned earlier. Other terms include "FLASHBACK" and "(CONT'D)" for "continued" (this is usually inserted automatically by the screenwriting software at the end of each page). If the page breaks

fall differently, then the translator can omit or move them accordingly.

Screenwriting Theory

Screenwriting theory has established a number of rules that help screenwriters shape their work to conform to audience expectations. The structure created will have a bearing on what the character does and what he feels at each point of the story, and hence also have an impact on translation decisions. A basic understanding of screenwriting theory is very helpful for translators so that they can decode the subtext of each scene.

A screenplay usually tells the story of a main character (the protagonist). It is divided into three acts: Act I (set-up), Act II (confrontation), and Act III (resolution). Screenwriters often speak of the "character journey" or "character arc" when they describe how the character first wants some-

thing, enters into conflict with an antagonist to get it, and changes in the process of obtaining it before the drama is resolved at the end. The expectation is that Act I and Act III each represent 25% of the screenplay, while Act II represents 50%. For example, Christopher Vogler's model in his book *The Hero's Journey* describes the different stages of the character's journey and how these relate to the three acts.[5] This journey is represented visually in Figure 1 above: the top right quadrant segment represents Act I, the bottom half represents Act II, and the top left quadrant segment represents Act III. Essentially, in the scenario depicted in Figure 1, when the film begins, we meet the hero in his or her ordinary world, then there is an "inciting incident" (here the "call to adventure"). Initially, the hero refuses this call, but then meets a mentor and finally crosses the threshold into new territory (the "special world" ➡

of Act II). There the hero faces tests and meets allies and enemies, then approaches the innermost cave where he or she faces an ordeal, followed by death and rebirth, and receives a reward (e.g., the hero seizes the sword), and is then on the road back to the ordinary world. Following the final showdown and resurrection, the hero returns with the elixir (or the hero's new knowledge/wisdom).

Each moment within the main character's actual and psychological journey in the narrative can be related back to where it is found in the screenplay and vice versa, and therefore it can matter enormously to the translator whether the word or phrase to be translated is found: 1) at the beginning of the screenplay, where we meet the character in his or her everyday setting; 2) at the beginning of Act II, when the character has surrendered to the new challenge and has begun the journey (which may mean that the character is already in crisis to some extent, or there is a crisis brewing without it necessarily being acknowledged among the characters); or 3) at the point approaching the climax, where everything is out of control and the character struggles to overcome the obstacles to his or her goal in a final showdown. Key to making the right translation decisions is an understanding of the character's psychological state and the subtext in each scene, so that the translation choices reflect the choices made by the writer and strengthen rather than weaken the established structure.

Getting Started

So now that you have a rough idea of what screen translation involves, how do you get started? Translators entering this field should begin by finding screenplays in their source and target language(s), many of which are available for free on the Internet. The use of parallel texts is the best strategy to ensure the accurate translation of technical terms. Translators can also search the latter individually on the web or look at film school websites, which often provide useful explanations. There are a number of free screenplay
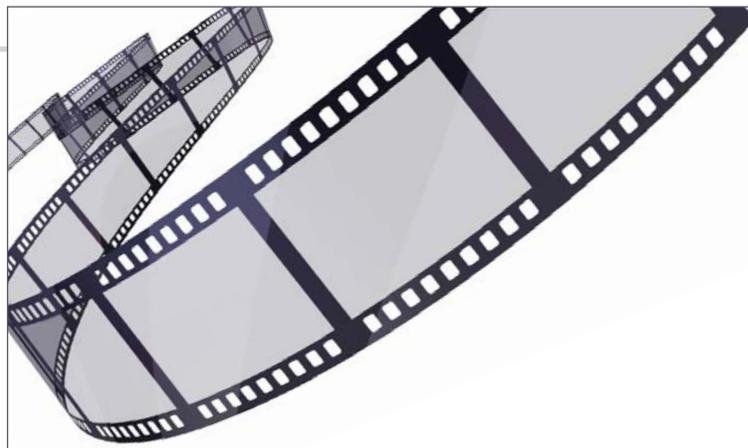
Screenwriting Resources

Software

BBC ScriptSmart Gold
http://scriptsmartfile.weebly.com

Celtx
www.celtx.com/index.html

Final Draft
www.finaldraft.com

Movie Magic Screenwriter
www.screenplay.com/p-29-movie-magic-screenwriter-6.aspx

Websites for Screenplays

The Daily Script
www.dailyscript.com

Drew's Script-O-Rama
www.script-o-rama.com

Movie Scripts and Screenplays
www.moviescriptsandscreenplays.com

Simply Scripts
www.simplyscripts.com

software packages such as Celtx or BBC Script Smart Gold, but Final Draft offers a free trial version for the first 30 days.

Although the challenge of translating a screenplay may sound daunting given the many technical aspects, it is ultimately creative, rewarding, and enjoyable work, and if you are offered a project, well worth doing.

Notes

1. Seger, Linda. *Creating Unforgettable Characters* (Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 146-147.

2. Seger, 147.

3. Minghella, Anthony. *The English Patient: Screenplay* (Mirage Productions, 1996), http://bit.ly/amazon-English-Patient.

4. Markus & McFeely. *The Hundred Year Winter: Screenplay* (Walden Media, 2003), www.dailyscript.com/scripts/Chronicles_of_Narnia.pdf.

5. Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers, 3rd Edition* (Michael Wiese Productions, 2007). ■