

Beyond compliance

Creativity and human agency in audiovisual translation

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The academic field of audiovisual translation (AVT), broadly conceived as the localisation and adaptation of multimodal media content, is currently experiencing a structural transformation of unprecedented scope. Driven by the digitisation of media and accelerated technological innovation, this transformation has reshaped not only the production, circulation, and consumption of audiovisual texts, but also the epistemological foundations and professional practices of AVT itself (Chaume and de los Reyes Lozano 2021; Spiteri Miggiani 2022). While earlier technological shifts primarily affected tools and workflows, recent developments – particularly in artificial intelligence (AI) and machine translation (MT) – directly challenge long-standing assumptions about authorship, creativity, and human agency in audiovisual translation.

Over the past decade, industrial AVT practices have been profoundly reconfigured. The widespread adoption of MT-related technologies – such as automatic speech recognition (ASR), speech-to-text and speech-to-speech translation, translation memories, and post-editing – has firstly transformed subtitling, then audio description and, increasingly, dubbing workflows. These technologies have enabled faster turnaround times, reduced costs, and facilitated large-scale multilingual distribution. At the same time, the consolidation of global streaming platforms has standardised production pipelines, changed agency and intensified productivity demands, while cloud-based localisation environments have redefined collaboration among both translators, engineers, and clients, on the one hand, and - in the case of dubbing - adapters, talents, and dubbing directors, on the other. Together, these shifts have contributed to an unprecedented degree of automation within AVT.

Yet, as automation expands, the limitations of machine-generated audiovisual translation become increasingly visible. In particular, AI-driven solutions continue to struggle with dimensions that are central to meaning-making in audiovisual texts: emotion, performance, gender, pragmatics, cultural resonance,

humour, and stylistic nuance. Despite widespread hype, AI dubbing, for example, cannot replace the uniquely human dimensions of audiovisual translation. Claims that AI delivers comparable quality at lower cost, outperforms glossaries, or effortlessly supports multiple languages often overlook its real limitations. AI performs best in structured, repetitive tasks – preparing glossaries, identifying keywords, or creating synopses – while humans provide creativity, interpretive insight, and cultural nuance. The most effective model is therefore ‘Human + AI’ vs AI in which human translators harness AI for efficiency but retain control over meaning, style, and emotion. It is precisely at this juncture that creativity emerges not as a marginal or ornamental feature of AVT, but as its defining human core. Creativity functions as the space in which translators interpret, negotiate, and rearticulate meaning across semiotic modes, cultural frameworks, and ideological positions – an activity that (still) cannot be fully reduced to algorithmic pattern matching.

The scholarly engagement with creativity in translation is not new, although its conceptualisation has evolved significantly over time. One of the earliest monographs explicitly addressing the topic is *Translators’ Strategies and Creativity* (Beylard-Ozeroff et al. 1998), a work still largely influenced by structuralist approaches and the legacy of the Prague School, in which creativity was conceptualised as a mediating hinge between form and content. Usually associated with source texts which are themselves quintessentially creative (literary, theatrical, poetic) (see for example Perteghella and Loffredo 2006), the intersection between creativity and other translation domains was for a long time a comparatively underexplored field, even though creative problem-solving is involved in all forms of translation, not only in the translation of literary works (Jääskeläinen 2012, 131). Even a rapid perusal of the scholarly output on creativity in translation reveals that literary texts are still privileged by scholars, also thanks to the substantial number of occurrences in these contexts that make quantitative methodologies, paired with qualitative ones, a valuable tool of investigation. Kenny (2011/2014), for example, using corpus linguistics, devised a methodology for analysing lexical creativity and normalisation in translated literature, looking for matches of lexically creative forms or collocations in the source texts with equally creative forms or collocations in the target texts (Kenny 2001/2014, 140).

Analyses of creative translation in non-literary fields, on the other hand, have focused on texts ranging from those characterised by a specialised, technical, terminology (see, for example, Šarčević 1998, for legal texts) to creative rewritings of religious texts: Wakabayashi (2012, 25) rightly notes how “the Western concern with written translation largely overlooks oral milieux and practices that blur the written/oral distinction” and result in a “flexible” attitude towards authorship and originality.

It is only in more recent years, and arguably also as a response to dystopian visions of a totally mechanised future, that a surge of interest in human creativity in translation and its definitions has led to a more diffused interest, expressed in the organisation of conferences and events on the topic, and in the release of various publications (see, for example, Malmkjær 2020) which foreground the role of creativity, “the greatest gift of human intelligence” (Robinson 2001/2011, xiii), in the production of translations.

Within audiovisual translation, creativity emerged later as a central analytical category. Early calls for a “creative turn” in AVT can be traced back to Nornes’s (1999) seminal intervention, which inspired subsequent work by Foerster (2010), McClarty (2012), and Romero Fresco (2021), among others.

Since then, creativity has been examined across different AVT modes, including dubbing (Ranzato 2011, 2023), subtitling (Liang 2023), and audio description (Szarkowska 2013; Walczak and Fryer 2017; Rizzo and Spinzi 2023; etc.). In parallel, the emergence of cybersubtitling and cyberdubbing practices (Díaz Cintas 2018; Baños Piñero 2019) has generated striking – if sometimes controversial – instances of creative intervention in even the most canonical audiovisual texts, ranging from auteur cinema and high-end television series to globally distributed video games. In these contexts, translators and adapters increasingly assert authorial agency by reshaping formats, challenging established conventions, and strategically adding, modifying or omitting content, thereby explicitly ‘making a statement.’ Analyses show how dubbing adapters, for example, in significant times and places, have “patiently loosened the bonds” which tied audiovisual texts to “a specific cultural environment and rooted it into very different soil” (Ranzato 2023: 394) – a testimony of the work of the translators in their full capacity as creative authors.

Creative Audiovisual Translation, then, encompasses those practices that, on the one hand, provide linguistic and cultural access to the media for everybody, irrespective of their capabilities, and on the other, claim to become an artistic, imaginative, and creative contribution to the audiovisual text that evokes a new viewer experience (Romero Fresco and Chaume 2022). In contemporary digital environments, creative audiovisual translation has thus acquired renewed significance, closely associated with the exploration of technologically mediated practices such as transcreation.

Creativity in translation should not be understood as an exceptional or marginal phenomenon, but as an intrinsic dimension of translational activity. All human translations necessarily involve interpretation, decision-making, and the reconfiguration of meaning across linguistic, cultural, and semiotic systems; in this sense, translation is creative by nature. However, this does not imply that all translations are creative to the same extent. Rather, creativity operates along a

continuum, ranging from minimally transformative, convention-bound solutions to highly interpretive and innovative ones (Boden 2004). Translational outputs can thus be positioned according to the degree of creative engagement they display.

This continuum becomes particularly salient in the context of increasing automation. While contemporary machine translation systems may occasionally produce outputs perceived as creative, their position within the creativity continuum remains limited. Creativity presupposes creative thinking – a cognitive mode that extends beyond linear, rule-based processing to include divergence, ambiguity tolerance, and the capacity to establish non-obvious connections (Sternberg 1999). These capacities are central to human translation practice but remain fundamentally constrained in machine-driven processes (Cronin 2017).

The existence of creative translation is especially evident in pedagogical contexts (see for example, Díaz Cintas 2008; Talaván 2019). Translation trainers can readily distinguish between solutions that are accurate yet flat or predictable and those that demonstrate interpretive depth, contextual sensitivity, and aesthetic awareness. Crucially, creativity does not imply deviation from professional norms, but rather the ability to negotiate constraints productively (Martínez Sierra 2008). Mere compliance with client guidelines or style guides – such as those imposed by major audiovisual platforms – is insufficient to produce creative translation and can be efficiently replicated by automated systems.

From this perspective, creativity emerges as a key site of human agency in an increasingly posthuman translational landscape. In contemporary educational and professional debates, creative and critical competences are increasingly foregrounded as essential skills for operating under conditions of uncertainty shaped by globalisation and digitalisation. In translation, where automation has reshaped workflows and market expectations, professionals are required not only to execute tasks efficiently, but to solve problems strategically. Such problem-solving relies on creativity and critical thinking, enabling translators to justify their decisions, position themselves ethically and professionally, and ultimately differentiate human translation from automated output.

This volume advances the argument that creativity constitutes the primary qualitative threshold separating human audiovisual translation from machine-assisted output. Far from being an optional enhancement, creativity underpins the capacity of audiovisual translators to produce emotionally convincing performances, culturally situated dialogue, and narratively coherent adaptations. This is especially evident in modes such as dubbing and audio description, where voice, timing, prosody and embodiment converge, but it is equally relevant to subtitling, voice-over, and emerging hybrid forms of audiovisual mediation.

From this perspective, creativity also acquires a critical and ethical dimension. In an environment increasingly dominated by MT and post-editing, audiovisual translation plays a decisive role in shaping discourses, identities and ideological representations across languages and cultures. Human creativity enables translators to recognize, question and strategically manage ideological content – an interventionist capacity that risks being eroded when translation decisions are delegated to opaque algorithmic systems optimised primarily for efficiency. Moreover, a historical perspective reminds us that AVT has repeatedly adapted to technological disruption without relinquishing its creative dimension. Past innovations – once perceived as threats to professional expertise – have ultimately reshaped, rather than eliminated, the interpretive and creative labour of audiovisual translators.

The growing centrality of MT and AI further raises pressing pedagogical and professional implications. Translator education must now address the tension between technological competence and creative autonomy, ensuring that future practitioners are not merely trained as post-editors of machine output, but as critical and creative mediators of audiovisual meaning. Professionally, the expansion of automation is already redefining roles within the AVT industry, generating new profiles in which creativity, evaluative judgement and multimodal expertise are likely to become key forms of added value. Creativity also plays a pivotal role beyond professional AVT, particularly in didactic audiovisual translation practices used in foreign language learning contexts, where creative engagement with audiovisual material fosters linguistic awareness, intercultural competence, and learner agency.

These and many other concerns, ideas, and associations emerge from the contributions included in this collection, which stemmed from the brainstorming sparked by two iterations of the conference “Translators as Authors: Creativity in Media Localisation”, organised by Frederic Chaume and Irene Ranzato at the Sapienza University of Rome on 24/25 November 2021 and 10 May 2023.

The authors have engaged with the notion of creativity in its contemporary declinations in the domain of various modalities of AVT, proving that if, as Carol O’Sullivan (2013, 42) maintains, “the importance of the concept of creativity to Translation Studies is partly due to its use by scholars and critics with a view to improving the status of translation by showing that it is, indeed, ‘creative’”, today the focus has shifted to the either human or artificial author of these translations and to whether creativity is the prerogative of only the former or also the latter. In her essay “Creativity in audio description. Culture-specific references in *I leoni di Sicilia*”, Alessandra Rizzo thus compares audio description scripts made by humans for a Disney+ series with descriptions created by ChatGPT, in order to assess Generative AI’s ability to identify culturally relevant elements and to

make use of creative language. Shifting the attention to dubbing, Giselle Spiteri Miggiani, in “Rethinking creativity in dubbing”, examines the ‘human’ creative processes at play in the dubbing studio and evaluates how adaptations generated by AI are reshaping creative practices and viewers’ perceptions. Rather than asking if AI-dubs are creative, rather than simply comparing them with human-generated dubs, the author reflects on the notion of ‘credibility’ as a more suitable category for this new state of affairs.

The AVT modality of subtitling is examined by several authors in this collection. Serenella Massidda, for example, illustrates relatively new practices such as the creation of in-show and out-show comments on screen and of web titles, in order to assess how young audiences engage with social networking platforms to create a sense of belonging and ‘leave their mark’ on the internet.

Another way to look at creativity in subtitling is shown in Carol O’Sullivan’s contribution. The author documents the fascinating process of ‘cannibalisation’ and retranslation which led to the creation of the subtitles of the film *Cyrano de Bergerac* by Jean-Paul Rappeneau, uncovering how they were in fact the fruit of the creative work of two individuals, the celebrated (and credited) author Anthony Burgess and the British subtitler Ian Burley. Retranslation and the degrees of creativity involved in this process are topics also tackled by Jorge Díaz Cintas in “The practice of retranslation in subtitling”, in which the author tests Chesterman’s (2000) ‘retranslation hypothesis’ (which Díaz Cintas discusses and problematises) on three different English translations for subtitling of the French film *La Haine* by Mathieu Kassovitz.

In the context of queer audiovisual culture, Iván Villanueva-Jordán analyses the music video of the Spanish cover song “Es una pasiva”, comparing it with its English source “Boy is a bottom” in order to explore how the linguistic elements in the song have been creatively amplified and recontextualised in translation and how they interact with music and images to construct meanings related to gender and sexuality. Also examining the creative skills at play when localising a product, Serenella Zanotti, in her article “In pursuit of the cinematic experience”, looks back to the distant past of silent cinema in order to uncover the strategies adopted by translators to tailor silent films for international audiences, illustrating, through archival research, the process of adaptation and reception of Charlie Chaplin’s films.

In their contribution, “Creativity in didactic audiovisual translation”, Noa Talaván and Jennifer Lertola look at the “motivation boost” derived from incorporating the freedom of creativity in language learning activities, enhancing the students’ skills and motivation in carrying out tasks and exercises.

This diverse collection of papers offers yet another perspective in Pablo Romero Fresco’s and Kate Dangerfield’s article on “Media access in the land of

many shapes” which raises awareness of ableism in a predominantly non-disabled media environment, in terms of both representation and participation in the decision-making process of creating audiovisual products. The authors dwell on possible solutions such as accessible film-making and on new specialist professional figures such as that of the access coordinator, pioneered in the UK and Australian film industries.

By foregrounding creativity as both a theoretical lens and a practical necessity, this volume positions audiovisual translation as a paradigmatic space in which the tensions between automation and human agency, standardisation and expression, and efficiency and creative intent are negotiated. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates within *Translation Spaces* on the spatial, technological and ideological conditions under which translation is produced, experienced, and valued in the contemporary media landscape.

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