



# Conference Proceedings

## CIVAE 2022

**4th Interdisciplinary and Virtual  
Conference on Arts in Education**

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Edited by  
**MUSICOGUIA**

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## The surtitle of the sung word: a form of linguistic and cultural mediation

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### Abstract

Studies dedicated to the translation of dramatic-musical texts (opera libretto, oratorio text, liederistic text) in recent decades are being (re)considered by some amateur scholars (Vega Cernuda, 2012). This modality of audiovisual translation, an heir to the film subtitling techniques and media, is closely linked to the great development of the media and the new technologies that were put at the service to “update” this kind of text; a way to reach a wider audience what was previously reserved for a select audience. In this context, we intend to trace and analyze the main uses of this translation modality and detect the difficulties presented by the elaboration of surtitles in opera (Burton, 2009). In order to achieve these research purposes, we trace a brief journey about the origin and promulgation of both interlinguistic and intralinguistic surtitle of opera librettos (Mateo, 2002; Díaz Cintas, 2007), we outline the substantial differences between subtitling and surtitle, we analyze what the main uses of this translation modality are, and we pinpoint the difficulties presented by the elaboration of surtitle in opera (Burton, 2009). By adopting a didactic approach, the different translation strategies are examined depending on the objective pursued by the surtitler (Gambier 2004, Virkkunen 2004, Desblache 2007).

*Keywords:* translation of musical texts, opera, librettos surtitle, updating, intersemiosis in musical theater.

## El sobretítulo de la palabra cantada: una forma de mediación lingüística y cultural

### Resumen

Los estudios dedicados a la traducción de textos dramático-musicales (libreto de ópera, texto de oratorio, texto liederístico) en las últimas décadas están siendo (re)considerados por algunos estudiosos aficionados (Vega Cernuda, 2012). Esta modalidad de traducción audiovisual, heredera de las técnicas y soportes del subtítulo cinematográfico, está íntimamente ligada al gran desarrollo de los soportes y de las nuevas tecnologías que se pusieron al servicio de la “actualización” de este tipo de textos; una forma de llegar a un público más amplio que antes estaba reservado para un público selecto. En este contexto, pretendemos rastrear y analizar los principales usos de esta modalidad de traducción y detectar las dificultades que presenta la elaboración de sobretítulos en ópera (Burton, 2009). Para lograr estos propósitos de investigación, trazamos un breve recorrido sobre el origen y promulgación del sobretítulo de los libretos de ópera, tanto interlingüístico como intralingüístico (Mateo, 2002; Díaz Cintas, 2007), esbozamos las diferencias sustanciales entre subtítulo y sobretítulo, analizamos cuáles son los principales usos de esta modalidad de traducción, y señalamos las dificultades que presenta la elaboración del sobretítulo en la ópera (Burton, 2009). Adoptando un enfoque didáctico, se examinan las diferentes estrategias de traducción en función del objetivo perseguido por el sobretitulador (Gambier 2004, Virkkunen 2004, Desblache 2007).

*Palabras clave:* traducción de textos musicales, ópera, sobretítulo de libretos, actualización, intersemiosis en el teatro musical.

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## Introduction

In the field of linguistic mediation, audiovisual translation (AVT) represents the most prominent novelty of the last four decades. However, the specialty of performing arts surtitle has remained, for years, on the margins of academic studies. In this short contribution, we will deal with the operatic translation and subtitling that, thanks to its particularities, acquires an unquestionable notoriety and is a must-read.

As a first approach to the topic in question, we differentiate the translations of the librettos to be sung from the translations of the librettos to be read (Sciutto, 2018). The translation of the chant or *singable*, consists of adapting the original libretto to the target language to be sung. The translation to be read, in contrast, may be: (i) literal translation of the libretto, used as a working tool for the singers during rehearsals in order to understand the meaning of the words written in the score (and provide the song with better eloquence); (ii) direct translation of the libretto, namely, an interlingual translation to be read by the audience (usually published in the programs); (iii) translation of the surtitles of the operas, which we will address in this work, that is to say, of the text of the libretto translated and condensed that is projected on the stage during the performance and to be refined during rehearsals (Weaver 2010).

According to Conti (2014), the first documented appearance of surtitles in a rudimentary form is in 1949 for a work by Brecht in Paris, but it was an isolated case back then. It was not until 1983, with the successful surtitle of *Elektra* of Strauss in the *Canadian Opera Company* of Toronto, that surtitles began to be disseminated (Eugeni, 2006 and De Frutos, 2011). In 1986, they were used in Europe and, particularly, in Italy during the demonstration of the *Maggio Musicale Fiorentino*.

Nowadays, the projection of (intra and interlinguistic) surtitles of dramatic-musical texts is the standard process in the main opera houses around the world. Opera, being a traditional paradigm of a classist genre, with the incorporation of the surtitles, approaches all types of audiences, even minorities with special needs or demands.

## Taxonomy of surtitles

According to the proposal of Mateo (2002, p. 51) “[...] opera surtitles consist of a summarized written translation of the source text that is projected simultaneously with the sung transmission of that libretto on a screen located at the top of the theater proscenium during the opera performance.” [Own translation.]

Even though surtitles were born as an evolution of subtitles, there are some differences that mainly concern issues of an extralinguistic nature, that is, technical aspects and expectations (understood as the relationship established between the show and the viewer), summarized in the following table:

Table 1.

*Differences between subtitling and surtitles.* Own elaboration

SUBTITLES	SURTITLES
<b>Technical differences</b>	
<b>Defined rules</b>	<b>Flexible rules</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 lines.</li> <li>• 36 - 38 characters per line.</li> <li>• From 1 to 5 seconds of exposure.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each representation is different.</li> <li>• Verification of visibility.</li> <li>• Number of variable characters.</li> </ul>
It is translated from a fixed text	Translation is the result of a process
<b>Differences in the public's expectations of the text</b>	
Lower level of attention.	Higher level of attention.

The attention is concentrated in a small space of the monitor = less eye effort to focus.	Wider visual field: continuous movement of the eyes (and, depending on the position, also of the head) to read the surtitles and, simultaneously, watch the show.
Intralinguistic subtitling: hearing-impaired audience for the purpose of social inclusion.	Intralinguistic surtitles: text that is difficult to understand (type of language or speech problems).
<b>Common goal: understanding the main ideas of a scene</b>	

As for the purely linguistic aspect of the translation and surtitles of theatrical or cinematographic text, they can be interlinguistic or intralinguistic. In the case of an opera, intralinguistic surtitles help to understand the sung word, which is sometimes confusing (due to its archaic language, or the unclear diction of some singers), while intralinguistic subtitles for the screen are mainly intended for the hearing-impaired audience for social inclusion purposes. Translation for the theater also requires taking into account the requirements of functionality as a service for the audience, a service that follows the rhythm of the music and that contains the reading times in pace with what is happening on stage.

### The intersemiosis of surtitles

The work of opera surtitles cannot do without intersemiosis, since four types of language come into action: music (singing and instrumental music), body language (gestures, staging, movement, dance), visual language (scenography, sketches, makeup, and technical image resources such as film and video) and verbal language. Each of these languages has an autonomous meaning, but when they are organized according to the music, the processes of meaning become complex, resulting in different meanings simultaneously.

Considering opera as a form of musical multimedia means studying the effectively operant (and cooperating) modes of intersemiosis in this field, taking into account the system as a whole (Sciutto, 2020). However, as we can see in Table 2, opera surtitling as a form of linguistic mediation in the contemporary socio-cultural context does not reach consensus and acceptance from all types of audiences, artists, and critics:

Table 2.  
*Arguments for and against opera surtitles.* Own elaboration

Arguments in favor of surtitles	Arguments against surtitles
it allows the access to the opera world of a wider and less elitist audience.	Distraction of the public.
It makes it easier to understand the script without resorting to reading the libretto.	Impoverishment of the original text by subjecting it to a condensation and simplification.
Increase of opera repertoire.	Slightly adjusted elaboration and projection.
It presents fewer technical difficulties compared to the translation of the libretto to be sung and is done in less time.	Little clarity in the <i>concertato</i> .
More economical.	Synchronization problems related to the length of the text.
More translations = more choice of repertoire.	Loss of rhymes, puns, phraseology, cultural references.
General public acceptance.	Limited visual field.

### Strategies for surtitling

In principle, it is based on the idea that writing surtitles is like telling a story in a time frame imposed by the scene, through singing and acting. It is a written story (to be read) that synthesizes an oral story (to be heard). Therefore, as a starting point for the practical realization of surtitles, the text is segmented and systematized by numbering the phrases of the opera libretto already translated, also marking them in the score (what would become the “dialogue list” and the “spotting list” in subtitling). And this is where time comes into play by combining these two types of parallel narration, where the written is subordinated to the oral. Being the surtitle a manual operation, it will be carried out at slightly different speed in each representation according to the time the operator uses, on the one hand, to place and remove the surtitles and, on the other, according to the *tempo* set by the orchestra conductor. That is why it is not possible to establish exactly the minimum and maximum time of permanence of the surtitles on the screen. The arduous task of the surtitler will be precisely that of knowing how to adjust the projected surtitle to the live show from the surtitling booth (Figures 1 and 2) according to the type of situation (linguistic-song or scenic).



Figures 1 and 2. *Surtitling booth and live surtitle projection.*

*Teatro dell'Opera di Roma. Own elaboration.*

It is worth highlighting some of the work strategies that characterize the surtitling process: these are rehearsals, optimization, and teamwork. Rehearsals in a theater are a mandatory practice, and they are also for translators and surtitlers. This means that each linguistic solution must be rehearsed together with the acting, singing, scene movements, to be able to correct the starting hypotheses based on what happens (or changes) on stage. Surtitles also have a shared visual and semantic impact that must be considered: as a graphic project, as a rhythm, as a narrative. As for the optimization, there are several parameters that underlie a surtitling work and that must reach a decisive balance to make linguistic mediation functional to the live show. This is an objective that must be pursued progressively, through different phases of work that condition each other. Finally, creating surtitles is a team effort task made up of individuals with multiple and specific skills. However, this working group needs to be coordinated and supervised. What cannot be missing in any case is a sense of commitment and the need to search for satisfactory results.

To address the initial stages of the process of surtitling, the surtitler not only must have a good knowledge of the two languages and cultures (source and target), but must also dominate the opera on a literary and musical level to be able to follow the score for voice and piano in rehearsals; must work alongside with the orchestra conductor and the stage director to create a good management team, tho-

roughly familiar with the names of the characters; and must observe the correspondence between the libretto and scene. Also, the surtitled must take into account a number of technical aspects, namely: the translation management of the libretto for its proper integration in the show, the notation in the score, the color of the text to be projected, the alignment of the text and the font, the permanence of the text on the screen, the use of blank slides, the change of titles in musically logical parts, the retention of title on the screen when there are repetitions, the style of the composition (repetition, dialogue, etc), the match between the beginning and the end of sung phrases, the coincidence between the surtitles and phrases sung.

## Conclusions

Surtitled, as a specific form of audiovisual translation, is not only a vehicle for understanding but also a means to promote the exchange of cultural values between different communities. It is necessary to establish clear boundaries between surtitles created for theatrical shows and those which are specially created for lyrical operas, where music plays a fundamental role (if not preponderant with respect to the words). Operatic surtitled forms its own system with technical and linguistic peculiarities related to the intersemiosis of the show. It is, as we have seen, a process of complex work that starts with the translation of the libretto, and that will be transformed with the collaboration of different professionals and technicians involved in the show (orchestra conductors, stage crew, singers, sound engineers, and lighting, etc), taking into account the demands of music that determine the tempo of the surtitles in order to get to the surtitles of an opera, which will be projected simultaneously to the execution of the live opera.

Considering the set of skills and knowledge that one must have to make a quality surtitled, we firmly believe that the training of specialized professionals is, without a doubt, one of the objectives to be pursued in this field. It is urgent to lay, from the experience and the daily exercise of this trade, the foundations for the consolidation (and sometimes, creation) of the figure of the surtitled in Spanish-speaking theaters, with an equally musical, linguistic, and theatrical profile.

A special mention should be made of the teaching of surtitled in the academic field, which, although it is timidly gaining ground in some European and American universities thanks to the interest of professors who are fond of lyrics, still has a long way to go.

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