The Challenge of Subtitling in Yoruba Nollywood Movies and Possible Solution

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Abstract

World's second largest movie producer, Nollywood (United Nations News Center, 2009), is roughly divided into two equal parts– English and vernacular. The vernacular aspect comprises Yoruba (approximately 70 %, Hausa (20 %) and others. The increasing global visibility of the Yoruba genre and its large size elicit a dissection of subtitling, which is one of the daunting challenges it faces. This paper identifies, evaluates and discusses specific subtitling problems in the context of relevant theoretical framework, using a mixed method of analysis. It examines the issues relating to language, linguistics and understanding in respect of the genre. One significant finding was lack of standardized format of subtitling. What is more, practitioners were not even asking for one! Interestingly, the lackadaisical vitality arose out of non-existence of any ethical universal and a coherent policy on the industry especially from the statutory perspective. Practitioners need encouragement to get round this problem though sanctioning seems a more result-oriented strategy if solution is genuinely craved.

Keywords: Nollywood, Nigeria, Yoruba, Subtitles, English, Policy, Language.

Introduction

This paper posits that a significant number of Yoruba movies of Nollywood are poorly subtitled in terms of grammatical expressions and typography, which run counter to enthusiasm and positive projections

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that have been associated with the Nigerian movie industry over the years. Though subtitles provide linguistic approximations Curti, 2009, p. 201), it is supposed to serve as medium through which non-native speakers can understand and enjoy the movie. In many movies, however, the clumsiness of subtitling inspires rage among audiences (Nornes, 1999, p. 17) especially for those of Nollywood who are spread across the globe. This issue has become a serious concern especially for viewers who depend on the veracity of translation and legibility of textual image in order to comprehend the plot and the scenes of action. More concerned are non-Yoruba speaking audiences who think that this genre has an appreciable offering in terms of originality of story but are highly demoralized by the neglect of decorum in the ways those movies are subtitled. It can be observed even in those movies screened on globally rated media platforms such as *Afrotainment* and *DSTV* are not spared the visual impropriety imbedded in the movies subtitles, which makes a quick resolution of the matter imperative.

• These concerns have raised some issues about the inability of Yoruba movies to cross cultural barriers and deliver acceptable product to international an audience which many opine has huge potential. This has also raised some questions:

• Has Nollywood developed enough resource and structure to cater for its subtitling needs?
• Are Nollywood Yoruba subtitlers rightly positioned to deliver internationally acceptable movie subtitles?
• Can standards be set for movie subtitles that can eradicate identified subtitling challenges?

This article, in the attempt at discussing the problem and proffering solution, is premised on a few assumptions which no scholarly literature has refuted:

· That the subtitling of Yoruba movies is problematic and makes the epistemology that Nollywood is a pride of Nigeria and indeed Africa highly fragile and that the problem needs urgent redress.

· That although Nollywood practitioners and stakeholders have endless possibilities of tapping into rich human and structural resources in terms of getting subtitling expertise, they have not done so on the scale needed to service the entire industry.

· That most Nollywood subtitlers are not known, monitored or sanctioned for

poor subtitling and this covers up the issue of whether or not their are well qualified, equipped or motivated.

· That a critical viewing and evaluation of a range of Nollywood Yoruba movies will reveal specific subtitle problems.

· That most industry practitioners, especially subtitlers and video editors work on subjective rules of thumb rather than benchmarked parameters that serve the best interest of the industry.

Exploring Translation Problems

The subtitling issues commonly associated with Yoruba movies are categorized as direct translation, transliteration, wrong interpretation, typographical illegibility, transposition, translation inadequacy, poor pacing and poor image projection.

Direct Word Translation
This occurs when the subtitles read directly from Yoruba to another language. Here translation is carried out in a second language having the same meaning as the spoken, written or typed communication in a first language. This involves changing words, phrases or whole texts, but

ensuring equivalence in meaning while following the rules of English grammar, which is the focus of this study. However, verbatim or direct translation of words, phrases and whole texts is what prevails in many Yoruba movie subtitles, but often change the meaning, e.g:*E kaaro l'oni o. A o ji re bi?* would be translated as: *Good morning today oh. Did we not sleep well?* instead of: *Good morning! You slept well, didn't you?* or better still: *Good morning, I hope you slept well*.

A deeper look suggests that this challenge is a carryover from the historical link between orality and written text in a sequence of which the latter depends on the former.Ong (1982) and Soffer (2010) note that orality cannot be separated from the written text. Soffer adds that the extent to which orality influences text is determined by people's culture andhistory. It is not clear whether the culture and history of the people of south west Nigeria who speak the Yoruba language sustain a very deep orality and text link which seem to abet this direct translation.

Transliteration
Many Nigerian subtitlers focus too much on verbatim translation, rather than meaning, which calls for an excellent knowledge of precision writing. They transliterate instead of translate. The anomaly of

transliteration here is a subtitler's alphabet-for-alphabet, word-for-word, phrase-for-phrase, transription from Yoruba-to-English. This is the basic technique of language decoders, espionage professionals and anthropologists which has not been found to be appropriate for subtitling.

Wrong Interpretation

To interpret an actor's lines in an on-screen subtitle is to give viewers a clear and proper understanding of what he has said or is saying. Before a subtitler can deliver proper subtitles, he needs to possess a sound understanding of the theme and plot of the movie, how its actors and actresses interpret their roles as well as have a good knowledge of both the first and second languages he is working on. Often, wrong interpretations like this occur, e.g: (Singing) *Awa ja, awa ja, awa ja ninu aiye…*which is wrongly interpreted as: *We come market, we come market, we come market in this world.*This is wrong both in interpretation and bad in grammar. The right subtitle for the lyrics of this song should have been: *We've come to fight (3ce) in this world.*

Illegibility of Text

More often than not, digital graphic artists choose the wrong font type

and size as well as the wrong colour background on which they publish/print subtitles thus making them too tiny, too faint or too blurred and not legible enough to read and understand. What is more, where plain readable, easy to read transitional or modernstyle fonts such as Times New Roman, Fournier and the like should be used, handlers of subtitling had deployed unreadable and clumsy cursive and script type fonts which discouraged viewing. The graphic editors obviously lacked the working knowledge of typography as they could not decipher functions of x-height, ascenders and descenders in textual composition.

Transposition

Transposition is the act of reversing the order or place of things. This often happens in the more contemporary Yoruba movies in which the cast is encouraged to mix their Yoruba with a smattering of English. Instead of ignoring whole sentences that an actor renders in English, which the viewer is expected to understand anyway, or translate the actor's mixed utterance completely and subtitle it all in English, many subtitlers feel obliged to criss-cross and subtitle in both languages.

Inadequacy of Translation

Specific actions like singing,

dancing, incantation and other poetic recitations are often ignored by Nollywood Yoruba subtitlers. Unfortunately such scenes encapsulate the rich culture and heritage of Yoruba people which the movie is trying to portray in the first instance. Instead of subtitling such scenes, they simply print/publish onscreen labels like 'Incantation', 'Monologue', 'Singing', 'High Praises' or 'Panegyrics'. What is required for proper subtitling is much more than this.

Poor Pacing

Poor pacing of onscreen textsis a problem in Yoruba movies.Onscreen texts are published and erased too quickly for anyone to read and understand.At other times, what an actor said in two previous scenes is left on the screen for too long such that it wrongly becomes the subtitle for another scene or actor.

Poor Imaging

Bad grammar in combination with the foregoing challenges agglomerate into a bad image for Nollywood and Nigeria as a whole. The tendency is for people outside Nigeria (including Nigerians in the Diaspora who are exposed daily to well produced and well subtitled foreign movies) to conclude that English language education is generally poor in Nigeria

Intellection and Nollywood

Intellectionwhich is synonymous with understanding is a psychological process related to an abstract or physical object, such as a person, situation, or message whereby one is able to think about it and use concepts to deal adequately with that object. According to Bereiter(2002),understanding is a relation between the knower and an object of understanding.

This means that a watcher or viewer can only understand whole scenes of a movie if the words and phrases that make up the subtitles match the actions and lines of the movie cast.Understanding implies abilities and dispositions with respect to an object of knowledge sufficient to support intelligent behaviour– that is, viewer responses.To understand something is to have conceptualized it to a given measure. Therefore, if a movie scene is funny and from just reading the subtitles, a non-Yoruba viewer is seen laughing, then the subtitler has done an apt and meaningful job of its subtitles.

Chaitin (2006) suggeststhe need not go too far in our pursuit of understanding as there are limits to reason.He stresses that understanding is a kind of data compression. For example, understanding why day and nightexists because there is a simple

model - the rotation of the earth - that explains a tremendous amount of data like the changes in brightness, temperature and atmospheric composition of the earth. We have thus compressed a large amount of information by using a simple model that predicts it.The best kind of subtitles would therefore be the ones that compress the data of actors' lines and actions into properly summarized subtitles that convey meaning, rather than dwell in verbosity. Verbosity can also be used to refer to the length of a monologue or speech, especially a formal address such as a lawyer's oral argument (Percy and Percy,1826).

While some subtitlers may feel that using long and obscure words may make them seem more intelligent, a recent study fromthe Psychology department of PrincetonUniversity found that students rated short, concise text as being written by the most intelligent authors. But those who used long words or complex font types were seen as less intelligent - Oppenheimer (2005).

Issues of Readability

Readability is the ease with which text can be read and understood. Various factors to measure readability have been used, such as "speed of perception," "perceptibility at a distance," "perceptibility in peripheral vision," "visibility," "the reflex blink technique," "rate of work" (e.g., speed of reading), "eye movements," and "fatigue in reading" (Tinker, 1963). Readability is distinguished from legibility which is a measure of how easily individual letters or characters can be distinguished from each other. Readability can determine the ease with which subtitles can be read on a movie screen or a computer programme code can be read by humans, such as through embedded documentation.

Readability has been defined in various ways, e.g. byHarris and Hodges (1995); Dale andChall (1949); McLaughlin (1969);and DuBay W (2006) among others.Easily read movie subtitles help learning and enjoyment. According to Fry(2006) what we write should be easy to understand.

In the 1880s, English professor, Sherman (1893) found that the English sentence is getting shorter. In Elizabethan times, the average sentence was 50 words long. In his own time, it was 23 words long.Sherman's work established that:

- Literature is a subject for statistical analysis.
- Shorter sentences and concrete terms help people to

make sense of what is written.

- Speech is easier to understand than text.
- Over time, text becomes easier if it is more like speech.

Sherman wrote: "Literary English, in short, will follow the forms of standard spoken English from which it comes. No man should talk worse than he writes, no man should write better than he should talk... The oral sentence is clearest because it is the product of millions of daily efforts to be clear and strong. It represents the work of the race for thousands of years in perfecting an effective instrument of communication."

Dale-Chall Formula

Edgar Dale, a professor of education at Ohio State University, was one of the first critics of Thorndike's vocabulary-frequency lists. He claimed that they did not distinguish between the different meanings that many words have. He created two new lists of his own. One, his 'short list' of 769 easy words, was used by Irving Lorge in his formula. The other was his 'long list' of 3,000 easy words, which were understood by 80% of fourth-grade students. In 1948, he incorporated this list in a formula which he developed with Jeanne S. Chall, who was to become the founder of the Harvard Reading

Laboratory.

To apply the formula:

1. Select several 100-word samples throughout the text.
2. Compute the average sentence length in words (divide the number of words by the number of sentences).
3. Compute the percentage of words NOT on the Dale-Chall word list of 3,000 easy words.
4. Compute this equation

Raw Score = .1579PDW + .0496ASL + 3.6365

Where: Raw Score = uncorrected reading grade of a student who can answer one-half of the test questions on a passage.

PDW = Percentage of Difficult Words not on the Dale-Chall word list.

ASL = Average Sentence Length

Finally, to compensate for the 'grade-equivalent curve,' apply the following chart for the Final Score:

Raw Score - Final Score

4.9 and below - Grade 4 and below
5.0 to 5.9 - Grades 5-6
6.0 to 6.9 - Grades 7-8
7.0 to 7.9 - Grades 9-10
8.0 to 8.9 - Grades 11-12
9.0 to 9.9 - Grades 13-15 (college)
10 and above - Grades 16 and above.

Correlating 0.93 with comprehension as measured by reading tests, the

Dale-Chall formula is the most reliable formula and is widely used in scientific research. In 1995, Dale and Chall published a new version of their formula with an upgraded word list, the New Dale-Chall Readability Formula. (Please go to the Okapi Web site for a computerized version of this formula: Okapi for the original easy word list: Long Dale-Chall list).

Where: Hard Words = words with more than two syllables.

Theoretical Framework

Chomsky's Transformational-Generative Grammar

In theoretical linguistics, generative grammar refers to a particular approach to the study of syntax. A generative grammar of a language attempts to give a set of rules that will correctly predict which combinations of words will form grammatical sentences. In most approaches to generative grammar, the rules will also predict the morphology of a sentence.

Generative grammar originates in the work of Avram Noam Chomsky, beginning in the late 1950s. Early versions of Chomsky's theory were called transformational grammar, and this term is still used as a collective term that includes his subsequent theories. There are a number of competing versions of generative grammar currently practiced within linguistics. Chomsky's current theory is known as the Minimalist Programme (MP).Most versions of generative grammar characterize sentences as either grammatically correct (also known as well formed) or not. The rules of a generative grammar typically predict grammaticality as a discrete (yes-or-no) result.

Chomsky's MP holds that the language ability in humans show signs of being incorporated under an optimal design with exquisite organization, which seems to suggest that the inner workings conform to a very simple computational law or a particular mental organ. In other words, the MP works on the assumption that 'Universal Grammar' constitutes a perfect design in the sense that it contains only what is necessary to meet our conceptual, and physical (phonological) needs.This MP focus on brevity coincides with the thrust of this paper; subtitles ought to be brief, not verbose. Regardless of how many words are packed into an actor's lines, the subtitles must be brief.

Uses And Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory is a popular approach to understanding mass communication under which the Nigerian film and home video

industry (Nollywood) aptly falls because of its phenomenal spread to massive and diverse audiences within and outside Nigeria, especially with the advent of Movie World (DStv Channel 112), Africa Magic (DStv Channel 114), Africa Magic Hausa (DStv Channel 116) and Yoruba (DStv Channel 118). The theory places more focus on the consumer or audience, instead of the actual message itself by asking what people do with messages rather than what messages do to people.In expounding this theory, the primary area of study was media and the messages they carry (Katz, 1959). The theory assumes that members of the audience are not passive but active in interpreting and integrating messages into their lives, and that audiences are responsible for choosing the messages that meet their needs. This approach suggests that people use messages (whether gospel, academic, social or news, including movie subtitles) to fulfil specific gratifications (Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. 1974).

By inference, one can say that non-Yoruba viewershave continued to watch subtitled NollywoodYoruba movies, regardless of how much they understand or do not understand the poor subtitles as long as some gratifications are met doing so. Such gratifications may include clarity of audio output and visual images, beauty of the cast and setting, et cetera.

However, Blumler made some interesting points why Uses and Gratifications cannot measure an active audience. "The issue to be considered here is whether what has been thought about Uses and Gratifications Theory has been an article of faith and if it could now be converted into an empirical question such as: How to measure an active audience?" (Blumler, 1979). Of course it has not been done for these reasons. The notion of active audience has mixed together an extraordinary range of meanings, including utility, intentionality, selectivity and imperviousness to influence.

Utility - that all communication (including subtitles) has uses to p e o p l e . *Intentionality* -message consumption is directed by prior motivation. *Selectivity* - media behaviourreflects prior interests and preferences *Imperviousness*- The lessened ability of themedia (or movie subtitles,in this case) to influence an obstinate audience - Blumler and Katz (1979).

Interview findings

In addition to the yet-to-be-controverted assumption that the subtitling of Yoruba movies is

problematic, we confirmed in separate interviews with two popular subtitlers and a director of Nigeria's National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) where some facts emerged regarding the terms and conditions under which the subtitlers work. The subtitlers areAyo Akindele and Biola Hughes. The NFVCB Zonal Director respondent is Edward Edion.Akindele is a graduate of Mass Communication, University of Lagos, Nigeria. She has a high ratingas one of the better Yoruba movies subtitlers having worked on more than 50 movies, including the chart bursting Yoruba comedy, *Jenifa,* starring Funke Akindele, her blood sister.

Although she takes her time to proof read the subtitle-scripts she hands out to typists "to ensure that the subtitles are devoid of typographical or grammatical errors or outright blunder," in her own words, the fact that she still uses manuscripts from a typist rather than a word processor obviously leaves yawning gaps for subtitling errors.

The same is true of Hughes. He had actually just returned from Ikorodu, a town in the outskirts of Lagos, where he went "to proof read the graphics for the subtitles I did on a movie two weeks ago." Neither of them has a Yoruba-to-English software to work with.

Being a trained communicator, Akindele understands the difference between translation, interpretation and transliteration and for her this is how they all come together in her subtitles.

"I take my time to interpret each cast's dialogue, scene by scene. Some very dramatic or exclamatory scenes may call for translation or even transliteration. I take my time to listen attentively to the actors and actresses. I also make use of both the Yoruba and English dictionaries" she explained. However, she spends an average of 24 hours to subtitle each movie, saying "I heard some subtitlers spend less time per movie."

Critically speaking, 24 hours may sound too little time to do a thorough job per movie, but when one considers that Akindele gets paid N20,000 per movie ($150) or N15,000 per part for a two-part movie, and that some subtitlers get paid as little as N10,000 per movie, it becomes clear why they dedicate so little time to each movie. The pay is low, but it is symptomatic of the paucity of funds in the industry, at least as far as such low-end suppliers like subtitlers get.

Hughes, 51, is a continuity anchor at movie locations, but he has been writing movie scripts and subtitles for 16 years. He studied Theatre Arts at the Lagos State University (LASU). Hughes dedicates up to five days to each subtitled movie, "but if the

movie is uninteresting, it takes even longer."

Both Hughes and Akindele rate the overall quality of the movie subtitles available at 50 per cent although they consider their own works as well above the current industry standards. They both blame the general low quality on marketers (not even producers) who they say promote quackery because they do not want to pay handsome fees to thoroughbred professionals.

Subtitles are not poorly done because subtitlers are poorly educated. According to Akindele, "We have graduates as subtitlers, but the errors in subtitling could be judged from two angles. Some subtitlers are lazy writers; they don't make out time to proof read their work in the editing studio. Some stingy marketers especially the semi-illiterates believe it is a waste of funds to contract a competent hand, so they resolve to doing it themselves!"In Hughes' words: "Expertise and capacity would increase if there is increased remuneration for subtitlers."

The tools of trade for the Nigerian subtitler are devoid of all the sophisticated digital language software that are available and used in Hollywood and Bollywood. Said Akindele: "Biro, paper and a laptop to type remove the stress of having to go to the studio to proof read. But most marketers prefer you don't even type because then they would need to pay you more."

Now the National Film and Video Censors Board is the chief gatekeeper of Nollywood products and productions. But speaking on behalf NFVCB, Edion revealed that NFVCB does not compel any local language movie to be subtitled.

Althoughglobal platforms like the Digital Satellite Television (DStv) that run local language movies insist on them being subtitled, Edion says it is DStv that determines (if at all they do) the subtitling standards they'd accept on air, not NFVCB. This is sad because DStv is South African and NFVCB should not abandon its responsibilities to DStv. Yet DStv must seek and get NFVCB approvals for any local language Nigerian movie it airs on its various channels."As for the subtitling of such movies, I would believe they meet the parameters and standards set by DStv," Edion said.

NFVCB does not have specific parameters set for subtitles (except those set for all movies). This makes its claimed monitoring of movie subtitles at best, porous and ineffectual.

While Edion claimed that NFVCB

has indeed sanctioned any erring subtitled movie, Akindele simply said "Yes, I am aware they have recalled some very poorly done movies for subtitle corrections. But I am not aware of any subtitler being sanctioned for poorly done jobs.

Suggested Solutions

The following are suggestions for different stakeholders to address the lapses that have been identified:

- Brevity of texts with apt meanings is key. Subtitlers must avoid filling the screen with text flux – (Chomsky,1993
- Onscreen texts must properly relate subtitles to movie action and cast's lines – Chomsky, 1990).
- Font types and sizes used as subtitles must be reader-friendly and must be *'back-grounded'* in ways that ensure constant readability, regardless of onscreen colour changes or change in scenic settings.
- Subtitling of Nollywood movies can reach world class standards faster if further readability investigation is done on statistical methods to analyze the reading ease of texts such that some formula similar to the Dale-Chall formula is propounded, tested and made useful for subtitlers to determine vocabulary and sentence length to predict the reading ease of a subtitle-texts.
- The National Film and Video Censors Board must get more involved in sanitizing subtitled works. It should seek more proactive partnerships with the Language and Theatre Arts faculties of universities, and other Language and Information Technology experts in order to aggressively develop language-switch competencies and software that subtitlers need to deliver world class Local Language-to-English subtitles.This is expected to particularly standardize text-pacing, grammar and text legibility.
- While it is expected that the forces of demand and supply would eventually balance the needs and deeds of the Nigerian film and video industry, it is vital and expedient for its chief gatekeeper, NFVCB, to stimulate things by instituting parameters by which good and bad subtitles can be judged. A reward-and-

sanction structure should be set up by NFVCB to further stimulate subtitlers.

· Sanction is needed to totally erase cases of transposition – the aberration that mars the art of subtitling. NFVCB must warn all subtitlers, marketers and producers against this 'sin' of subtitling, and attach sanctions to the offence.

· To address occurrences of bad grammar, direct translation (or 'Yoruba English'), wrong interpretation and overbearing transliteration, it is strongly advised that NFVCB steps into the picture to facilitate workshops that will highlight these subtitling anomalies such that Nollywood stakeholders will be sensitized as to the menace and embarrassment these problems constitute.

· To facilitate and encourage such regular workshops and trainings would really help in building capacity in this regard for the Nigerian movie industry.

· To attract more competent professionals into the subtitling trade, marketers and producers would have to stop paying peanuts. Once the rewards are more competitive, better subtitled movies will start dotting the Nollywood landscape.

Remarks

Nollywood films, in whatever genre, cannot afford the cultural insularity and monolingual character of Hollywood (Williams, 2009, p: 92) which makes subtitling imperative. Since local expertise still finds it difficult to evolve the right standard, foreign investor can be called in to provide the assistance needed. As a major stakeholder in the Nigerian movie industry, DStv through its marketing platform, Multichoice Nigeria, should up the standards for acceptable movie subtitles. The company has already achieved this in the production quality of Nollywood videos and Nigerian music videos it accepts and airs on its Africa Magic, Channel O and MTV channels and should do likewise to subtitles, because these also impact on the overall quality and appeal of the Nollywood movies airred on DStv. Because of what the company's devotion to Nigerian movies, it is probably better positioned to influence improvement in the standard of movie subtitles by simply rejecting poorly subtitled Nollywood movies.

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