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Path Dependence of Dubbing in the German Film Market

Extended Abstract

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The Case

In the German movie market dubbing is the dominating standard transferring foreign-language films into German. This has been so since the oldest members of the audience can think, actually since the mid 1930's. Since that time opponents and adversaries of dubbing have fiercely discussed the aesthetic merits and drawbacks of dubbing vs. alternative forms of language transfer, in particular subtitling and original versions. This paper does not aim to contribute to the aesthetic discussion on language transfer but emphasises economic considerations on the issue. Particularly it will be asked how dubbing compares to subtitling from the film distributors' point of view, and what its consequences are for the audience. In that respect it is also necessary to ask why in certain nations subtitling prevailed while in others dubbing became the market standard.

It is generally acknowledged that dubbing is much more expensive than subtitling. This raises the question why film distributors employ such a technique in the first place while subtitling is employed successfully other countries. The common explanation is that Germany is a large country where dubbing is economically feasible and consumers are strongly habituated to this technique; so suppliers of films are bound to the consumers' preferences. The paper holds that the widely assumed automatism that a large country size leads to the adoption of dubbing is inappropriate, i.e. at the introduction of sound films was it not irrevocably predetermined that Germany adopted the dubbing regime. The rationale is that the mechanisms inherent in habituation could have led the German audience to embrace a distinct language transfer standard if the then prevailing critical conditions were different, so that the adoption of dubbing was not predetermined. In that sense, if the taste over language transfer mechanisms

depends on habituation the dubbing standard in Germany constitutes just one of the possible equilibria. This allows for the possibility, that dubbing is not necessarily the best solution to the language transfer problem from the point of view of film suppliers and the audience. The cost argument from the perspective of film suppliers emphasises potential cost savings in the production process that could be enjoyed if subtitling was the standard instead of dubbing. Furthermore, the implications of the cost structure of dubbing extend into a cultural diversity argument: dubbing puts small and medium budgeted films marketed by small film distributors to a systematic disadvantage in the market, thus hampering the diversity of the films supplied and consumed in the market. Another alleged side effect of subtitling is the positive externality of foreign language acquisition by the audience, which is foregone under a dubbing standard. The argument is that viewers' acquire foreign language skills by watching subtitled films/programmes. This argumentation is popular when it comes to explain the relatively strong English skills of the Dutch and Scandinavians as opposed to the Germans, French, Spaniards and Italians.

The main research goals that can be derived from this argumentation are

1. *In how far does the language transfer system established in Germany (and other dubbing countries) constitute a potential inefficiency with respect to the*
 - *Distributors' costs and the costs' consequences for cultural diversity in the market*
 - *Language skills of the consumers*

A sudden language transfer system change in Germany is unlikely to be feasible on a large scale - at least by market forces - due to demand side rigidities. It is of interest to see in how far these rigidities are the result from a path dependent adoption process.

2. *Does the adoption of dubbing in Germany constitute a path dependent development?*
 - *Were there alternative language transfer techniques available and feasible when sound film was introduced?*
 - *Which historical critical events and circumstances were responsible for the final predominance of dubbing in Germany?*

Considering the variety of solutions to the language transfer problem in different countries path dependence may play a role in the adoption process. Therefore, the characteristics of path dependence will be outlined and linked to the theory of habituation. Their combination builds the theoretical framework for explaining the adoption of the language transfer formats. The empirical analysis starts with an introduction into dubbing and

subtitling. Then it aims to answer the research questions by first identifying the potential inefficiencies of dubbing vs. subtitling. After that the persistency of the potential inefficiencies in the film market is explained by the rigidity of consumers' habituation with respect to language transfer formats. Dutch and German consumers' attitudes towards language transfer are compared to identify relevant consumption skills associated with subtitling and dubbing respectively. Both, the inefficiency and the rigidity of habituated consumers are shown empirically. Thereon the self reinforcing mechanisms that propelled and manifested dubbing as the dominant standard in Germany are identified. The initial conditions and crucial events that led the German market to adopt dubbing in the beginning years of the sound film era are looked at and compared briefly to other countries. At last the findings are summarised and a conclusion is drawn.

Method

From the available Literature and from semi structured expert interviews with film distributors (6), subtitling studios (2), a film exhibitor the costs of dubbing and subtitling were identified for today and the digital cinema to come. The selected film distributors were those that answered to an interview request which was sent out by mail and email to all distributors in Berlin. To supplement and confirm the film distributors' data, a film distributor in the Netherlands and executives of subtitling studios were interviewed. The identification and description of the timely development of language transfer specific consumption skills of Germans and Dutch was based on survey data and reports of experiences in the cognitive sciences. The economic-historical aspects of the adoption processes of the language transfer methods were gathered from monographies and contemporary and historical industry and academic journal publications and surveys. The volumes 1929 to 1939 of the daily trade publication *Film Kurier* have been searched systematically searched for language transfer related issues by help of the *Film-Kurier Index*. These contemporary sources provide important insights – although naturally limited- to the popular audiences opinions in the interwar Germany.

Findings

Dubbing constitutes a potentially financial inefficiency for film distributors. Particularly for distributors of S&M sized films the costs of dubbing constitutes a significant cost block. Under a subtitling regime this group of distributors could provide roughly 10% more films with the same budget. The consumption of subtitled content improves the populations foreign language skills. As a conclusion dubbing leads to a potential inefficiency

from an EU policy perspective aiming at encouraging more culturally diverse film consumption and increased language proficiency of the citizens.

Different language transfer formats prevail in different national markets as the respective audiences became habituated to 'their' language transfer format. Suppliers of films are bound to the national tastes and demand is rigid with respect to language transfer formats. This is because changing the format is associated with switching costs for the consumer. These costs in Germany consist primarily in the need to accumulate a set of subtitle-related consumption skills such as subtitle reading skills and foreign language comprehension skills. A consumer that has accumulated a sufficient stock of these skills is said to be habituated to subtitling, such as the Dutch are. The German audience in contrast is habituated to dubbing, i.e. has accumulated the skill to ignore the inconsistencies inherent in dubbing. The process of habituation to language transfer formats is identified as a self reinforcing process: More consumption leads to increased utility from consumption. The question is why consumers' habituation took so different forms in different countries.

The historic process of adoption of dubbing can be denoted path dependent for the finally prevailing language transfer format was not generally predetermined by country size as the examples of small dubbing- and large subtitle-countries shows. Rather there were critical events and circumstances that had a significant effect on the adoption of the language transfer regimes. In the beginning years of introduction of sound film audiences in general did not accept the 'synthetic man' embodied in dubbing. The situation was essentially undecided between 1929 and 1933. In Germany, during the early 1930s subtitling and dubbing were still competing for the succession of the multiple language versions. Through these versions the audience was strongly habituated to watching all films the domestic idiom, which favoured dubbing. Additionally protectionism, nationalist policies and the wide use of language versions favoured the adoption of dubbing. Foreign influences were systematically shielded off, especially during the 3rd Reich, and dubbing was a means for that. A critical event was the Ufa decision to employ dubbing as a means to provide work for the unemployed masses of Ufa actors. The combination of these factors leads to the adoption of dubbing in Germany. There are counterexamples, e.g. Japan a large country, where a similar combination of factors did lead to the adoption of subtitling. Also there are 'small' countries that adopted dubbing, so the argument that country size predetermines the language transfer regime in a country is not valid. Rather the adoption of a language transfer regime depends on a combination of different factors, some of which are not foreseeable. In post-WWII Germany allied film policies used dubbing as a way to market the backlog of films produced during the war and

reinforced the audience's habituation to dubbing. It is well imaginable that habituation of the German audience could have taken a different path if chemical subtitling was developed 1-2 years earlier, the German government policies were less protectionist and nationalistic in nature, and if the Nazi-era and the consequent post-war period authorities did not so systematically favour dubbing.

Further reinforcement of consumption habits occurred with the wide introduction of TV in the 1950's and Video in the 1970's. Then dubbing was chosen since it was compatible with the audience's set of accumulated dubbing-related consumption skills. Learning-by-doing effects on part of the dubbing studios increased the effectiveness and quality of dubbing in the 1950s and acted as self reinforcement.