Translating Indigenous Languages in Multilingual Fiction Feature Films: *Ixcanul* and *Embrace of the Serpent*

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to uncover current translation practices for Indigenous languages in multilingual feature fiction films by conducting a comparative case study of two 2015 movies: *Ixcanul* (*Volcano*, dir. Jayro Bustamante, 2015) and *El abrazo de la serpiente* (*Embrace of the Serpent*, dir. Ciro Guerra, 2015). It addresses dialogue translation, on-set and *in diegesis*, as well as audiovisual translation (AVT). Studying the translation of Indigenous languages in film is crucial to our understanding of the hegemonic and enduring linguistic dynamics disseminated by the media. As such, I investigate which target audience the AVT was produced for, and the reception of the films following their distribution. The understanding of these aspects of translation of Indigenous languages for cinema advocates for reflective, more inclusive, and creative AVT practices aiming to uphold the agency of Indigenous peoples and their languages in cinema.

KEYWORDS: audiovisual translation, subtitling, indigenous languages, multilingual films, linguistic hegemony, audiovisual sovereignty

Introduction: Translation in *Ixcanul* and *Embrace of the Serpent*

Translation has always been part of film production, even before talking pictures, through the translation of intertitles (Romero-Fresco 2019:1). Translation became more challenging with the introduction of sound, notably through the demanding development of multiple language versions before the standardisation of dubbing and subtitling (Vincendeau 1988). It remains a crucial part of the industry as “the dubbed and subtitled versions provide an average of 45% of a film’s total revenue” (Romero-Fresco 2019:4) when “only 0.1-1 per cent of a film’s production budget is

devoted to AV translation" (Bosseaux 2015:215, see also Romero-Fresco 2019:2-3, both reporting from a conference paper presented by Lambourne in 2012). Indeed, if AVT is a necessary part of the cinematographic industry, it encounters specific challenges in cases of multilingual films. Translating a single source language into another single target one seems somewhat straightforward. On the contrary, having to translate several languages for a monolingual target audience raises questions of whether to keep several languages in translation or not, and if so, how (Sanz Ortega 2015; Kilpatrick 2020). Moreover, depending on which languages are to be translated, questions of linguistic hegemony must be considered.

For this article, I investigate the translation of two multilingual films featuring different Indigenous languages: Jayro Bustamante's *Ixcanul* (*Volcano*, 2015, Guatemalan-French co-production, shot in Guatemala, mainly in Kaqchikel) and Ciro Guerra's *El abrazo de la serpiente* (*Embrace of the Serpent*, 2015, abbreviated below as "*Embrace*", Colombian-Venezuelian-Argentinian co-production, shot in Colombia, featuring Cubeo, Huitoto, Ticuna, and Wanano, amongst other languages). I choose these two films, amongst the many featuring Indigenous languages, for productive comparative analysis for multiple reasons: both were released in the same year, were co-produced between Latin America and Europe, and required the critical involvement of Indigenous communities and actors to be produced. Moreover, questions of multilingualism, language use, and translation are prevalent in both narratives.

Before delving into the specifics of the films and their languages, it is important to acknowledge how Indigenous people have been part of cinematographic history since its very beginnings, yet not necessarily as agents of their own representation. As Wendy Gay Pearson and Susan Knabe (2014:3) and Petra Löffler (2022:277) note, Indigenous people have been the objects of the gaze of countless ethnographic documentaries since the early days of audiovisual recordings, whether through short "actualities" made by the Lumière brothers and their emissaries around the world, or in longer pictures such as *Nanook of the North* (dir. Robert Flaherty, 1922). Indigenous people were filmed as an intriguing other, worthy of scrutiny and amazement. This tendency to alienise Indigenous people through the lens of film carries on far after the introduction of optical sound. Even today, Indigenous communities and their cultures are often used as tokens for exoticism

(Milligan 2023; De Largy Healy & Wittersheim 2019). Similarly, the use of Indigenous languages in film has often been sparse, inaccurate, and untranslated. Writing about Polynesian peoples and early films in the Pacific, Jani Wilson explains how this was done to cater to "international audiences who desire to see their pre-existing ideas about Polynesian peoples, informed by Western texts and art historical depictions, personified" (2018:39). This catering to audiences outside of the Indigenous communities being represented can be seen in the linguistic choices made for the making of these films, exemplified by examining Knud Rasmussen's *The Wedding of Palo* (1934). Filmed in Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland), its soundtrack possesses some dialogue in Kalaalisut. Citing and translating Werner Sperschneider (2003), Ebbe Volquardsen reveals that "Due to the mixture of dialects, the often incoherent text fragments and the apparently unsuccessful efforts of some of the speakers to imitate the East Greenlandic language, even speakers of Greenlandic have difficulty following the dialogues" (2017: 218). While it is important to not minimise the harm done to Indigenous communities by exploitative cinematographic practices, including the misuse and misrepresentation of their languages, recent literature highlights the silenced agency Indigenous people had in early filmmaking. As such, Faye Ginsburg (2002) highlights the involvement of Inuit actors in the making of *Nanook of the North* and Peter G. Geller (2004:153) by writing about the role of Kila Arnaugak in the making of *Back to Baffin* (dir. Georges H. Valiquette, 1928). He evidences her role as an interpreter and, as later acknowledged by the film director himself, as an "assistant director" (*ibid.*). Considering this cinematographic history, my approach centres Indigenous agency and visibility, and the impact they have on Indigenous language use and translation.

In doing so, the definition of Indigenous language I adhere to is that of "languages currently or historically used by Indigenous Peoples and considered integral to their heritage, knowledge systems or identity" (UNESCO 2021b:36). In that sense, and in the context of this research, they will be differentiated from minority languages (languages spoken by a minority of people in a specific area, due to displacement; i.e. languages of diasporas), and regional languages and regiolects (languages spoken regionally, as opposed to a national standard, and regional varieties of said language. e.g. Standard French and the regional language Occitan, of which Gascon is a dialect). According to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Indigenous

peoples (making up less than 6% of the global population) speak more than half of the world's languages. This disparity is further noticed as only 1,400 of the approximately 6,700 languages still in use today privilege from official recognition status (UNESCO 2021a).

From this data, it is understood that the wide variety of Indigenous languages is supported by a small number of speakers, and thus are at risk of extinction. This extinction is commonly multifactorial: the eaching of these languages might have been prohibited, they might not be transmitted to younger generations of speakers in favour of other hegemonic languages, and their domains of use might be reduced. Taking into account this broader context, it is important to look closely at the languages featured in *Ixcanul* and *Embrace.*

Ixcanul is mainly filmed in Kaqchikel, a Mayan language of Guatemala, with Spanish being featured in three scenes of the film. Despite being recognized by the 2003 Law of National Languages, Kaqchikel is considered a "threatened language" as, in 2019, only 38.4% of the Kaqchikel ethnic population spoke the language (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig (eds.) 2026). *Embrace* offers a much more complex case of multilingualism as it features ten languages: Cubeo, Huitoto, Ticuna, Wanano, Spanish, Portuguese, German, Catalan, Latin, and English. Of these ten languages, the first four are native to the Amazon region (current territories of Brazil, Colombia and Peru). If Huitoto and Wanano are considered threatened languages, with around 1000 and 1300 speakers, respectively, Ticuna is considered a "developing language" (with 48,580 speakers in 2012, for an ethnic population of 35,000) and Cubeo a "wider communication" language, being used as a lingua franca for the northwest Vaupés area (as of 2008, 6,260 speakers, including 610 monolinguals) (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig (eds.) 2026).

Both films have been produced in contexts calling for a close consideration of postcolonial dynamics between the non-Indigenous filmmakers, crew, and audiences, and the Indigenous crew and actors. In that sense, I later use "postcolonial" as referring to a "project to reclaim and rethink the history and agency of people subordinated under various forms of imperialism" (Ivison 2023). Indeed, while the definition provided by Duncan Ivison also equates "postcolonialism" to "the historical period or state of affairs representing the aftermath of Western colonialism", he

warns us that it "should not be confused with the claim that the world we live in now is actually devoid of colonialism" (*ibid*.). Such moderation of the word is also championed by Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday who state that "'Post-' does not signify that colonial relations have been overturned" (2020:n.p.). Thereby, my use of the term "postcolonial" does not intend to negate current contexts of discrimination and oppression of Indigenous peoples within nation-states, but to both inscribe my research in the larger body of works aiming to question ongoing cultural and linguistic imperialism, and to locate the historical context my research navigates.

As part of this postcolonial framework, another fundamental component to this research is that of language invisibilisation, defined by Anna Havinga and Nils Langer as "the instances where in particular discourses languages are simply not acknowledged, are not afforded the label 'languages', or are claimed to be but a small fragment of the majority culture" (2015:3). More recently, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam use the term "homogenization" (2020:121) to describe the same phenomenon. In the context of AVT studies, and especially works focusing on subtitling. In this article, I favour the use of "invisibilisation" over "homogenization", as I consider the former to more accurately describe the process of a minoritised or foreign language disappearing via the addition of subtitles, while the latter mostly highlights a transition from spoken multilingualism to written monolingualism.

Drawing from existing scholarship in AVT Studies, Indigenous Studies, as well as from press coverage of the two films, this essay illustrates the current subtitling practices for multilingual fiction feature films in Indigenous languages through the comparative study of subtitling strategies applied to *Ixcanul* and *Embrace*. Nonetheless, while existing literature focuses almost exclusively on AVT as a feature of the film text added post production, my article demonstrates how the studies of pre-production and on-set translation methodologies are necessary for a more comprehensive approach of multilingual films. By failing to do so, efforts from film directors, producers, and actors to support and visibilise Indigenous languages through collaborative processes of scriptwriting and filmmaking may become undone by standard post-production subtitling practices. To best understand these methods, I first evaluate the processes of translation deployed for each film during pre-production, both on-set and *in diegesis*, followed by assessing

their post-production practices.

Ixcanul **and** ***Embrace of the Serpent*** **in Translation**

Pre-production Translation

From a spectatorial point of view, one might assume that translation only occurs during post-production through dubbing and subtitling as it is the most, if not the only, visible act of translation for a film audience. However, this is not accurate. Indeed, both scripts for *Ixcanul* and *Embrace* had to be translated before shooting. Far from being an exception, script translation is a common practice. Carol O'Sullivan (2010:118) and Alice Kilpatrick (2020:39) note its prevalence in works such as *Inglorious Basterds* (dir. Quentin Tarantino, 2009) and *Pa Negre* (dir. Agustí Villaronga, 2010). In these situations, actors might not be able to understand each other in certain scenes, depending on personal language skills. The same goes for the crew and director.

Whilst Jayro Bustamante does understand some Kaqchikel, Ciro Guerra does not speak any of the Indigenous languages featured in his film. Bustamante wrote his script in French (as the film's first producer was French), then translated it into Spanish for the coproducers and Spanish-speaking technical teams. Finally, a translation in Kaqchikel was needed, as it is the main language of the film. This last step in the translation chain was, as credited in the film, entrusted to María Elisa Orón Cuca and Justo Lorenzo (who plays Ignacio in the film). It was then partially edited by the rest of the cast before being memorised (Alfaro Cordoba 2015:191). This trilingual process testifies to both the linguistic complexities of international film production and the challenges of multilingual filmmaking. Indeed, it is fair to assume that the entirety of a film crew might not speak the same language, even more so the same two or three languages. Here, sequential translations of the script were necessary to first secure funding, then to allow the technical crew to work in a language they knew, and finally, to ensure that the actors could perform in their language. When considering an *auteur* perspective, this process requires the director(s) and the scriptwriter(s) to relinquish some control over the story, which is then entrusted to others. In this case, one of the two Kaqchikel script translators credited is one of the

main actors. This would be seen as surprising in traditional filmmaking, as the two roles are most frequently separated. Yet, in the context of making a film in a language with few speakers trained in scriptwriting or film work, the language proficiency of Indigenous actors allows for the very making of the film as intended by the non-Indigenous director.

Similarly, the script for *Embrace* was first written in Spanish, then orally translated by the actors themselves given their expertise in the diverse Indigenous languages of the film. Antonio Bolívar (old Karamakate in the film), who was an elder of the Ocaina people and also spoke Huitoto, Nilbio Torres (young Karamakate in the film) who is Cubeo, Yauenkü Migue (Manduca in the film) who is Ticuna, and the rest of the Indigenous actors and crew members enabled the complex multilingualism of the film (Mathiesen 2016:1). Nonetheless, the script is written exclusively in Spanish, with indications of which Indigenous language the lines are to be delivered in when not in Spanish (Villanueva Rabotnikof 2016). This is mostly due to the fact that, as highlighted by Maria Chiara D'Argenio, the Indigenous languages spoken in the film "are not written languages, [thus] the production crew used a translation technique that would not involve writing" (2018:138). Here actors were again entrusted with the translation of their lines as the director was not able to assess their accuracy. Their very knowledge of their languages prevailed over the assumed necessity to follow the written script. In both cases, crew members and spectators who do not speak one or several of the film's languages rely on the expectation that what is being delivered to them — dialogue and AVT — is in accordance with what the director envisioned.

On-set and in diegesis *Translation*

Following the necessities of script translation and multilingual collaboration, the possibility that not everyone on-set shares a common language should be considered. In the case of *Ixcanul*, some bilingual Indigenous actors, such as Justo Lorenzo and María Mercedes Coroy, assumed roles of on-set interpreters (Mathiesen 2016:4). Alejandra Colom, director of the Fundación Ixcanul between October 2019 and December 2022 and executive producer on Bustamante's later multilingual film, *La Llorona* (2019), emphasises the importance of having "middle people who

not only speak Spanish and the Maya language of the film but that also understand Ladino/Mestizo culture and film culture" as well as having Maya crew members to help with "respecting people's rhythms, understanding their questions, interpreting consent forms, etc." (Colom 2024). The same was observed during the shooting of *Embrace* where multilingual participants ensured translingual communication. Sara Malagón Llano (2016) highlights the role of the late Antonio Bolívar by mentioning his multilingualism and relaying his favourable opinion on shooting a multilingual film where many did not understand each other's language.

Considering this, it is critical to note that two of the actors cited for their instrumental action in translating the scripts also worked as on-set translators. In this sense, Justo Lorenzo and Antonio Bolívar play a double role both off and on screen. This duplication demonstrates the increasing prevalence of multilingualism in filmmaking, but also its normality in many Indigenous communities. If AVT can often be an instrument of linguistic hegemony, as most texts are translated towards a few "global" languages, the necessary skills and knowledge of Indigenous actors in these two instances testify to the resilience and power of their languages in the global mediascape. Furthermore, by focusing below on a few scenes from both films, I will demonstrate the purpose and power of translator characters. While on-set translation responds to a communication imperative and *in diegesis* translation is the result of an artistic choice, both are undertaken by the same people, doubling their multilingual capacities for the purpose of production work and storytelling. Because of this multi-local use and valorisation of the actors/protagonists' competence, on-set and *in diegesis* translation should be considered in tandem.

In *Ixcanul*, Ignacio (played by Justo Lorenzo) is the only character to speak both Kaqchikel and Spanish. Both María, whom he plans to marry, and her parents, work on the coffee plantation he is the foreman of. The three scenes during which Spanish is spoken are all mediated by Ignacio. Taking advantage of his bilingualism, he offers unreliable translation to the trusting family in order to serve his own interest: marrying the childless María. This role of "unreliable translation/translator" is discussed by Michael Cronin in his monograph *Translation Goes to the Movies*. He notes the lying and forgery potential of "pseudo-translation" (2009:41, 64), two

deceptions Ignacio partakes in. A first example of this is when a civil servant comes to María's family house to conduct a census. The civil servant asks María's parents, in Spanish, how many people live in their house. Ignacio translates the question in Kaqchikel, to which María's mother replies: "Oxi' " ("Three" in Kaqchikel). Ignacio translates "Van a ser cuatro" ("They are going to be four"; my trans.), thus revealing María's pregnancy by overstepping her mother's answer. Later, when María is rushed to the hospital after having been bitten by a snake, she is taken away by medical personnel while Ignacio and the civil servant who had come for the census have an inaudible conversation with two nurses behind closed doors.

Once María is in her hospital room with her parents, the civil servant asks Ignacio, in Spanish, to tell them about the baby. In Kaqchikel, he tells them that the baby is dead. The civil servant then asks, still in Spanish, that María signs a form. Ignacio explains to them that, by signing this form, the cost of the funeral will be covered. We later discover that María's baby isn't dead, and that Ignacio was complicit in having the baby removed from María and her family without her informed consent by taking advantage of the asymmetry of their language proficiencies. However, once this has been discovered by María and her parents, they go to the police. María is taken away, while two Spanish-speaking policemen question her parents and Ignacio, the latter providing translation for both parties. At the end of their conversation, María's mother asks a second time, in Kaqchikel, if the policemen are going to help find the baby. Ignacio replies to her in Kaqchikel that they are trying to. One of the policemen then asks, in Spanish, what is "la señora" ("the lady"; my trans.) saying. Ignacio replies to him, still in Spanish, that she wants to leave, prompting the group's departure.

In *Embrace*, Karamakate does not so much translate speech rather than mediate culture. Indeed, he is only required to translate a few sentences in a single scene: his two journeys in search of the *yakruna*[1] require him to transmit his knowledge of the Amazon and of his people. Thus, while he barely translates any speech, his role as a cultural mediator for the foreign scientists on their journeys is critical. He is the one who knows how to navigate the river and walk in the jungle

[1] A fictitious sacred medicinal plant.

when the maps are not sufficient. He is the guardian of the myths, skills, and knowledge of his people, which he explains to Theodor and Evan. His final voyage constitutes a last form of cultural mediation to ensure the survival of his song. In that sense, as argued by Enrique Bernales Albites (2020:200-201), Karamakate represents a perfect iteration of Yuri Lotman's guarantor of the semiotic universe, in this case for the fictitious Cohiuano people. Lotman defines the "semiotic universe" as "the totality of individual texts and isolated languages as they relate to each other" (208). As such, Albites argues that Karamakate, in transmitting his people's knowledge and song — his people's "semiotic universe" — ensures its survival beyond his own life and thus acts as a guarantor of it. This attests to the dual role taken up by Indigenous actors in both the making of *Ixcanul* and *Embrace*, and in the representation of their languages and cultures on the frontiers of semiospheres.

Post-production Translation

During its last stage, AVT occurs as part of the post-production necessities film distribution. In order to analyse how AVT was conducted for both *Ixcanul* and *Embrace*, I assess 1) how language choices were displayed when accessing the films, and 2) what were the available AVT options. When looking at DVDs of *Ixcanul*, the European edition (distributed by Trigon film) mentions a "VO" (standing for "original version") audio track in addition to German, French, English, Spanish, and Italian subtitles. When playing the DVD menu, the "VO" audio track is listed as "Kaqchikel". The United States DVD and VOD (Kino Lorber) mention the film's languages as: "Kaqchikel, Spanish". The Arte TV[2] broadcast available on BoB[3] in the UK plays the Kaqchikel and Spanish soundtrack, with German subtitles. These subtitles, as the ones from the Trigon film DVD, do not differentiate language switches from Kaqchikel to Spanish, thus invisibilising the film's linguistic diversity (Sanz Ortega 2015:38; Kilpatrick 2020:51). Hence, it would be difficult for viewers to understand such switches occur if they are unable to differentiate, by listening, the languages themselves (Diaz-Cintas 2011:221; Bosseaux 2023:70). This can be critical as the use of Spanish in the film always happens when María and her

[2] Arte TV is a European public service channel, co-run by France and Germany.
[3] Box of Broadcasts, is a British online service offering streaming of previous TV and Radio broadcasts.

Kaqchikel-speaking family members communicate with Spanish-speaking civil servants (hospital workers, policemen) and everyone must rely on Ignacio as translator. Undifferentiated subtitles prevent viewers from grasping how unreliable Ignacio's translations are and can therefore lead to an overall misunderstanding of the film's plot. This hinders the sociolinguistic and political significance of the film. Indeed, by invisibilising the difference between Kaqchikel and Spanish through English or German subtitles, the AVT negatively impacts the recognition and representation of Kaqchikel as an Indigenous language in a settler-colonial state.

However, such invisibilising is not unavoidable. Many audiovisual texts provide examples of what is often referred to as "creative subtitling", which, I argue, would be a better alternative AVT practice for multilingual films. A growing body of literature focuses on this practice (McClarty 2014; Kilpatrick 2020; Sasamoto 2024; Wu 2024), which follows Rebecca McClarty's definition of creative subtitling as:

> a subtitling practice that creatively responds to the individual film text in terms of both language and style. It rejects the notion that a one-size-fits-all approach is adequate for all modes and genres of audiovisual media and instead offers a bespoke solution that responds to film as a creative, artistic medium. (2014:393)

Examples of creative subtitling most often include the use of italics (*Je'vida*, dir. Katja Gauriloff, 2023), different colours (*Colours of the Alphabet*, dir. Alastair Cole, 2016) or font types (*John Wick,* dir. Chad Stahelski, 2014). By visibilising Indigenous languages through such non-standard subtitling choices, productions of multilingual films are better preserved. As a result, audiences relying on subtitles have better chances to access the film's multilingualism, which is not completely erased by more traditional subtitling practices. Beyond allowing for a simply more accurate and language-sensitive transposition of the audio track to the written subtitles, creative subtitling can facilitate the understanding of scenes where misunderstandings, unequal communication, or humour are dependent on multilingualism.

Regarding *Embrace*, the United Kingdom DVD and streaming platform of Peccadillo Pictures show the audio language track as "Spanish" with English subtitles. This is particularly inaccurate since, as aforementioned, the film features ten languages. This label insinuates that the sole presence of Spanish makes it the film's de facto language when this is not the case. The European Union and French DVDs (Trigon Films and TF1) offer a more accurate, yet still imprecise, information: the soundtrack is specified as "OV/VO" with either German and French, or solely French subtitles. When watching the Peccadillo Pictures DVD menu — and unlike the physical cover — the language choices do not feature "Spanish" nor any other language but only technical sound formats (such as "5.1 Dolby" for example). They are three choices of subtitling: no subtitles, English, and English for hard-of-hearing (HOH). The English subtitles do not specify any language change, with the exception of a scene discussed in the next paragraph. Alternatively, when choosing the HOH English subtitles, an indication on language is given in the first scene.

In one scene of the film, subtitles are not provided. This is when Manduca, Theo (Jan Bijvoet) and young Karamakate meet a rubber worker. The worker has been mutilated by the rubber plantation foreman, and comes running to the others, begging them for help. The worker speaks in a different language than the others, which is not subtitled. Manduca then asks Karamakate what the worker is saying, and Karamakate translates the plea. This is the only translation of speech Karamakate performs in the film. Here, the sudden absence of subtitling puts the spectators in the same linguistic void as Theo and Manduca, who rely on Karamakate to understand what is being said. This very absence is even more jarring than in *Ixcanul* as the film explicitly displays its multilingualism from the beginning. Indeed, Antonio Bolívar, Nilbio Torres and Yauenkü Migue each speak their respective languages, namely Huitoto, Cubeo, and Ticuna (Malagón Llano 2016). In the first scene, when Theo and Manduca meet young Karamakate, Manduca asks: "Yukuna? Tukano? Wanano? Kobeu?" (Pecadillo Pictures English subtitles), to decipher which language he will use to communicate with young Karamakate. Similarly, when Evan (Brionne Davis) encounters old Karamakate, he asks: "Tukano? Anoke? Kaihona? Muinane?" (Pecadillo Pictures English subtitles), to resolve the same communicational dilemma. It is thus very clear, for the characters and for the spectators, that multilingualism is a key feature

of the narration. Yet this is not reflected in the English subtitles. Alternatively, when selecting the HOH subtitles, the first line of the first scene, spoken by Manduca, is prefaced by the indication: "(in dialect)". This is a particularly limited, unhelpful, and misleading indication, as "dialect" does not refer to any of the languages spoken by Manduca, nor to any specific dialect of any given language. The indication then seems to only signify a sense of vague foreignness in comparison to the language of subtitling (English) and stands in contrast to the line of dialogue it describes, which makes explicit the multilingual richness of the region and the characters.

Facing these cases of inaccurate — or even absent — representation of Indigenous languages on distribution materials for former colonising countries such as France and the United Kingdom, the ethics of postcolonial AVT (Robinson 2021:100) need to be considered. My observations corroborate a dynamic of unilateral translation, from Indigenous or minoritised languages to hegemonic European ones. Thus, I suggest that, regardless of their achievement in portraying Indigenous cultures and featuring Indigenous languages, *Ixcanul* and *Embrace* further participate — to some extent — in a mainstream approach to translation.

This predominance is described by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi as stemming from "the close relationship between colonisation and translation" (1999:5) as part of which "translation was for centuries a one-way process, with texts being translated into European languages for European consumption, rather than as part of a reciprocal process of exchange" (*ibid.*). Other scholars such as Cronin (2009:69), as well as Shohat and Stam (2014:191-192) have discussed the dominant role of Anglophone (especially Hollywood) cinema in building and maintaining a filmic "monoglot fiction" (Cronin, 2009:69). As such, translation still functions as an unequally accessible tool, the use of which is a privilege. In the case of *Ixcanul*, the privilege of translation is obvious both in and out of the diegesis: the Kaqchikel speakers are forced to rely on a sole self-centred translator to navigate a Spanish-speaking state apparatus that neglects them, and even displays overt racism towards them. At the same time, the subtitles render accessible the language without distinguishing it from Spanish. While Cronin speaks of "the dismissive hubris of the guardians of the imperial tongue" (2009:78) in regard to English as the global language and its speakers, and Shohat and Stam write about how "Hollywood especially came to incarnate

a linguistic hubris bred of empire" (2020:108), I argue that this notion can be applied to other colonial languages, such as Spanish in this case.

Furthermore, AVT in *Ixcanul* contributes to reproducing the colonial dynamics of oppression the film denounces. Nonetheless, it is important to note the liminality of Ignacio's character as a pivotal agent of said dynamics. Here liminality, referring to multilingualism, is used in the sense of Bosseaux's (2023:59) development of Victor Turner's definition (1967), arguing that "multilingualism in polyglot products can be considered a liminal space, since it is through linguistic diversity that identities are constructed and negotiated" (2023:59). Thus, I would argue that the position of Ignacio's identity constitutes a liminal space at the crossroads of several systems of privilege and oppression as conveyed by his bilingualism with either María and her parents or the non-Kaqchikel civil servants. Indeed, if he exercises power over María and her family, it is not only because he speaks the language of the former coloniser, but also, and most importantly, because of his position in other systems of oppression such as patriarchy and the capitalist hierarchisation of labour (Bandia 2012:420).

In relation to *Embrace*, D'Argenio notes that: "Resonating with Homi Bhabha's reflection, translation here is less about languages and more about (other) cultural signs. Indeed, Indigenous languages are not translated into Western ones (except for the subtitles)" (2018:149). If Bernales Albites considers Karamakate as a sole figure of Lotman's guarantor of the semiosphere, for his translation is more cultural than linguistic (2020:200-201), I argue then this is not exclusive. First, even though the cultural mediation is crucial, as described earlier, it does not negate the representation of forced language attrition notably at the hands of Catholic missionaries. In one scene of the film, the missionaries call the Indigenous languages "*lenguas del demonio*" ("languages of the Devil"), and children in the missionary orphanage face corporal punishment for speaking in their mother tongue. Second, subtitles should not be considered a negligible exception as they constitute a core component of the film to ensure its viability on the international and commercial markets.

The active participation of Indigenous actors in translating the scripts and portraying situations of

linguistic and cultural mediation constitutes a great advancement towards what could be seen as postcolonial multilingual filmmaking. Nonetheless, it is important to remain cautious and remember the necessities and aims of commercial fiction production in a globalised capitalist market. In other words, the aforementioned efforts towards postcolonial filmmaking remain subjugated to the need for profit-making in order to cover the costs of production and distribution (Romero-Fresco 2019:2-3; Taghavi 2023).

Conclusion

Both released in 2015, *Ixcanul* and *Embrace of the Serpent* are fiction feature films showing Indigenous characters speaking their own languages. The first one is mostly shot in Kaqchikel, while the second one features Huitoto, Cubeo, Ticuna, Wanano, and other non-Indigenous languages. With the directors' lack of proficiency or fluency in the aforementioned languages, the involvement of Indigenous actors was crucial in the making of the films, thanks to their instrumental roles as script and *in diegesis* translators. Indeed, Justo Lorenzo (Ignacio in *Ixcanul*) and Antonio Bolívar (old Karamakate in *Embrace*) were critical players in conducting pre-production translation, thus allowing their languages, and that of their fellow actors, to be represented on screen. This aligns with the crucial role attributed by Sharon Huebner and Ezzard Flowers to "intercultural collaborations based on cultural integrity and respectful engagement [...] in developing for the screen genuine and truthful representations of story, histories and identities" (2021:233).

While information about how multilingualism was navigated during the production process is scarce, tangible testimonies of post-production AVT have been provided by DVDs, broadcasting, and streaming sources. From these sources, it is possible to suggest a tendency towards the invisibilisation of multilingualism at the hands of undifferentiated subtitles. Given that none of the subtitles studied (*Ixcanul*: Trigon film's DVD English subtitles, Arte broadcast's German subtitles; *Embrace*: Peccadillo Pictures' DVD English and HOH English subtitles) differentiate shifts between the spoken languages, it is evident that the norm favours standardised subtitling practices over creative ones, at the risk of compromising the understanding of the plot, necessarily tied to language diversity and shift in both cases.

The only significant differences observable between the two films were: 1) In profilmic scenes of translation: a) in *Ixcanul*, Ignacio provides unreliable translation between Kaqchikel and Spanish in three scenes, where language change is never signified by the subtitles; b) in *Embrace*, Karamakate only translates speech once and the sentences he has to translate are not subtitled; 2) When playing the HOH English subtitles on the Peccadillo Pictures DVD of *Embrace*, a single mention of "(in dialect)" appears in the first scene. This lack of precision in post-production AVT can be surprising, considering the target audience discussed earlier is not expected to be fluent in the Indigenous languages featured in both films. As a matter of fact, more than 50 per cent of each film's revenue came from foreign markets (mainly the U.S.A. and Europe) and local commercial screenings were very much influenced by the films' success at international festivals (Box Office Mojo, online). This speaks to the favouritism of international distribution circuits over national ones in both Guatemala and Colombia. This furthers the importance of initiatives such as the Fundación Ixcanul to ensure that the films reach people who would otherwise not have access to them (Fundación Ixcanul, online).

Despite the critical involvement of Indigenous actors and crew to allow the international success of films like *Ixcanul* and *Embrace*, the use of their native languages is more often mediated inadequately for non-speaking audiences; the native-speaking audiences only enjoy very limited access to the films. This calls into question the purported post-coloniality of the narratives with regards to problematic AVT practices, notably *vis-à-vis* language invisibilisation (Havinga & Langer 2015; Shohat & Stam 2020; Robinson 2021). If pre-production and *in diegesis* practices and narratives allow Indigenous participants a greater agency over their cinematographic representation and that of their languages, these efforts seem diminished by unrepresentative AVT practices. Indeed, the present research acknowledges the critical role of Indigenous participants in making films such as *Ixcanul* and *Embrace* and recognises the filmmaking process as a site for Indigenous agency over script-development and translation, as well as story delivery. At the same time, it highlights the invisibilising effect caused by standard monolingual AVT. As such, there is a tension between two stages of cinematographic translation: the first one being that of pre-production and *in diegesis*, where Indigenous voices are sought after, promoted, and

visibilised, and the second one being that of post-production, answering to budget constraints and homogenising expectations, ultimately erasing (part of) the former's impact.

Considering this tension, I return to Markus Nornes' advice that:

> Filmmakers must involve themselves in translation because the contribution of the translator is every bit as profound as that of the screenwriter, actor, or director. The translators are creating a new text from their original films, and there are myriad cultural, industrial, and ideological pressures exerting themselves on that act of creation. (2007:283)

Today, I would further the argument that when a film involves Indigenous communities, their involvement in and agency over its AVT should be guaranteed, as it participates in the representation and preservation of their cultures and languages as much as filmmaking does. While not exhaustive, the aforementioned use of varying colours and types of fonts for subtitles, as well as accurate paratextual indications, could provide more culturally and linguistically sensitive representation of Indigenous languages in multilingual films. This succinct survey of Indigenous languages' translation in feature fiction cinema attests to the need for a more inclusive, accurate, and creative subtitling of Indigenous languages in multilingual films, as well as the necessary inclusion of Indigenous people at every stage of cinematographic production, including AVT.

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