

## *Linguistics as a Tool for Teaching Interlingual Subtitling: a Case Study*

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### ABSTRACT

Scientific linguistic training is an aspect that is given little consideration in most translation courses and programmes. However, it is worth (further) exploring linguistics, as the scientific study of language, in terms of its potential as a tool for the teaching of translation, which is essentially a language operation. A sound, if basic, linguistic knowledge is especially important when performing a multidimensional, polysemiotic translation task such as interlingual subtitling: the translator is required to condense information, mainly but not exclusively, from the verbal auditory channel in order to transmit it via a more limited verbal visual additive sub-channel, under strong space and time constraints. The paper discusses a number of strategies for teaching effective linguistic tools to aspiring subtitlers. The approach aims to raise students' awareness of how linguistics can be relevant to translation by teaching theoretical core elements of translation-related linguistics in a practical context while avoiding demotivating levels of theoreticism. The methodology is complemented by a bi-directional score metric that, in addition to providing added learning incentives for students, allows for a more complex evaluation of the teaching approach than a uni-directional grading system.

**Keywords:** screen translation, subtitling, linguistics, translator training

### 1. The culture conundrum – or is it?

In recent decades, translation has come to be understood as “not only a linguistic but also considerably and primarily a culture-transferring activity” (Kaloh Vid & Kučič, 2014), especially by scholars adhering to functionalism, descriptivism, and postcolonialism. This focus on culture and even refusal of the relevance of linguistics<sup>1</sup> to translation may be due to the perceived need of the discipline to emancipate itself from linguistics. Interestingly, this happened often under the careful disregard of such sub-disciplines of linguistics as pragmatics or textual linguistics (cf. Kvam, 2010: 21), which do take into consideration extralinguistic factors. In this context it is ironic that, in its earliest stages, even functionalism<sup>2</sup> defined translation studies as a sub-discipline of linguistics, applied linguistics in this case (Vermeer, 1978).

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<sup>1</sup> In its extreme form to be found, e.g., in the trajectory of descriptivism; cf. e.g. Hermans' (1985: 10) statement on the inadequacy of linguistics “as a proper basis for the study of literary translation”.

<sup>2</sup> Another contender for interpretational sovereignty of translation and opponent of linguistics as a universal tool for translation studies (cf. Hermans 2012)

Against this theoretical, maybe even ideological, backdrop the question arises if this shift of the theoretic focus towards culture is compatible with or meaningful to the very practical activity of actual translation. An answer can be found if one is to consider the fundamental relationship between language and culture, based on two very basic and ideologically indeterminate working definitions. Firstly, culture can be observed to be an information management tool – and, more loosely, also its products – that humans have developed in the course of evolution: it allows us to conceptualise our natural, social, and intellectual environments so we can interact with them more efficiently. In order to perform this function culture itself consists of a set of tools which are suited to special purposes, which also accounts for cultural differences:

“[...] Lévi-Strauss [...] proposed that, in their attempts to solve the problems of daily life, people might be regarded as bricoleurs – handymen with their bags of cognitive tools. Pursuing this metaphor, we may say that even if all cultures possessed essentially the same basic cognitive processes as their tools, the tools of choice for the same problem may habitually be very different. People may differ markedly in their beliefs about whether a problem is one requiring use of a wrench or pliers, in their skill using the two types of tools, and in the location of particular tools at the top or the bottom of the tool kit.” (Nisbett et al. 2008)

If we accept this toolset definition of culture, one of the most extensive ones of these tools can be observed to be language (cf. the social/cultural role of pragmatics in Nerlich 2010), which almost completes our second working definition: language is an information management tool which enables us to think and transmit thoughts efficiently, and, as such, is a subset of culture. (Written) language is our most important and universal means of dealing with conceptual information in a non-volatile, persistent manner.

The conclusion to be drawn from this, in order to answer the question raised above, is that culture is a general, extremely fuzzy and iridescent collection of phenomena whereas language, although being a subset of culture, is much more tangible and, when translating, our only or at least main means of transmitting thought. So, whatever cultural phenomenon we are dealing with in a concrete situation, in translation its representation is almost always and exclusively conveyed through language (cf. Jakobson, 1959). If there is insufficient (applicable) knowledge with regard to the functioning of language, including, of course, knowledge as to the relationship between language and the extralinguistic world, then no adequate translation can be produced, no matter how well the translator knows the cultures involved. So, cultural knowledge and extralinguistic factors are not unimportant for the successful translation of texts – indeed their importance can vary from very low to very high – however, evidently, linguistic knowledge is *always* a necessary condition. This is why the present paper aims to illustrate how linguistics-based information can be provided to and awareness for its importance be raised among student translators, in this case student subtitlers.

## 2. Defining the central elements

The present discussion of teaching linguistic knowledge relevant to translation shall take defining the central notions involved as a starting point. The first of these

definitions with practical implications is that of linguistics, as it is understood for the purposes of this paper. The definition here is a rather simple and broad one: linguistics is the science that deals with the workings of the information management and transmission tool that is language, in all its aspects that can be or can be made to be studied reproducibly and systematically. As such it is the one science, of course containing many sub-disciplines, that allows for the most informed decisions whenever one is dealing with practical problems of translation. Linguistics can be subsumed under the broader term of semiotics, which is the science of signs. Signs<sup>3</sup> can be subsumed under the term of culture, defined above as the general mental tool that enables us to conceptualise, i.e. manage the complexity of, our surroundings.

The second definition that is important for the purposes of what is being discussed is teaching itself. Here as well a relatively basic definition is to be given, mainly for the research interest in hand, firstly, because the author is no authority on the latest teaching/learning theories and, secondly, because an in-depth analysis of teaching and learning in general is neither the interest of the present paper nor could it be accommodated within its scope. A conventional or superficial definition of teaching that could be a starting point is the transfer of knowledge between individuals, usually intentional in manner. However, the author holds that this approach would fall short of a well-rounded concept of teaching because, firstly, there is as yet no reliable method for transferring knowledge directly and persistently from one individual to another – there is always repetition and autonomous activity on the part of the learner involved: “Learners do not necessarily learn something the first time they encounter it” (Graves, 2005: 164). Secondly, as we will see, translating in general and screen translation and subtitling in particular are fields of action that have seen such rapid change of surrounding conditions in recent years that teaching (only) what can be called *first level knowledge*, i.e., concrete competencies relating to concrete problems, seems problematic. What is required is rather the teaching/acquisition of meta-competencies: knowledge and skills as to how to assess and acquire knowledge and skills. So, this definition as well is tool-related: meaningful teaching consists in the provision of mental tools as well as the covering of concrete topics (cf. ‘training’ vs. ‘education’ in Bernardini, 2004).

The last definition that is to be employed here is of subtitling, in our case interlingual subtitling. In this context the definition is less about making clear what the phenomenon is – knowledge of what subtitling means can most likely be presupposed for all readers – but more about what aspects make it necessary for the teaching of subtitling to include linguistics-related training. As has been shown, linguistic knowledge is a necessary condition for any translation. For subtitling it is especially important for two main reasons. The first one is the polysemiotic nature of screen translation as such and even more so of subtitling: screen texts are multimodal in nature, i.e., they encompass multiple channels, the most important ones have been identified as verbal and non-verbal visual, and verbal and non-verbal auditory channels (Gottlieb, 1998: 245). With regard to various other

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<sup>3</sup> At least those that constitute artifacts, i.e. icons and symbols. Indices present a special case which would go beyond the scope of this article.

characteristics, sub-channels can be defined, e.g. a verbal visual one which is intradiegetic (i.e. part of the plot of the original) or not. Subtitles for instance are not intradiegetic, i.e., they are added later and as such are a kind of foreign bodies to the original text. This situation involving the various channels imposes constraints on subtitling which are absent in purely written translation. One is the temporal dimension: There is very little wiggle-room to the point in time/text when a translated unit of information can and must appear. Also, the space for it is limited due to the circumstance that we can process speech much more quickly than written text. Another characteristic to do with audiovisual texts being polysemiotic is the fact that written text has – continuing to use channel-related parlance – much less bandwidth than speech: there is no intonation or stress, which can significantly colour or alter the meaning of the same sequence or syllable. In written text other means have to be used in order to convey such information – something very similar to what Catford (1965: 72 ff.) called *translation shifts* has to be performed: if in spoken form a certain emphasis is conveyed by means of sentence stress it has to be implemented with the help of functional grammar in written form. Such shifts may also help with the aforementioned problem of lack of space: If, e.g., a person’s mode of speaking characterises them as intellectual by being longwinded and grammatically complex, this characterisation can be conveyed in written form with the help of elevated variety/register.

The second reason for the importance of linguistics in translator training is extralinguistic, or, to be more precise, extrasemiotic in nature. It is to do with the working conditions under which present-day screen translation is carried out. The current situation involves processing high volumes over short periods of time on tight budgets:

“[...] increasingly tight deadlines for distribution of extremely varied material, and the cost reduction in language transfer, despite the increasing volume of material for subtitling, as a result of digital TV and DVDs. This threefold constraint (deadlines/costs/volume) obviously creates a challenge in terms of quality requirements.” (Gambier, 2008).

As a consequence “a film which once required three weeks to dub from start to finish, now calls for the same task to be completed in three to five days, something technically feasible but at the cost of quality.” (Chiaro, 2008). So, the concern here is one of quality. Witness to the results of these working conditions, as well as to the oftentimes total lack of formal linguistic<sup>4</sup> training of the professionals in charge of screen translation<sup>5</sup> is borne by several translation errors listed in the *MuliTransInn* database at the translation studies department of the University of Innsbruck (see Zybatow et al., 2009). Quality assessment and control are two things that can benefit significantly from improved training of linguistics-related aspects in subtitler training: if translation quality is loosely defined as proportional to the craftsmanship with which information is transferred from the source language to the target language, and craftsmanship is defined as the knowledge (theoretical and practical) of the material with which one works, then it is evident

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<sup>4</sup> Linguistic training, let alone linguistics-related training, i.e., one to do with linguistics as the scientific study of language.

<sup>5</sup> As could be experienced at first hand by the author by visiting companies in the field.

that language professionals who know more about language – i.e. the material they work with – will work more proficiently. Interestingly, this observation also holds for functionalism: if a foreign language version of a text is to be determined first and foremost by the purpose for which it is written, then the more one knows about the target language, the more efficiently they will be able to accomplish the task. Descriptivism, of course enters into this discussion only in so far as what has just been said can be regarded as a translation norm, or rather meta-norm, whose implementation could be studied by this paradigm.

### 3. Didactics – a three-pillar approach

#### 3.1 Awareness of relevance

In order to include linguistics-related elements into teaching, within the framework of a master's level introductory course with a workload of 2.5 ECTS credits in the 2015 winter term, an approach with three fundamental didactic elements was chosen. The first of these can be summarised as *raising awareness of relevance*, i.e., the relevance of linguistics to translation and subtitling in particular. This was held to be important because doing something meaningful, e.g. knowing for what purpose one is learning something, is usually more rewarding and motivating than not knowing the reason for an activity<sup>6</sup>. This awareness raising was achieved with the help of several methods. The first of these consisted in a few short presentations at the beginning of the course, which mostly contained the information and rationales presented so far in this paper, such as trying to find working definitions of language and culture, observing that translators always work with language, showing the problems that are sure to arise when there is a lack of linguistic training in professionals producing screen translations<sup>7</sup>, having a closer look at what subtitling is from a linguistic point of view etc.

On a more anecdotal note, this segment also contained a very important analogy, which was repeatedly employed during the course: language was presented as one big, complex machine that everyone uses in their daily lives; if this machine is not used correctly or assembled in a defective manner, most people will notice the fact, but most likely not the exact cause, similarly to when a car is making a strange noise; in the case of the car it is the mechanic's job to know where exactly the noise comes from and how the problem can be remedied: in the case of language it is the job of language professionals to know how "the machine" works, to use it and to fix it with the right tools from their most important toolbox: linguistics.

#### 3.2 Don't overwhelm

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. the terms 'task involvement' and 'ego involvement' (Nicholls 1989: 95): learners who know the purpose of an exercise and are interested in it for the sake of learning as opposed to merely outperforming others have higher levels of satisfaction with learning and are less prone to work avoidance.

<sup>7</sup> This has been proven empirically with the help of the *MultiTransInn* database of film translation errors (see Zybatow et. al. 2009)

The second pillar of the didactic concept used in the course was not overwhelming students with theoreticism. Although the author is a convinced advocate of the importance of theory in teaching, he is also aware that it does not have the best of reputations among students: unjustly so. One of the reasons for the lack of popularity of theoretical or technical segments in teaching among students is to be looked for in the lack of awareness of its relevance to practice, which was addressed with the help of the first didactic element of the course, mentioned in the previous section. However, and this is a factor that is closely related to the latter, what can also be problematic are theoretical elements that are too comprehensive or extensive at a time. Even if their practical relevance is pointed out, they can be too much all at once, which is why it is important to mix them with practical parts. This was done, during the first, more theoretical part of the course, by working with many examples, each time immediately after discussing a theoretical phenomenon. Later, when the more practical part of the course, involving working with subtitling software, began, the theoretical elements that had been covered during the first part were revisited each time one of the discussed phenomena came up during work on a particular video clip. This is in accordance with recent modern learning theory: cf. e.g. Graves' (2005: 164 and 125, respectively) principles of (a) recycling: “[S]omething that has been introduced is then learned in connection with something else, so that it is both ‘reused’ and learned in more depth” and (b) “input before action” (the latter also supports the aforementioned awareness raising strategy). The appearance of relevant passages in the videos was not left to chance, but the material selected accordingly. The specific phenomena in each clip – most of them had only one or two that were clearly distinguishable – it was the student’s task to find before working on the clips as a home assignment. This means there was mandatory text analysis, oriented towards linguistic and semiotic phenomena that had been covered in a theoretical segment first, aimed at creating light-bulb moments by giving students a chance to find again in real-life material what they had previously learned in a more theoretical context.

### **3.3 Carrots as well as sticks**

The last core element of the didactic concept is a bidirectional system of formal feedback. Although it seems quite natural for teachers everywhere to praise students as well as to point out errors, i.e., to give positive as well as negative feedback, this is not reflected in most grading systems. These mainly consist in error metrics and thus in summative evaluation, as it is also widely used in industry contexts: “The summative approach used by the industry is mostly directed towards passing a judgment on a pass/fail basis through an error-based assessment method” (Jiménez-Crespo, 2009). This was indeed one element of the grading system in the course, too; however, it was used in a bidirectional manner: students could earn bonus points with very good and excellent variants as well as lose them with slight, severe, and fatal errors. The reason for many grading systems only using negative points is that it is difficult to decide if an error can be compensated by one or several very good solutions in a target text – so, there is a certain degree of ambivalence inherent to the concept of translation quality, which is, in fact, being discussed here but shall not be the central interest of this paper. In any event, this

question is one that cannot be brushed aside, especially since in any professional application more severe errors can decide professional or companies' fates. In order to account for this, the positive points were weighted less than their negative counterparts. Firstly, there were only two positive categories: *very good* and *excellent*, as opposed to the three negative error degrees *slight*, *severe*, and *fatal*.

The overall score was calculated in the form of points per character count, so that it would automatically be relative to the text amount. On average, students could produce fifteen, five or one, respectively, of the three types of errors per an average five minutes of video clip. The two positive variants were weighted at 25 percent of the severe and fatal error categories, respectively. In this way the grading system was balanced as positive points were unable to "save" very poor translations. On the other hand, the reward system created an incentive for students not just to avoid errors, but to consciously apply what they had learned. Interestingly, about 90 percent of the marks based on the test scores calculated with the help of this system coincided with the respective intuitive marks on the five-part Austrian grading scale that the author would have assigned each paper.

Category	Points (error or bonus)	Mark	ppc (points per characters)
Slight error	2.5	1 ( <i>very good</i> )	$\geq 0.9975$
Medium error	10	2 ( <i>good</i> )	$\geq 0.9950$
Severe error	40	3 ( <i>satisfactory</i> )	$\geq 0.9925$
Very good solution	2.5	4 ( <i>fair</i> )	$\geq 0.9900$
Excellent solution	10	5 ( <i>fail</i> )	$< 0.9900$

Where

$$ppc = ttc / (ttc - tep + tbp)$$

ttc..... total number of text characters

tep..... total number of error points

tbp..... total number of bonus points

Fig. 1: Formal representation of the grading system used

Apart from degree, errors and bonus points were also classified according to a number of linguistic categories. The categories were: *denotation*, *connotation*, *false friend*, *linguistic interference*, *grammar*, *spelling*, *idiomaticity*, *particles*, *language variety*, *other pragmatics markers*, *timing*, *too many characters*, and *typography*. In this way, there was a rather fine granularity to error classification, which was aimed at higher usefulness of teacher feedback.

In addition to this bidirectional and relatively fine-grained grading system, a strong focus was placed on verbal feedback: the comments included in the returned assignments amounted, in extreme cases, to as much as approximately 25 percent of the text characters of the translations themselves.

#### 4. Examples of linguistic terminology taught

As the last part of this paper, after introducing mostly methodological aspects so far, a few examples of the content taught are to be included, in order to give a more complete picture and to make the importance of linguistic training especially in terms of interlingual subtitling more tangible. The methodological aspects introduced so far can be applied to other forms of written translation, too. The

added constraints faced by subtitlers discussed in Section 2 – conversion between semiotic channels, time constraints, lack of space etc. – constitute optimisation requirements which are not as relevant to other forms of written translation. Linguistic knowledge provides the tools for such optimisation. The discussion of examples is to be done without going into too much detail as the aspects themselves are not new and can be reviewed better in the form of original literature. The purpose here is merely to list a number of examples that, in their combination, are of relevance to linguistically complemented subtitler training.

The linguistic theory used by the author has been developed (cf. Stauder, 2013: 121 ff.) in order to bring some clarity into the translation quality discourse. It is not to be discussed here in detail. What should be mentioned is that it takes American semiotics as a starting point, which, beside the classic Saussurean sign components of form and content (as signifier and signified), equally emphasises the sign user as a core aspect of any sign (cf. Morris, 1938: 3 f.). Describing the relationships among these three elements is describing a text systematically and linguistically. The most important ones of these relations can be found in the form of the classic linguistic fields of syntax/grammar (form-form relationships), semantics (form-content relationships) and pragmatics (relationships between form and its processor, i.e. the sign user). Reproducing these relationships in translation means achieving high translation quality by maintaining information weighting (cf. Stauder, 2013: 121 ff.). Similarity of information weighting between source and target texts corresponds to and sheds some light on what has traditionally (and controversially) been called equivalence.

For the exemplification of the linguistic elements taught in the course, let us look at them one type of relationship after another, one example for each of the most important linguistic relationships. First, let us consider form-form relationships. One of the most important elements here is syntactic complexity, to be found in the form of parataxis and hypotaxis. It can be quantified at the word and sentence level. How long are the words a character uses? How long are their sentences and how ramified are they? This category has a significant bearing on the way a character's speech is perceived. Subtitlers must learn to recognise and reproduce or equivalently replace sentence complexity, e.g. by means of substituting high register for it, as longwinded speech is difficult to process in the form of subtitles.

A form-content relation, i.e. a semantic one, which is very important is described by the linguistic terms of collocation and probabeme (after Herbst & Klotz, 2003), which correspond to an open choice model and the idiom principle (of Sinclair, 1991), respectively. Regardless of whether we choose adjacent linguistic elements in a complex multi-part fashion or as preconstructed units, what is clear is that there is very often a lexical representation of a certain element or combination of elements of content which is more likely to be used by speakers than is any other verbalisation. Recognising probabemes and being able to produce natural renderings of probabemes in another language are especially important for subtitling because most subtitled material is in dialogue form. Real-life dialogue is a form of discourse that is strongly defined by naturalness (for a typology of features of such naturalness, see e.g. Warren 2006: 13 f.) and constitutes a series of

speech acts, whose felicity conditions are violated if unusual, i.e., unnatural, verbalisations are used.

The third type of the most prominent linguistic relationships is the one between form and sign users, i.e. utterers and recipients. This was covered in class discussing, among other things such as the use of modal particles, the concept of language varieties, mostly describing them with the help of the diasystem (after Weinreich, 1954, further developed by Coşeriu, 1981[1958, orally], and modified by Goossens, 1977). One central aspect to language varieties in screen translation is the immediate and intuitive typecasting of characters: if someone speaks in a distinctive accent or sociolect, viewers immediately see them in a certain light: think for instance of a person speaking in a Texan accent versus one speaking in a received pronunciation accent (“BBC English”). Here again subtitling presents a special case: firstly, the target audience is unlikely to recognize a language variety or its features (e.g. a typical accent) when they hear them; secondly, there is the aforementioned conversion between an auditory verbal channel and a written verbal channel, the latter of which is not suited for rendering phonetic features; thirdly, dialects, sociolects and other types of language varieties cannot simply be mapped to another language as each language has its own system of varieties. However, sociolinguistic features must be recognised and adequate strategies for reproducing found in the target language rendering, e.g. substituting sociolects for diatopic variants etc., for the dramatic effect not to be lost.

## 5. Results and conclusion

The evaluation of home assignment and test scores drew an interesting picture of the effectiveness of the described method. The study, which was conducted with a total of 22 students, had the following general statistical characteristics:

	Test 1	Test 2
Highest score	0.9957	1.0083
Lowest score	0.9749	0.9569
Mean score	0.9913	0.9886
Median score	0.9927	0.9929

*Table 1: general statistical properties (rounded to the 4<sup>th</sup> decimal)*

Fig. 1 below shows a comparison of the mid-term and final test scores of the students.

What must be noted here is that the mid-term test was a project for which the students could choose and subtitle a video sequence on their own and at home; the final test was a video clip that was chosen by the author and had to be subtitled in class within a time limit of 90 minutes. This is interpreted as the reason for the considerable drop in scores observed in a few of the students that generally struggled: when they could choose their own videos and there was no time pressure, 50 percent of those that showed an extreme drop in performance had at least been able to achieve fair results. Text difficulty was factored into the marking in order to compensate for the, strictly speaking, un-level ground on which this test was performed. As far as performance in general is concerned, 50 percent of all students were able to improve their score; the other 50 percent achieved worse

scores in the second test. Not all improvements, however, were significant in terms of achieving higher marks: 36 percent of students were able to achieve scores that earned them higher marks, 18 percent were able to maintain the same mark, 32 percent received lower marks in the second test, six of whom showed an extreme deterioration. One student, however, was able to perform immensely better in the second test: they improved by only one mark in terms of the grading system, but only because the mark achieved was a 1, the best mark on the scale. In terms of points, the increase (from 0.9952 to 1.0082) would have been worth 5 marks.

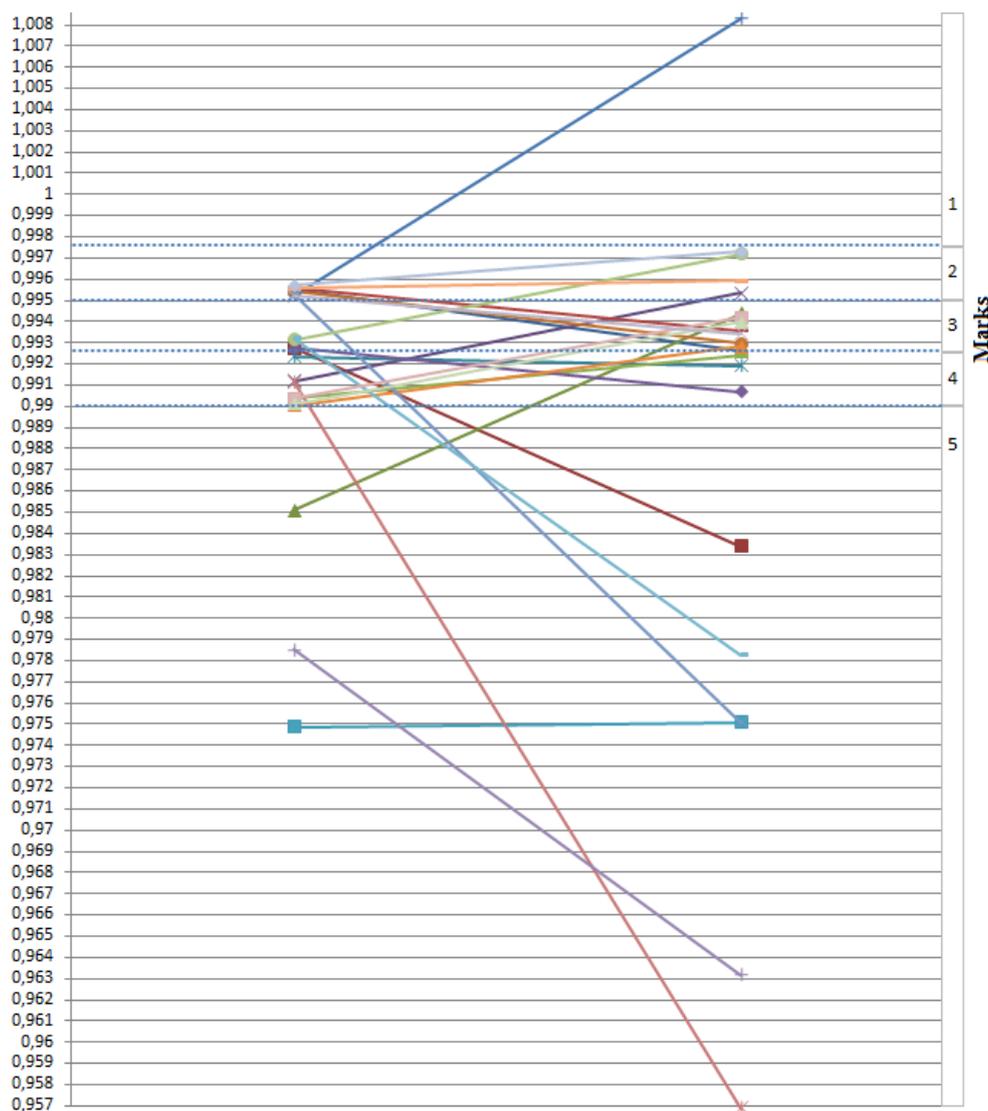


Fig. 2: Student scores at the middle and end of term

Of course, there is an issue regarding the testing conditions (which has been disclosed earlier) due to the first test, which was used as a baseline, being subject to possible skew as text difficulty had to be compensated for manually. The advantage this method had, however, is that by letting students select their own material and letting them hand in a written text analysis with the finished subtitles, it was possible to establish the learning and motivation types of the students, which would prove to be highly valuable information in retrospect. The types were established by assigning the characteristics *task involvement* high or low and *ego*

*involvement* high or low (for the term *task involvement* cf. Nicholls 1989: 95). In addition to the evaluation of the Test 1 assignment, contributions during class were recorded. Interesting phenomena in connection with the learning and motivation types can be observed especially when the extremes are considered: the student who improved the most had high task-involvement and low ego-involvement, the student who improved the second-most had high task involvement and high ego involvement, the student who showed the most severe drop had high ego involvement and low task involvement. Of all the students with drops worth more than one mark, the only two with high task involvement and low ego involvement had dropped the least, despite being non-native speakers of the target language; i.e., they did better than native speakers with low task involvement and high/low ego involvement.

Therefore, despite the conditions of Test 1 being problematic in some regards, some valuable insights can be gleaned from the collected data. The central interpretation is that the proposed and employed method for including linguistics in the teaching of interlingual subtitling is one that exerts a high degree of selection pressure on learners: highly motivated and task involved students were able to use linguistics as an effective tool for improving translation quality, also in real-life conditions with high time pressure, while students who were less motivated and task involved generally did not adopt the tool as willingly and consequently didn't benefit from it, some even did worse than non-native speakers of the target language on the second test.

Another insight that could be gained, although it hasn't been systematically evaluated, was that the method employed appears to achieve satisfactory mnemonic effects as many of the linguistic theoretical tools taught in this course were brought forward by the same students on several occasions during discussions in a course taught in the following semester, which was a seminar on the theory of screen and literary translation.

In summary, the evaluation of the discussed subtitling course helped demonstrate that, in connection with translation, linguistics can be a most valuable tool: of the kind that is desperately needed in one of the most dynamically developing sectors of the translation industry today<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> For a qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the development of the industry, see Stauder, in press.

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