Economic & Political WEEKLY

Film Songs as Continuing Education: Same Language Subtitling for Literacy

Author(s): Brij Kothari

Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Sep. 26 - Oct. 2, 1998, Vol. 33, No. 39 (Sep. 26 - Oct. 2, 1998), pp. 2507-2510

Published by: Economic and Political Weekly

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/4407205

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms



Economic and Political Weekly is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Economic and Political Weekly*

This content downloaded from 128.32.65.83 on Fri, 24 Sep 2021 03:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Film Songs as Continuing Education

Same Language Subtitling for Literacy

Brij Kothari

Field studies indicate that same language sbtitling (SLS) for film songs invites reading without diminishing their entertainment value. SLS can be a subliminal way of integrating literacy skill practice into people's everyday television viewing.

RAPIDLY approaching the year 2000, India still has one-third of the world's non-literates. The low level of literacy, both in terms of rate and quality, is to a great degree maintained by frequent relapse into illiteracy or stagnation of semi- and neo-literates' skills. Thus, many short stints in school and adult literacy programmes are wasted because they very often fail to push the participants above the minimum threshold of learning. But what happens within the classroom is not as much the topic of this article as what could happen outside it. A key factor responsible for India's slow progress with literacy is infrequent reading outside the classroom, sometimes due to lack of opportunity and/or individual motivation but more significantly due to the absence of a reading environment. Television, which is rapidly making inroads into rural and urban homes, is a medium that could dramatically alter this bleak scenario by building an inviting environment for reading, an environment which creates reading opportunity and motivates.

Same language subtitling (SLS) is a technique that holds enormous potential to create such a reading environment, far beyond what text already exists on television. Simply, it suggests subtitling motion media programmes in the same language as the audio [Kothari (forthcoming)]. Thus, Hindi programmes would be subtitled in Hindi and likewise with all the regional language programmes in the country. The basic idea is, what you see (text) is what you hear (audio). This article contends that SLS's strength lies in the incidental learning processes it would launch in the everyday lives of children as well as adults, across the nation. For SLS to contribute to literacy skill acquisition and improvement there is no better context than film song programmes that already exist in most regional languages.

Film songs pervade popular culture in India like no other music [Arora 1986]. Film song programmes command regular and high viewership. They attract people from all walks of life, including large numbers of school-going children and adults with developing or partially developed literacy skills. In everyday life many of them will not be able to afford reading material and/or be motivated enough to find time for reading. However, watching television and film song programmes have become an integral part of people's lives in today's rural and urban India and will continue to dominate popular culture. This report argues that SLS, when used in popular culture, can create entertainment which invites reading. The technique is simple and inexpensive and according to audience feedback, it promises to be generally popular.

The literature is replete with studies that have argued for the appropriate use of subtitling in language learning [Lambert 1986, Holobow et al 1984 and Vanderplank 1988, 1990]. Few however, have explored the possibility of merging subtitling with popular culture and not educational programmes specifically. Lambert (1986:199) suggests from experimental studies in language learning that adding English script to educational television programmes that normally have English dialogue only would help literacy. According to him, "For those with English as their only language but who are poor readers, poor spellers or illiterate in English, this simple addition could become a valuable aid over time, not only for improving literacy and reading abilities, but also for enhancing and enriching listeners' general comprehension of verbal information." A plethora of studies on closed-captioning,[1] which was originally implemented to aid the hearing impaired and deaf [Koskinen et al 1986, Carney and Verlinde 1987], have suggested how it could be useful in second-language acquisition, reading improvement [Koskinen et al 1985; Bean and Wilson 1989], litening comprehension development [Froehlich 1988], vocabularly enrichment [Neuman and Koskinen 1992], and even speaking performance [Borras and Lafayette 1994].

Context for Implementation

The proposed context for the implementation of SLS is the proliferation of vastly popular Indian language film song programmes on Doordarshan and other private television networks. For example, nationally, SLS could be used in programmes like 'Chitrahaar' and 'Rangoli' and statewise, in the different regional languages (e g, Gujarati 'Chitrageet' and so on). The rapidly increasing access to and viewership of TV is shown in Table. According to the NFDC internet home page (http://www.nfdcindia.com/doordarshan.html): "Doordarshan has an estimated viewership of 415 million people including both viewers having home TV sets and otherwise. In the last four years a number of commercial satellite channels have made an entry into Indian homes through various cable TV network. But Doordarshan has maintained more than 85 per cent of the total viewership." Furthermore, Doordarshan virtually monopolise viewership in rural areas where reading opportunities are lacking and literacy levels are low. And even in pockets where reading opportunities exist, it is found that people are more inclined to make time for television than they are for reading.

Literacy and Entertainment

Going by the findings, one thing that appropriate SLS is not likely to do is meet with any significant resistance from viewers whether they be literate or partially literate. (Guidelines on subtilting can be obtained from the author.) Both the categories of people will have something to gain, either in the form of entertainment or reading practice opportunity, or both. The two-fold rationale for the use of SLS is that it can:

- 'add' entertainment value to already popular song programmes; and as a consequence,
- contribute to the development of literacy skills, nationally.

Only when reading itself becomes a part and parcel of everyday life, without necessarily becoming a consciously laborious effort, will many semi- and neo-literates graduate to irreversible literacy. SLS of film song programmes does that by making literacy skill development a subliminal process through the association of text and song lyrics. This will subconsciously strengthen weak grapheme-phoneme bonds which are typically weak among the partially literate. Songs have a natural advantage over dialogue in that people know them by heart to varying degrees and repetition is an inherent aspect. This

This content downloaded from 128.32.65.83 on Fri, 24 Sep 2021 03:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

is crucial in enabling people with even extremely low levels of literacy to benefit from SLS. Furthermore, even the totally non-literate and especially pre-school children would benefit. Studies dating from the 1960s, many of which are referenced in Peters [1979:409] and more recently [Neuman and Koskinen 1993:383] have established that pre-schoolers and children can and do begin to recognise, read, and understand words by being exposed to text on television, without any formal instruction. Thus, there is strong reason to believe that SLS in song programmes would also contribute greatly to preparing the ground for a pre-schooler's future as a literate individual. It would complement her/his education outside the classroom and help even if s(he) is not enrolled in school.

Will the neo-literates read the SLS rather than watch the pictures? d'Ydewalle et al [1991:652] have demonstrated with an eye-movement registration method that people are naturally drawn to read subtitles, i e, if they're there and intelligible, they will be read. Commenting on teletext, Vanderplank [1988:280] argues that 'the presence of text does not reduce television watching to text reading – pictures, but that learners continue to try and match sound and text, and indeed try to monitor the correctness of their own match." But to derive any measurable benefit in language learning, he cautions, "subjects who watched subtitled programmes needed to take out language" [Vanderplank 1990:228]. In the context of songs it is argued that subjects would need to 'take out' song lyrics in order to benefit. This is likely to occur given the pervasive interest in film songs. The high motivation among Indians to memorise songs lyrics is well known, what with songs-games like 'Antakshari' having been around for generations and further popularised on television.

Will SLS benefit the already irreversibly literate? Yes, becaue the literate, as much as the neo-literate, will enjoy singing along or know the song lyrics. In viewing situations of poor sound, group and/or ambience noise, people would still be able to follow the songs. Therefore, it is crucial to not view SLS as an 'educational' initiative alone. Then the idea ceases to have any value for the literate and casting it as such, underplays the entertainment factor to discount its entertainment value is to also discount its literacy potential. In other words, SLS can succeed only because it makes song programmes more entertaining for the majority. Learning promises to be a by-product of enhanced entertainment and therein lies a central aspect of the real potential of this simple technique.

Having argued for SLS's potential, we now turn our attention to a series of pilot studies conducted in Gujarat to explore audience reactions to the idea. The findings of the present research confirm that people actually do read the lyrics to varying degrees and at different times during the song. If this should occur regularly during the plethora of song programmes on television, literacy skill development at the national level can be expected to be phenomenal.

Pilot Studies

The main objective of the pilot studies discussed here, conducted over three months, was to investigate the following questions: Do people read or at least try to read subtitles on their own, i e, without any prompting? Do they like the idea of SLS, and if so, what benefit do they see in it? What bothers viewers about SLS, either the idea itself and/or the format chosen? Should song programmes on Doordarshan include SLS? The objective was not to be able to comment conclusively on the degree to which people's reading abilities and or literacy skills could improve. While this remains a long-term objetive of the project, it will be explored only after arrangements can be made for sustained showing of SLSed programmes over a period of at least one year.

Eight sites were chosen for field testing with an idea to cover urban slums, rural villages, a school, and a general city area. In the order in which the testing was done, these were: (i) With three sweepers at IIM, Ahmedabad; (ii) Gulbai Tekra slum, Ahmedabad; (iii) Vastrapur slum, Ahmedabad; (iv) Viramgaon; (v) Gandhigram railway station, Ahmedbad; (vi) Godavigaon village; (vii) Aniyarigaon; (viii) Gram Panchayat Primary School, Vastrapur, Ahmedabad; and (ix) School for Deaf-Mutes, Navrangpura, Ahmedabad. In half the places there was no prior information given or arrangements made. In places where prior contact was established, the local organisers were simply told that some videos would be shown and audience feedback recorded on video. Neither the idea of showing song programmes or subtitles was shared beforehand. With some variation, the routine was as follows: Audience were shown one or two Gujarati songs from Chitrageet with subtitles. They were asked to identify the programme and whether it was any different from what Doordarshan showed them. Once the difference was established they were asked who liked the idea of writing below and then, who didn't. As appropriate, individuals were asked what hindrance or benefit was introduced by the subtitles. After this, subtitled Hindi film songs were shown and and audience was asked to sing along. The entire process was video taped and was shown to the audience.

There is absolutely no doubt that, at least in an experimental setting, people enthusiastically and overwhelmingly supported the idea of SLS. This, despite our conscious attempts to also seek negative responses. Leading questions were asked, such as, 'Who didn't like the subtitling?', or 'There must be someone here who didn't like it? At times one even tried to persuade the audience by saying, "You better tell us now if you didn't like it otherwise you'll be stuck with it forever since we will merely convey your comments to Doordarshan and so it is important to speak out your mind now." But as the response from each place will make clear, people generally responded positively. The rare resistance to the idea was not strong enough to make any serious impression on the others present. The reaction of the viewers are available in translated transcripts. The original responses are available on video. Leaving the original recording intact, an edited video of the meaningful responses has been made and may be viewed as complement to this report in which it is difficult to capture the enthusiasm generated for SLS.

It is amply clear from the responses that most people to whom SLS of song programmes was shown, appreciated the idea. Many could only articulated that they liked it but a significant number of people were able to provide a reason. Some found it entertaining because one can sing along, it's fun to do so; know everything that is being sung; learn (memorise) the song; write the song; clarify doubts about wording; and understand the dialogue in a play, serial, or picture.

Others found it educational because one could learn to read and learn to read faster

Table: Access to TV for All Age Groups, January 1997

(in million)

TV Viewers	Urban	Rural	Total
Access to TV at home	173	123	296
Watching at other places	+7	105	152
Total	220	228	448

Note: India has a population of 930m and 57.7m homes have television sets.
Source: http:/www.nfdcindia.com/view.html.

This content downloaded from 128.32.65.83 on Fri, 24 Sep 2021 03:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

as also practice reading; increase vocabularly and improve writing; and learn another language, especially when the unknown language and script are closely related to the known one (e g, Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, etc). Some even said it would help them find mistakes on TV and write to Doordarshan.

It was appreciated that SLS would be of service to special interest groups as it would benefit the hard of hearing or the deaf who suffer the humiliation of having to constantly ask someone for explanations. Similarly, SLS would also help where technical problems made for poor audio quality. Some felt that SLS would be socially beneficial because it could generate demand for literacy and encourage educational and/or literacy-linked interaction among parents, family members and children. It would benefit the partially literate by creating reading practice opportunities where time and/or interest for reading is lacking. Eventually it would enable one to read newspapers and letters.

It was pointed out on occasion that SLS should be used on Doordarshan (versus other channels since most people watch Doordarshan), it should be in Gujarati (even if it is not available in Hindi) and be available in villages (even if it is not available in the cities). At the School for Deaf-Mutes, it was learnt that SLS could be useful in several ways to the deaf-mutes. It could be useful in enriching their vocabulary, which tends to be limited. Those who have some hearing but are clinically deaf were the most excited students at the school, possibly because SLS gave the sounds better definition. While the benefits, which were often repeated, far outweigh the occasionally mentioned problems with SLS, it is nevertheless instructive to document the latter.

A woman felt that the writing was going away too fast but still felt that it should be there as it provided an opportunity to sing along. A man held that writing should not appear since a "song is for hearing and enjoying. Reading and writing is not going on." Another respondent opined that serials and pictures are a better context for SLS: unlike songs, where there is something to understand.

Only at Gandhigram railway station in Ahmedabad, did viewers voice a concern over the size of the letters. Someone rightly pointed out that the Gujarati letters were bigger than the writing in Hindi. The ensuing discussion on size led to the opinion among the by-standers that the Hindi size was more appropriate. However, this opinion was not consistently obtained and the size of the lettering was thought to be appropriate in both cases. When prompted to react to the fact that the writing might be cutting the picture, a respondent still supported SLS by saying, "when picutre is cut, it is only 10 per cent and we can manage with it because the writing should be there, the advantage is a lot". Was there a problem of double-vision caused by the introduction of writing? Many who were asked this question claimed that they could read and watch the picture at the same time. However, some did mention that it caused split attention, e g, "When someone reads the writing he/she can't see 'Chitrahaar' and if someone tries to watch 'Chitrahaar', he/she can't read".

Conclusion

Based on the field tests, this report strongly argues for implementing SLS in the context of songs. It should be implemented, not overtly branded as an 'educational' programme, but, marketed as a strategy that enhances people's entertainment. This would be necessary precisely because one would not wish to undermine its literacy potential. SLS promises to provide enormous social returns on relatively modest investment (especially when compared to the huge sums spent by individual districts and states, under the aegis of the National Literacy Mission, on Post-Literaey Campaigns and programmes). SLS's greatest potential lies in the simplicity of the idea. Intuitively it has been found to appeal to most people. And perhaps this is why at least a few children in every field test were found to be lip-reading the subtitles on their own, even before anybody's attention was explicitly drawn upon the writing. How many more were reading in their minds is anybody's guess but it is likely that semi- and neo-literates are likely to do so. It is a fair assumption that the person who has recently picked up a skill will have an innate drive to practise it, whether the skill is riding a bicycle or reading.

Whether SLS can be implemented on national and state television is a policy decision. With Prasar Bharati advocating greater local autonomy, Doordarshan Kendras are in a better position in the present climate to experiment with the idea. Certain abjections from policy-makers can be anticipated (i) film songs are an inappropriated (read 'vulgar') medium to promote literacy; (ii) video clips are often available at the last moment cutting into the lead time necessary for subtitling; (iii) song-programmes are revenue generating making decision-makers averse to experimentation; and finally; and (iv) who is to bear the cost of subtitling?

Admittedly, film songs are a mixed bag – ranging from the poetic to the risque. But subtitling would hardly change that. SLS or not, if the popular song programmes are shown, people will watch them. The question from a moral point of view is, thus, not whether we should film songs for literacy but whether we should be showing them at all? It is a contradiction to be doing the latter and objecting to its use for a social good.

The availability of song clips with enough lead time (typically 48 hrs is sufficient) is a management issue and can be enforced easily. But even if this is not desirable there is no harm in subtitling only the songs that do become available well in advance. In fact, it creates a good scenario for viewers to compare and contrast SLSed against unsubtitled songs and send in their feedback.

Regarding the concern that sponsors many not support the subtitling idea, the answer lies in viewer feedback. It has been argued based on the field tests that both the literate and the partially literate have something to gain from SLS. Knowing song lyrics and being able to sing along is a significant form of entertainment enhancement.

Finally, the cost of subtitling is a critical issue. During an experimental phase. SLS services for song programmes in any language are offered to Doordarshan kendras willing to test the idea. How do we make it sustainable? One way would be to offer the viewers, printed lyrics of all the songs in a programme for a nominal price. However, if the literacy gains prove to be substantial, national and international organisations involved in adult education and literacy development can be persuaded to take up the activity as a service to the television networks and Doordarshan production centres, similar to the National Captioning Institute's non-commercial services to the networks in the US [Jensema et al 1996]. The services can further expand to other suitable programmes, such as cartoons watched by many children, and not be restricted to film songs. Film songs, nevertheless, provides the most fertile ground for experimentation with SLS. And experiment we must, if there is to be progress.

Note

[This project would not have come this far without the help and support of several people and institutions. The project was based at the Indian

This content downloaded from
128.32.65.83 on Fri, 24 Sep 2021 03:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Institute of Management (IIM), in the Ravi J Matthai Centre for Educational Innovation. It was jointly funded by IIM and UNESCO. At UNESCO, New Delhi, we would especially like to thank Warren L Mellor for supporting the project and Ashok Sharma for his able co-ordination. B S Bhatia and S R Joshi at the Development and Educational Communication Unit of ISRO were among the strongest supporters of the idea. Ashok Joshi diligently transcribed the songs in Hindi and Gujarati and together with Prashant Nayak and Umesh Nayak of Jay Dub Compute, subtitled the songs. Hasmukh Sadhu, Sudhakar, Rekha Vyas and Nikku Bala Raju contributed in field testing. V C Dodiya and the entire staff of the audio-visual department provided unstinting technical support. Finally, we would like to thank the people who gathered voluntarily for the field tests and shared their thoughts frankly.]

1 Closed-captioning is an option implemented in technology whereby all television sets 13" or larger sold in the US after July 1993, have the ability to decode the captions, enabling viewers to switch the captions on or off. Closed-captioning is done for network cable and syndicated programming by The National Captioning Institute, a non-profit corporation. Daily, about 100 hours of captioned television programmes are shown on national television in the US [Jensema et al 1996: 285]. Closed-captioning is not necessarily in the same language although much of it is in the US: it is 'closed' because the viewer has control over whether it should be displayed or not. SLS is therefore open-captioning with emphasis on the text matching the audio word for word.

References

Arora, V N (1986): 'Popular Songs in Hindi Films', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 20/2, 143-66.

Bean, Rita M (1989): 'Using Closed Captioned Television to Teach Reading to Adults', *Reading Research and Instruction*, 28/4, 27-37.

Borras, Isabel and Robert C Lafayette (1994): 'Effects of Multimedia Courseware Subtitling on the Speaking Performance of College Students of French', *The Modern Language Journal*, 78/1, 61-75.

Carney, Edward and Ruth Verlinde (1987): 'Caption Decoders: Expanding Options for Hearing Impaired Children and Adults', *American Annals of the Deaf*, 132/2, 73-77.

d'Ydewalle, Gery, Coroline Praet, Karl Verfaillie and John Van Rensbergen (1991): 'Watching Subtitled Television', *Communication Research*, 18/5, 650-66.

Froehlich, Jurgen (1988): 'German Videos with German Subtitles: A New Approach to Listening Comprehension Development', *Die Unterrichtspraxis Teaching German*, 21/2, 199-203.

Holobow, N E, W E Lambert and L Sayegh (1984): 'Pairing Script and Dialogue: Combinations that Show Promise for Second or Foreign Language Learning', *Language Learning*, 34/4, 59-76.

Jensema, Carl, Ralph McCann and Scott Ramsey (1996): 'Closed-Captioned Television Presentation Speed and Vocabulary', *American Annals of the Deaf*, 141/4, 284-92.

Koskinen, Patricia S, Robert M Wilson and Carl J Jensema (1985): 'Closed-Captioned Television A New Tool for Reading Instruction', *Reading World*, 24/4, 1-7.

— (1986): 'Using Closed-Captioned Television in the Teaching of Reading to Deaf Students', *American Annals of the Deaf*, 13/1, 43-46.

Kothari, Brij (forthcoming): 'Same Language Subtitling: Integrating Post Literacy Development and Popular Culture on Television', *Media Technology and Human Resource Development*.

Lambert, Wallace E (1986): 'Dialogue in One Language, Sub-Titles in Another: Some Alternatives for Learning Languages' in Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, J A Fishman A Tabouret-Keller, M Clyne B Krishnamurti, and M Abdulaziz (eds), *The Fergusonian Impact*, Vol 1, *From Phonology to Society*.

Neuman, Susan B and Patricia Koskinen (1992): Captioned Television as Comprehensible Input: Effects of Incidental World Learning from Context for Language Minority Students', *Reading Research Quarterly*, 27/1 94-106.

— (1993): 'On Forests and Trees: A Response to Klinger', *Reading Research Quarterly*, 28/4, 383-85.

Peters, F J J (1979): 'Printed Messages in American Commercial Television and the Reading Teacher', *Journal of Reading*, 22/5, 408-15.

Vanderplank, Robert (1988): 'The Value of Teletext Sub-Titles in Language Learning', *ELT Journal* 42/4, 272-81.

— (1990): 'Paying Attention to the Words: Practical and Tehoretical Problems in Watching Television Programmes with Uni-Lingual (CEEFAX) Sub-Titles' *System*, 18/2, 221-A34.

PAKISTAN

The Intellectual Crisis

S Akbar Zaidi

The flight of intellectuals from Pakistan, by no means a recent phenomenon, has meant a diminishing of interventions from academia in political debates. The current series of crises in Pakistan may have something to do with this situation.

ONE of the numerous reasons why Pakistan has limped from one crisis to another, each often far worse than the one previous, is due to the quite dismal state and status of what, in any other country, would be called the intelligentsia or the intellectuals. In most countries, not just of the industrialised world, but notably, in Latin America, India and other south Asian countries, east Asia, and even in much of Africa, intellectuals have played a considerable role in shaping the course of the history of their lands. While in Pakistan too, many intellectuals did play a role in the past, this group has now increasingly become extinct.

One reason why intellectuals in Pakistan are fast becoming an extinct species, is the deterioration and demise of public sector institutions. In the years gone by, even up to the mid-1980s, Pakistan's universities could boast of a number of highly educated and competent scholars. Research and discussion used to take place, publications ere numerous and there was some atmosphere of debate and enquiry. This, as any one who has visited any public centre of 'excellence' or learning in recent years, particularly in the social sciences, will tell you, is no longer the case.

One educated elite, through which many intellectuals and social scientists have emerged, has reduced itself to the status of a social club, where anecdotes have replaced analysis and where discussion often quickly degenerates into gossip. This educated class, is interested primarily in its own very narrow interests and welfare. The rupee/dollar rate is of considerably more importance to them than any structural causes for Pakistan's existing predicament. In most countries, the elite has set up research institutes and funded think tanks; in Pakistan, our elite, and that too with considerable difficulty, comes up with some financial assistance for, at best, business schools and medical colleges. Schools of social science and research institutes where scholars can gather to persue discourse and study issues and ideas relevant to Pakistan's existence, just do not exist.

Privately funded institutions of higher learning have been set up in a large number of countries despite the presence of a strong and highly productive public sector in learning. These private sector institutions have had to compete with the best of what the government offered. Hence, it becomes even more tragic that in a country which has seen a very marked shift in the quality and number of public institutions of scholarship, the private sector has been unable to fill this void. The huge failure of Pakistan's educated and monied elite to develop institutions for scholarship must be a key reason why Pakistan barely survives from one crisis to another.

This content downloaded from 128.32.65.83 on Fri, 24 Sep 2021 03:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms