

## The concept of source text in audiovisual translation studies: Unexplored implications of “the initial point of view”

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Article abstract

Some audiovisual translation (AVT) scholars redefine the source text (ST) to encompass all modes in the audiovisual text and not just the verbal discourse, as in the still prevalent verbally driven ST notion. Focusing on subtitling, this conceptual paper explores the implications of a holistic redefinition of ST for AVT and TS at large. Two scholarly texts are analysed, both proposing holistic ST concepts but approaching text and translation from different initial points of view—the one starting from whole texts in context and the other from parts of text. The paper examines the scholars' argumentation regarding their holistic concepts and how it reflects their initial point of view, discussing its significance. The paper suggests, first, that both holistic concepts offer a theoretically more consistent approach to subtitling, compared to the verbally driven one, elucidating, for example, discussions on templates and machine translation in subtitling. Second, the paper argues that AVT provides a strong epistemological argument for a consistent initial whole-to-parts point of view for the study of translation as mediation. It calls for research within the multimodal framework to shift the primary focus from (ST) modes and meaning to the purpose and functions of whole texts in context.

# The concept of source text in audiovisual translation studies: Unexplored implications of “the initial point of view”

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## RÉSUMÉ

Certains spécialistes de la traduction audiovisuelle (TAV) redéfinissent le texte source (TS) de manière à englober tous les modes de l'audiovisuel, et non seulement le discours verbal, comme c'est le cas dans la conceptualisation dominante du TS. En se concentrant sur le sous-titrage, cet article conceptuel étudie les implications d'une redéfinition holistique du TS pour la TAV et pour la traductologie en général. Nous analysons deux textes scientifiques qui proposent tous les deux une approche holistique du TS, mais abordent le texte et la traduction à partir de points de départ différents – l'un partant de textes entiers dans leur contexte, et l'autre partant des parties de texte. Nous examinons dans chaque cas l'argumentation présentée, en montrant comment les définitions respectives de l'holistique reflètent un point de vue précis – que nous analysons à son tour. Nous suggérons, d'abord, que ces deux approches holistiques du TS offrent une approche théoriquement plus robuste du sous-titrage que la notion basée sur le discours verbal, en éclaircissant, par exemple, la discussion sur les fichiers modèles et la traduction automatique dans le sous-titrage. Ensuite, nous soutenons l'idée que la TAV fournit un argument épistémologiquement fort en faveur d'une approche procédant depuis le tout vers les parties composantes pour l'étude de la traduction en tant que médiation. Nous plaidons pour que les traductologues adoptant une approche multimodale déplacent leur focalisation principale des modes et la signification du TS (tel que traditionnellement défini) vers les buts et les fonctions des textes entiers, examinés dans leur contexte propre.

## ABSTRACT

Some audiovisual translation (AVT) scholars redefine the source text (ST) to encompass all modes in the audiovisual text and not just the verbal discourse, as in the still prevalent verbally driven ST notion. Focusing on subtitling, this conceptual paper explores the implications of a holistic redefinition of ST for AVT and TS at large. Two scholarly texts are analysed, both proposing holistic ST concepts but approaching text and translation from different initial points of view—the one starting from whole texts in context and the other from parts of text. The paper examines the scholars' argumentation regarding their holistic concepts and how it reflects their initial point of view, discussing its significance. The paper suggests, first, that both holistic concepts offer a theoretically more consistent approach to subtitling, compared to the verbally driven one, elucidating, for example, discussions on templates and machine translation in subtitling. Second, the paper argues that AVT provides a strong epistemological argument for a consistent initial whole-to-parts point of view for the study of translation as mediation. It calls for research within the multimodal framework to shift the primary focus from (ST) modes and meaning to the purpose and functions of whole texts in context.

**RESUMEN**

Algunos estudiosos de la Traducción Audiovisual (TAV) están redefiniendo el texto de partida (TP) para abarcar todas las modalidades en el texto audiovisual, y no solamente el discurso verbal como se suele hacer según la aún prevalente noción de TP. Al enfocarse en la subtitulación, este documento conceptual explora las implicaciones de una redefinición holística de TP para la TAV y para los estudios de traducción en general. Se analizan dos textos académicos, los cuales proponen conceptos holísticos de TP pero estudiando el texto y la traducción desde distintos puntos de vista iniciales – uno a partir de textos completos en contexto y el otro a partir de partes de texto. Examinamos los argumentos presentados en cada caso, mostrando cómo las respectivas definiciones de holismo reflejan un punto de vista específico, que analizamos sucesivamente. Sugerimos, en primer lugar, que ambos conceptos holísticos de TP ofrecen un acercamiento teórico más consistente a la subtitulación en comparación al verbal, esclareciendo, por ejemplo, discusiones sobre plantillas y traducción automática en subtitulación. Seguidamente, mantenemos que la TAV aporta un sólido argumento epistemológico para un punto de vista inicial integral consistente del todo a las partes para el estudio de la traducción como práctica mediadora, haciendo un llamado a la investigación dentro del marco multimodal a desplazar el centro de atención de las modalidades (TP) y el significado, hacia la finalidad y las funciones de textos completos en contexto.

**MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS/PALABRAS CLAVE**

traduction audiovisuelle, analyse conceptuelle, multimodalité, texte source, texte cible audiovisual translation, conceptual analysis, multimodality, source text, target text traducción audiovisual, análisis conceptual, multimodalidad, texto de partida, texto meta

**1. Introduction**

For decades, audiovisual translation (AVT) scholars have paid due attention to the audiovisual text, analyzing and classifying its complexities and implications for translation (see, e.g., Gottlieb 1994; Linde and Kay 1999; Chaume 2004; Gambier 2013). The growing interest in social semiotics and multimodality in both AVT and Translation Studies (TS) at large (see, e.g., Boria *et al.* 2020) has bolstered this endeavor. Indeed, AVT has been repeatedly said to challenge the very concept of translation (e.g., Delabastita 1989; Gambier 2006; Díaz Cintas and Remael 2021). Yet, despite the detailed attention to the audiovisual text itself, less has been said about what it might entail for the concept of “source text” (ST) and—even more importantly—what a potential redefinition of ST, in turn, might imply for translation as process and product as well as object of study (see also Adami and Ramos Pinto 2020: 78). After all, as a fundamental notion of TS, the concept of ST—and “target text” (TT)—explicitly connects the notion of “text” with translation.

This paper explores the concept of ST in AVT studies and, particularly, its fundamental implications for both theory and practice (Toury 2012: 102), focusing on subtitling. ST is one of the factors—and obviously a significant one—guiding the translator’s decision-making, along with aspects of source and target extra-textual context. Here, the term “ST” refers to “the text to be translated” (Palumbo 2009: 108), where the prospective TT is assumed to be its translation (Toury 1995); potential layers of original<sup>1</sup>, pivot language material or machine translated (MT) output used in the process are not considered here. The ST concept in focus refers to the way it covers *and* relates to the multiple semiotic resources, or modes—the visual, aural and

verbal modes—in the audiovisual text. From this perspective, there seem to be two ST concepts in use in the AVT literature. While today’s scholars generally acknowledge the importance of all semiotic resources in, for example, subtitling, most refer to the spoken or written verbal discourse as the actual ST, or, as in Díaz Cintas and Remael (2021: 66), “primary ST.” This conceptualization gives the other resources a secondary or no status as part of the entity to be translated. Some scholars, in turn, define ST as encompassing all modes, without giving fundamental primacy to any one mode. The former notion, which this paper calls “verbally driven,” originates from early AVT studies and continues to prevail. The latter, a more recent concept, I designate as “holistic,” which seems to be gradually taking hold. “Text” in this paper refers primarily to an audiovisual text, such as a film or television series, but may refer to any multimodally composed, communicative whole conceivable for translation. Translation, in turn, is examined here as a form of mediation on behalf of others, highlighting the translator’s intermediary role and their often initially external position vis-à-vis the communicative contexts involved.<sup>2</sup>

Exploring these notions of ST and their implications seems important for both theoretical and practical reasons. As discussed in Section 2, in academic investigations of AVT, even within the multimodal framework, the ST concept itself often remains implicit, unclear or its usage seems inconsistent. On the other hand, parallel to the rise of multimodality as an influential approach in academia, the subtitling industry is witnessing a contrary trend of returning to the times when subtitling was—for technical reasons—a primarily verbal endeavor. This retreat was initiated over two decades ago by the implementation of template files<sup>3</sup> in the private sector; with the introduction of machine translated subtitles for post-editing purposes (MTPE) this process of retreat has only accelerated. Template files and MT technology can certainly assist the industry (see, e.g., AVTE Machine Translation Manifesto 2021); however, clarifying basic notions—such as what it is that we are, should or could be translating—and considering their implications might help in applying these technologies in sustainable ways.

This paper therefore compares two scholarly contributions, Zabalbeascoa (2008) and Adami and Ramos Pinto (2020), both of which explicitly define ST in holistic terms, displaying, however, different approaches to text and translation: the one starts from the whole text in context and the other from parts of text. Using the two texts as examples, this paper applies the notion of “the initial point of view”—from whole to parts or *vice versa*—as a metaperspective. This metaperspective permits a new, closer look on the potential significance of holistic ST conceptualizations. This paper asks how the initial point of view is reflected in the two texts and, more importantly, what kind of implications may be drawn from it in each case, on the one hand, and compared to the verbally driven ST concept, on the other. Now that multimodality is increasingly acknowledged as part of all translation (Kaindl 2020), I hope to promote this conceptual discussion in both AVT and TS at large. I wish to draw attention to some unexplored implications of the audiovisual text not only for the concept of ST but also for the initial point of view on the text, its translation and analysis.

## 2. Background: Discussion on the ST concept in AVT studies

Though frequently used, the concept of ST seems to be missing from among the basic theoretical concepts addressed and considered relevant for AVT theory in the 1990s and 2000s, as outlined in Chaume (2018: 41-47). General accounts of AVT, including those featuring multimodality among the research frameworks, do not include “source text” or “source” in their subject indices (e.g., Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007; 2014; 2021; Pérez-González 2014a; 2019; Gambier and Ramos Pinto 2018). ST in AVT studies has tended to be treated as a given.

In the subtitling literature, ST refers traditionally to the verbal discourse in the original language(s). This notion continues to prevail and be used implicitly. The verbal discourse is considered “the text to be translated,” while the translator should “consider,” or “take into account,” the other resources. In its consistent manifestation, the traditional approach conceptualizes both ST and TT as well as the task in translation, in verbal terms: ST refers to the original-language’s verbal discourse, TT to subtitles and the task to translating the verbal spoken or written discourse. Thus, the verbal is given primacy in translation.<sup>4</sup> In practice, however, subtitlers make and are advised to make exceptions to prioritising the verbal (Titford 1982: 113; Tveit 2004: 41, 79). For example, in instances where the image carries the narrative, no subtitle might co-occur with the original dialogue, or it is as short as possible. Such solutions seem to contradict the task of translating the verbal.

Noteworthy regarding the verbally driven conceptualization is that, in that approach, theoretically speaking, we—as translators or scholars<sup>5</sup>—take the original verbal discourse as the starting point for our interpretation of meaning, style or function (or speech act). Then we widen our perspective to micro-level images and sounds and perhaps beyond to macro-AV-textual or to extra-textual aspects, such as culture, as if to check the validity of our initial interpretation. This conceptualization is apt to lead to an (implicit or explicit) assumption of local verbal-level semantic, stylistic or functional equivalence as the primary goal in subtitling (see, e.g., Díaz-Pérez 2020), which may then require “manipulation” due to audiovisual textual or extra-textual constraints. In subtitling, images and sounds appear as primarily restricting factors due to the time and space “constraints,” as literal visualizations of idioms, or as an occasional relief, due to redundant visualizations (see, e.g., O’Sullivan 2013: 11; Díaz Cintas and Remael 2021: 74-75). The point of view could be described as going from the parts to the whole—from parts of text to (the whole text and) the extra-textual context(s) as a whole. The ideal of micro-level equivalence inherent in this approach risks downplaying, even if not necessarily ignoring, whole aspects and their significance for translation.

### 2.1. *Struggling with the linguistic bias*

Subtitling research has been criticized for its excessive focus on the verbal, particularly in its early years. This paper argues that the linguistic bias is a necessary derivative of the verbally driven ST conceptualization and its parts-to-whole approach to text and translation, still prevalent in the literature. Today, it does not manifest itself so much as an insistence on verbal-level equivalence *per se*. Rather, it appears as an implicit premise in, for example, studies within the framework of Cultural Studies

that examine, for instance, characterization in subtitling. Such analyses tend to ignore the shifts in the intermodal relations in subtitling. They seem to be based on the straightforward assumption that the function of the verbal discourse in terms of characterization remains the same in the subtitled film as in the original language film (see, e.g., Díaz-Pérez 2020).

In the subtitling literature, while the concept of ST continues to be addressed mostly implicitly, it also tends to be used somewhat inconsistently, perhaps reflecting the ongoing transition in its conceptualization. For instance, if we turn to the most recent textbook on subtitling for current conceptualizations (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2021), we observe a few holistic notions<sup>6</sup> along with the still dominant verbally driven one, which the 2007 and 2014 editions used throughout.

Overall, AVT literature reveals varying and even contradictory views regarding what the audiovisual text entails—or does not entail—for the concept of ST or the task in subtitling. Some studies scrutinize all modes but refer to the verbal resources as ST (e.g., Taylor 2018: 41-42, 49-50; Desilla 2019: 253). Advocates of a multimodal—that is, holistic—ST concept may adhere to the verbally driven notion of subtitling as mediating spoken language (e.g., Pérez-González 2014b: 120-122). Obviously, audiovisual translators operate with language. However, if we consider the whole audiovisual text as the ST, is it consistent to define the task in AVT in verbal terms, as translating the original-spoken or written language? If not, how could the task be defined holistically and—more importantly—what difference does it make?

In light of the above, the ST concept and its implications await more focused and systematic investigation. Thus far, theoretical discussion on the subject appears rather isolated, somewhat cursory, and relatively recent. If the ST notion has traditionally been treated implicitly, it is perhaps unsurprising that studies addressing the notion explicitly tend to propose a holistic concept, questioning the linguistic bias of the verbally driven notion.

## 2.2. *Studies with a holistic ST concept*

To my knowledge, among the first scholars challenging the verbal ST notion in AVT studies would be Kaindl (1995), with his notion of opera as a “*multimediale Textgestalt*” [multimedial textual gestalt] and the text to be translated (39-41). Kaindl applies Snell-Hornby’s (1992) notion of “text as a gestalt” to opera as a text and skopos theory to opera surtitling. Virkkunen discusses the same AVT modality “from a holistic, multisemiotic and multimodal viewpoint” (2004: 96), proposing that the stage interpretation be considered the ST in opera surtitling (62, 95-96). Griesel (2005: 62) addresses theater surtitling as multidimensional translation, using Holz-Mänttari’s (1984) action theory and her concept of translation as “text design” (Holz-Mänttari 1993). According to Griesel, “the source text is the performance rather than the written text of the drama” (2005: 63). Moreover, she defines TT as the translated stage production where “the target language segment is the integral part component” (66).

All the ST (and TT) concepts above refer to the “whole,” that is, the textual gestalt, stage interpretation or performance. As examples of ST conceptualizations in stage translation, they are illustrative and relevant for all AVT. Even recorded audiovisual products are based on an interpretation of a script, which is then realized

as an audiovisual “performance.” Finally, regarding subtitling, Chuang (2006) discusses instances where the visual mode contributes functionally to subtitles, drawing holistic conclusions from this for both the concept of ST and TT, and AVT as a form of intersemiotic translation.

Whereas the aforementioned studies deal with specific AVT modalities, to my knowledge, the scholar to first challenge the verbally driven ST concept in both subtitling and revoicing in a focused manner was Zabalbeascoa (2008). While his article continues to be cited in AVT literature, little attention has been paid to his notions of ST, TT and translation. Section 4 analyzes Zabalbeascoa’s contribution in more detail.

Within the main bulk of AVT studies, it is only fairly recently, perhaps also due to the growing interest in multimodality that an increasing number of researchers have adopted an explicitly or implicitly holistic ST concept. Examples of multimodal approaches with explicit reconceptualizations would be Hirvonen and Tiittula (2010), who discuss ST within audiodescription. Kokkola (2014) and Kokkola and Ketola (2015) address sound as part of the audiovisual ST. Silvester (2018) proposes a multimodal ST and TT concept for subtitling, using multimodality and skopos theory as her theoretical framework. Dicerto (2018) suggests multimodality and pragmatics (relevance theory) as frameworks for text analysis in translation, proposing a multimodal ST concept. Dicerto addresses so-called static texts but claims her model applies even to audiovisual texts (2018: 19). Finally, Adami and Ramos Pinto (2020) explore the implications of social-semiotic multimodality (Hodge and Kress 1988; van Leeuwen 2005, Kress 2010) for fundamental TS concepts, such as ST, TT and translation, using examples from audiovisual texts and subtitling. My analysis also returns to their text.<sup>7</sup>

The scholars mentioned above reject the fundamental primacy of any one mode in meaning-making and it is indeed also one of the tenets of multimodality (Pérez-González 2014a: 182). Today, many researchers adopt the multimodal framework in their study. Many treat ST and even TT in holistic terms without being explicit about it (e.g., Guillot 2019) or without elaborating on the redefinition’s significance (e.g., Tuominen *et al.* 2018). The shift from a verbal to a multimodal ST notion in AVT studies seems, thus, to have been taking place somewhat quietly—as if not with a bang but a whimper. This paper aims to draw more attention to this conceptual shift and its implications, particularly to the relevance of the initial point of view in the approach to text and translation, and the implications thereof.

### 2.3. *The initial point of view on text and translation*

The debate around the point of view—from whole to parts or *vice versa*—in the approach to text and translation is an old debate and seems to have run along rather binary lines in TS (Kaindl 1995: 9-10). Having been a stronghold of linguistic approaches with its focus on language (e.g., Chaume 2018), AVT studies may be seen to have favored a parts-to-whole approach, as described in Section 2.

The notions of “whole” and “parts” originate from gestalt psychology and were applied to Translation Studies by Snell-Hornby (1988; 1992). According to gestalt theory, the relationship of these notions is such that “the whole is more than the sum of its parts, and an analysis of the parts cannot provide an understanding of the whole” (Snell-Hornby 1988: 29). Based on the notions of “whole” and “parts,” this

paper introduces the concept of “initial point of view.” As a concept, however, it takes a neutral stand on the initial direction in an approach. The concept offers a simple but useful metaperspective for investigating any theoretical or practical approach to text and translation as a mediating practice. It signifies whether an approach focuses first on whole aspects in the analysis, interpretation and redesigning of texts and their parts, or whether it starts with the parts aspects. An initial whole-to-parts approach would start from entire texts and their macro-aspects in their extra-textual contexts, while an initial parts-to-whole approach might first focus, for instance, on individual modes and their meaning (see, e.g., Dicerto 2018: 88-89).

A given point of view does not exclude, moreover, the consideration of both whole and parts aspects. What is crucial is the starting point—hence, the term *initial* point of view, that is, the point where actual analyses begin. The point of view also refers to the *relative weight* placed on the various guiding factors—the extra-textual situation and the macro- and micro-textual aspects—in the interpretation of purposes, functions, meanings or style in texts for *translational purposes*. The attribute “initial” further indicates that the point of view should not be understood in a binary, unidirectional manner. For instance, in an initial whole-to-parts approach, once a given task has been systematically framed by the extra-textual and macro-textual variables, whole and parts aspects are seen to interact in the interpretation and redesigning of texts. What a whole-to-parts approach would maintain, however, is that, in case of conflict, it is the text’s whole aspects in its extra-textual context that motivate micro-level decision-making in translation, the what, what for and how to translate.

Furthermore, I treat both concepts—“whole” and “part”—as relative notions. For instance, regarding the extra-textual context, the audiovisual text is viewed as a parts concept—for example, as part of a source or target system of audiovisual media and genres. On the other hand, the audiovisual text is considered a “whole” in relation to its “parts,” such as its medium and genre, the narrative elements—characters, setting, or plot—which are, again, whole concepts in terms of the modes that construct them. Regarding translation, from an initial whole-to-parts point of view, mode would therefore be subordinate to medium and genre, unlike in social semiotics that tends to foreground the notion of mode (see, e.g. Kress 2020; Adami 2023).

### 3. Research material and analytic approach

The two scholarly contributions chosen for the conceptual analysis are: 1) The book chapter by Zabalbeascoa (2008), “The nature of the audiovisual text and its parameters,” which appeared in *The didactics of audiovisual translation*, edited by Díaz Cintas; 2) The book chapter by Adami and Ramos Pinto (2020), “Meaning-(re)making in a world of untranslated signs,” published in *Translation and multimodality: Beyond words*, and edited by Boria *et al.*

Zabalbeascoa (2008) examines the dynamic relationship between the semiotic sign systems in different text types and draws conclusions for ST, TT, and the task in AVT. Adami and Ramos Pinto (2020) call for interdisciplinary work between multimodal studies and TS, urging TS to reconceptualize the notions of “text,” “context,” “source text” and “target text,” as well as “equivalence” and “translation” in multimodal terms (78).

Obviously, no scholar works in a vacuum, and many will have suggested one or more ideas addressed in what follows. The reason for choosing these particular two texts is, first, that their authors explicate their holistic ST concept and elaborate on its relevance. The second and even more important reason is that, while both propose a similar holistic ST concept, their initial point of view is different, opening an opportunity to consider its significance. The purpose is thus not to present a systematic review or classification of holistic ST conceptualizations in the AVT literature, neither a new conceptualization. Instead, the literature was chosen purposefully, with the idea of examining, by way of example, potential similarities and differences in two holistic ST conceptualizations with different initial points of view, with the intent to discuss their implications.

The analysis was conducted by close reading, used widely in conceptual research. Involving interpretation, the analysis is presented in such a way that it is “inter-subjectively traceable and provable” (Laiho 2021: 20). Conceptual analysis aims not only to clarify a concept’s usage and differentiate between potential different usages but also explores “what could be” instead of simply “what is” (Kenway and Fahey 2009: 77), thus offering potentially new insights into existing assumptions.

This analysis focuses on the following questions:

- 1) How do the scholars define their holistic ST concept?
- 2) How do they argue for it?
- 3) What is their underlying concept of translation?
- 4) How do they define TT?
- 5) What is the initial point of view in their approach to text and translation and how is it reflected in their texts?

The first four questions are discussed in three separate subsections, question 1) in Subsection 4.1., question 2) in Subsection 4.2. and questions 3) and 4) jointly in Subsection 4.3. These questions serve as operational questions, providing material for assessing the fifth question concerning the initial point of view, addressed at the end of Subsections 4.2. and 4.3.

#### **4. Analysis: Holistic ST concepts and their initial point of view**

Throughout the analysis, I use direct citations from the scholars’ texts in so far as they relate to the analysis questions, in order to give the reader first-hand material. As all of the questions are intertwined, the same citations may be addressed more than once, although from different angles. I compare the two holistic approaches, where applicable, with the verbally driven approach, as well as with each other.

I wish to point out, again, that the verbs that I use, such as “highlight” or “foreground,” in reference to whole or parts aspects do not necessarily mean that the scholars would limit their consideration to either whole or parts aspects. What they do signify, however, is a different emphasis given by the authors on macro- and micro-level source and target factors in determining not only what it is that we are supposed to translate but also what for and how.

#### 4.1. Features of a holistic ST concept

Zabalbeascoa (2008)<sup>8</sup> defines text as “any instance of communication,” and an audiovisual text as “a communication act involving sounds and images” (21). He asks whether the various sign systems “run along parallel lines, almost independently,” or whether “they intertwine in a complex mesh that cannot be undone without destroying the essence of the message or without compromising intended textuality” (22). He then proposes that in a “prototypical audiovisual screen text,” such as a feature film, all sign systems acquire “the same degree of importance” (24) and are “essentially complementary” (25). More specifically, the signs “all add up and combine with each other” and “may be regarded as inseparable for a fully satisfactory communication event” (25). In discussing the semiotics of audiovisual communication, such as “the audiovisual narrative techniques,” Zabalbeascoa notes that “[e]ach of these aspects may be intended to carry meaning or to help make the meaning of the words and script more explicit or dynamic” (33). He contests the idea that “the text being translated is restricted to the words only [...] whereby loyalty is due ultimately to the source language script” (33).

In addition, Zabalbeascoa (2008) contends that even images cannot be regarded as “universal and unalterable” but may be interpreted in different ways because of individual and sociocultural differences (33). In his conclusion, he proposes that non-verbal items be considered “part of a text rather than part of its context” (37). He also explicitly refers to the audiovisual text as ST (34, Figure 5 in the cited text).

Adami and Ramos Pinto (2020) define “text” as “any multimodally composed meaningful whole” (73). They conceive all semiotic resources, or modes, as socially and culturally shaped signs that “do not make meaning universally” (72). Signs, including non-verbal signs, “are not only denotational but also affective, identity shaping, and constructing of register, tone and style, mood and modality, as well as cohesion and coherence within the overall representation” (74). They “interact with all others present,” reflecting the idea of the “complementarity of resources” (74). Translation needs “to consider all modes and the meanings they promote (on their own and in relation to other modes)” (77), an idea that may be seen to reject the fundamental primacy of any one resource in translation.

In comparison, while the verbally driven approach does not rule out the influence of non-verbal resources, theoretically speaking, “translating the verbal” while “taking into account” the images and sounds tends to consider non-verbal resources exclusively a) in terms of their relevance to the verbal resources as the actual text to be translated, and b) primarily as restricting or occasional relief factors, giving them a secondary or no status in translation. It also foregrounds their *local* consideration regarding the original local verbal resources. In effect, the verbally driven ST concept readily accommodates the idea that modes run primarily, even if not solely, parallel. In concrete terms, this means that the subtitler condenses the verbal discourse within the temporal and spatial constraints, and the *viewer* combines the meanings of the various modes. In contrast, the idea of complementarity in a holistic ST conceptualization—perhaps even more pronounced in Zabalbeascoa (2008)—brings to the fore the *overall* constitutive role of all modes in the construction of meaning, style and textuality not only in the translated audiovisual text, such as a subtitled film, but also in the design of its subtitles.

Both texts also make the point that even visuals cannot be considered universal. Although one might think that the need to actually mediate such instances in subtitled audiovisual narration might be rather sporadic, or prompted by audiovisual content with a pronounced cultural-communicative function, their *de facto* occurrence may, indeed, be considered an argument for a holistic ST concept, as also proposed by Chuang (2006). In contrast, within the verbally driven conceptualization, a simple example of mediating non-verbal visual signs in instances with no concurrent verbal discourse would constitute an exception to the set task of translating the verbal. Both Zabalbeascoa's and Adami and Ramos Pinto's holistic ST conceptualizations readily accommodate such mediation, making the holistic ST concept theoretically more consistent.

While the two texts propose similar features for a holistic ST concept—the complementarity of signs, non-primacy of the verbal, and the non-universality of all signs—their emphases seem different. This becomes more apparent in their argumentation and underlying concept of translation.

#### 4.2. Arguments for a holistic ST concept

Zabalbeascoa (2008) argues for a holistic ST concept from a “textual and communicative point of view” (24). An audiovisual text tells a story, has “an author” and a “viewer” whose “perception and understanding” of texts is influenced by the “cultural background, which includes the texts we have been exposed to” (21-22). This culturally embedded textual and communicative stance leads him to address conditions for textuality, such as cohesion and coherence, intentionality, and “complying with situationality conditions,” whereby textuality is achieved by both verbal and nonverbal means (22) and “intentions and meanings are conveyed (and effects produced) through both audio and visual channels” (29). All sign systems “*add up* and combine with each other” and “may be regarded as inseparable for a fully satisfactory *communication event*” (25, emphasis added). They “are intended to carry meaning or to help make the meaning of the words and *script* more explicit or dynamic” (33, emphasis added).

Zabalbeascoa's (2008) “textual and communicative point of view” gives priority to macro-level aspects, such as the text itself, the story and its author(s), intentions and meanings in given “situationality conditions” (22). The focus on textuality, script, and the communication event, as well as the idea of signs “adding up” indicate a global, cumulative complementarity of signs in the construction of the audiovisual narrative as a whole. He foregrounds relationships among sign systems—vs. sign systems themselves and their meanings—and the way they together synthesize the whole *audiovisual text*. Put differently, meaning(s)—produced together by the various sign systems—are considered *primarily* in terms of higher-level aspects, such as the audiovisual narrative and its intended functions and effects in any text and communicative situation.

Adami and Ramos Pinto (2020) base their critique of a verbally driven ST concept on the social-semiotic tenet that “the meaning potentials of any given semiotic resource result from the history of its past uses in given social groups.” Therefore, they challenge the idea of the universality of non-verbal resources and their meaning-making practices, making this their main argument (72-73). Similar to Zabalbeascoa (2008),<sup>9</sup> they question the tendency of scholars to give modes other than the verbal “a

contextualising role” (Adami and Ramos Pinto 2020: 71). In their words, “nonverbal resources have remained reductively considered only as contextual elements” (78). Instead of then treating nonverbal resources “only as contextual elements” in what they call the “context approach,” Adami and Ramos Pinto (2020) propose a multi-modal “co-text approach.” The co-text approach “considers all resources co-occurring with writing or speech as signifying elements that make meaning on their own and in relation to each other” (73-74). In contrast to its linguistic definition, “co-text” means “signs (*in any mode and their combinations*) co-occurring with those that are the momentary focus of attention in a text” (73, emphasis added).

Furthermore, regarding complementarity, Adami and Ramos Pinto (2020) maintain that all semiotic resources “interact with all others *present*” (77). Therefore, translation should consider “all resources *co-occurring* with writing/speech as signs in their own right that might present *challenges to* (different) *viewers*” (77, emphasis added). These formulations seem to put the *primary* focus on modes themselves, on instances of (multimodal) meaning or meaning-making practices, and their *accessibility*. This interpretation is supported by their idea of co-text: “signs (*in any mode and their combinations*) *co-occurring* with those that are the *momentary focus* of attention in a text” (73) suggests a focus on local meanings, that is, parts. While a focus on parts does not, as such, entail a certain initial point of view on a text’s translation, the scholars’ concept of translation and treatment of “context,” addressed next, seems to support such a conclusion.

#### 4.3. *The concept of translation and TT*

Zabalbeascoa (2008) proposes that AVT “owes its first loyalty to the creation of a ‘new’ script in a different language that can create meaningful relationships [...] with the pictures and sounds that also make their contribution to the ‘new’ AV text, so that it is as coherent and relevant as possible to the new audience” (33, emphasis added). The “new’ AV text” is conceptualized as the TT (Figure 4, page 34 in the cited text). More concretely, the translator’s task is to be aware of “the most important and relevant items (verbal or otherwise) in the *meaning(s) and function(s)* of the (AV) *source text* [...] so as to make informed, *context-sensitive, function-oriented, audiovisually-coherent decisions* as to the words that will be the most appropriate for the task at hand” (33-34, emphasis added).

Compared to the verbally driven conceptualization of subtitling—rendering the original local dialogue within the local temporal and spatial constraints—Zabalbeascoa’s (2008) conceptualization, again, foregrounds whole aspects: a) the functionality of the “new’ script” as part of the *translated audiovisual text*, that is, the entire TT, and b) the “coherence and relevance” of the TT as a whole in its *target context*. On the micro-level, instead of laying the focus on local verbal or multimodal parts—the subtitle and the concurrent original-language dialogue and images and sounds—a whole-to-parts approach puts the focus on the design of *each subtitle as part of the whole subtitled audiovisual text*. Zabalbeascoa’s formulations explicate the cumulative constitutive role of all sign systems in the creation of the “new’ script” and the “new’ audiovisual text.” This, in turn, highlights change as part of all translation (Tymoczko 2004) and certainly of AVT—subtitling, in particular—with its dynamic interplay of sign systems in both ST and TT.

Turning now to Adami and Ramos Pinto's (2020) concept of translation, for them, "...[the multimodal nature of communication] opens the question on whether, as socioculturally shaped resources, modes other than writing and speech might need to be translated and how that could be achieved" (78). For the authors, "the issue of what is shared/non-shared in any form of expression achieves primary significance" (75). Instead of linguistic transfer, they conceive of translation as the transfer, or transposition—the authors' preferred term, borrowed from Kress (2020)—of "meaning in context," whereby meaning is multimodally constituted (Adami and Ramos Pinto 2020: 78) and "context" refers strictly to extra-textual factors in the social semiotic environment (73). The authors urge translators to make "holistic multimodal choices" regarding "what needs to be translated, from which modal resource, into which other modal resource, on the basis of an assessment of the target audience's semiotic knowledge in all modes," that is, knowledge of "how resources are used to make meaning at all levels" (74-75). Regarding the purpose of this task, the authors propose that "equivalence is sought for verbal and nonverbal modes alike as well as the meanings erected through intermodal relations" (78). After this rather definitive formulation of the purpose of translation—the search for equivalence for all modes based on the audience's assumed semiotic knowledge—the authors refer to the need to also consider "aesthetics, authorship, prestige and function of multimodal texts" (78), and later point out that "the (non-) translation of nonverbal resources will also be mediated by contextual factors" (83).

Regarding the TT, this is mentioned once in Adami and Ramos Pinto (2020), on page 78, where they state that the multimodal text "leads us to revisit fundamental concepts," listing "target text" as one of them. They do not elaborate on this concept. It seems reasonable to assume, however, that, as any multimodal text, TT would equally refer to "a multimodally composed whole" (73) and not just the target verbal resources in the translated text. Moreover, besides instances of assumed non-accessible semiotic meanings or practices, Adami and Ramos Pinto (2020) do not address the impact or non-impact of their multimodal ST concept and the complementarity of signs on (audiovisual) translation overall.

Noteworthy in Adami and Ramos Pinto's (2020) formulations is their concept of translation as the transfer of (multimodal) "meaning in context" vs. whole texts in context, as in Zabalbeascoa (2008). The assessment of the audience's knowledge of semiotic practices is considered of primary significance, as an initial criterion for translating non-verbal resources or intermodal meanings, with an initial goal of equivalence.<sup>10</sup> This conceptualization foregrounds the importance of understanding instances of semiotic meaning, that is, the *what* to translate over *what for*, suggesting not only an initial parts-to-whole point of view but also a focus on ST and ST *meanings over functions and TT purposes*. The difference from the verbally driven approach would be that, instead of starting from verbal parts and their co-occurring nonverbal resources, the "co-text approach" starts from multimodal parts—the momentary focus of attention and its co-occurring signs—postulating their equivalence as the initial goal in translation, which may then be potentially modified by macro-level textual factors or further "contextual factors" besides the target audience.

Yet another point addressed here regarding point of view in Adami and Ramos Pinto (2020) involves the very notions of "co-text approach" as opposed to "context approach." Notably, their flexible reconceptualization of "co-text" avoids, at least in

theory, the linguistic bias by not assigning nonverbal resources the consistent role of co-text, something to be considered in addition; depending on “the momentary focus of attention,” co-text may refer to verbal resources or a combination of verbal and other resources. On the other hand, by juxtaposing “co-text approach” with the very term “context approach”—which they discard as an approach treating nonverbal resources as “only contextual elements”—the authors seem to, in effect, treat “context” as secondary, a valuation not detectable in Zabalbeascoa (2008).

Furthermore, as indicated by the idea of “the momentary focus of attention” as well as the words “co-occur” and, indeed, “co-text,” we are dealing with micro-level analytical tools, with a primary focus on ST modes and their interplay in meaning-making. While micro-level analysis is important, together with the proposed notions of translation and equivalence, the co-text approach seems to postulate two things: firstly, that it is possible and useful—for translational purposes—to determine the meaning and the initial hierarchical placement of local ST signs, that is, what the signs of our momentary focus of attention are and which signs would be assigned the role of co-text; secondly, that it is possible and useful to determine the equivalence of local signs as the goal in translation *before* a) considering their place in both the source text and the prospective target text as a whole in their respective contexts, and b) weighing the impact of the various factors on translation decisions. In fact, the initial parts-to-whole approach seems contradictory with what Adami and Ramos Pinto (2020) acknowledge elsewhere in their text, that, for example, different media affect meaning-making (85)—an idea that would be more in line with an initial whole-to-parts approach.

### 5. Discussion: Some unexplored implications

Both holistic ST concepts analyzed above reject the fundamental primacy of verbal resources in meaning-making and translation, making the point that even non-verbal resources, such as images, cannot be considered universal as their main or one of their arguments. When the whole audiovisual text is conceptualized as ST, “the text to be translated,” mediating nonverbal signs no longer seems like a contradiction of the definition of ST or the task in translation. Thus, a holistic ST concept seems theoretically more consistent than the verbally driven one.

Both texts also point at the complementarity of semiotic resources in meaning-making and translation. On this point, Adami and Ramos Pinto (2020) seem to focus on semiotic resources as socioculturally shaped meaning-making practices and their local complementarity, and on the importance of translating non-shared meaning at all semiotic levels. Zabalbeascoa’s (2008) conceptualization, in turn, clearly incorporates the idea of both local and global complementarity of signs as well as their joint and cumulative role in the construction of whole texts and their translations. In contrast to both holistic conceptualizations, the verbally driven ST concept allows more readily for the conceptualization of resources as primarily running parallel, with non-verbal signs having a mainly restrictive, or a rather sporadic, local impact on the target verbal. This conception prevails in, for instance, MT research in subtitling (see, e.g., Koponen *et al.* 2020: 166).

Regarding point of view, the two texts display more distinct differences. Zabalbeascoa (2008) takes whole audiovisual texts and their functions in their

communicative situation as the starting point for translation. He appears to take a consistent initial whole-to-parts point of view, departing markedly from the verbally driven approach in AVT. Adami and Ramos Pinto (2020), in turn, seem to adopt an initial parts-to-whole approach. Perhaps based on the social-semiotic and multimodality studies' focus on *meaning* and *modes* vs. whole texts, they approach multimodal and audiovisual *translation* in similar terms, as the transfer—or transposition—of (multimodal) meaning in context (see also Adami 2023). Based on the target audience's assumed semiotic knowledge, they propose the search for equivalence at all semiotic levels as the initial goal in translation, which might then be modified by further textual or extra-textual factors. As such, their point of view is akin to verbally driven conceptualizations, “modes” simply replacing “language” as a starting point.

Within the paper's scope, I propose three aspects for further consideration: 1) theoretical implications of holistic conceptualizations *per se* for translation, specifically subtitling, 2) implications for the application of templates and MT in subtitling, and 3) implications of the audiovisual text as a multimodal text for the initial point of view in studying (audiovisual) translation.

Regarding the first aspect, when both ST and TT are conceived holistically, instead of restricting factors, non-verbal modes become resources in translation, as do the verbal ones. This idea seems particularly pronounced in Zabalbeascoa's (2008) approach. Similarly, the coherence of target verbal resources with non-verbal ones, or their readability and acceptability, become features of TT functionality, and cease to appear as compromising the underlying ideal of verbal equivalence. Such linguistically biased assumptions tend to give verbal-level change a rather negative ring, something of an inevitable “occupational hazard” (Bogucki 2004: 72).<sup>11</sup> A holistic ST concept underscores the constitutive role of all modes in meaning-making and translation, entailing an epistemological shift in translation, as also Adami and Ramos Pinto rightly point out (2020: 74).

Regarding ST as a guiding factor, this means that, together with the original verbal resources, nonverbal resources contribute to the function, meaning, and style of subtitles *overall*. Again, this becomes particularly apparent in Zabalbeascoa (2008). While in many audiovisual texts the original verbal resources might seem quantitatively dominant, from a holistic ST and TT perspective they would not be considered, by default, qualitatively dominant regarding subtitle function, meaning, or style.

Moreover, a holistic ST concept, rejecting the primacy of the verbal in translation, seems more consistent with the *de facto* changing role of semiotic resources in conveying the audiovisual narrative, acknowledged by scholars early on as a factor affecting translation (Titford 1982; Remael 2001). Regarding TT, a holistic conceptualization—notably the whole-to-parts approach—highlights the dynamics of all resources *also in the translated audiovisual text*, acknowledging more readily local-level change in both verbal meanings *and* intermodal functions and meanings in translation.

As a second aspect for consideration, a holistic ST—and TT—concept, particularly the one with an initial whole-to-parts point of view, challenges the theoretical grounds for applying templates and MTPE in subtitling, elucidating the problems found in their usage (see, e.g., Oziemblewska and Szarkowska 2020; Hagström and Pedersen 2022). Both workflows tend to reduce subtitling to a primarily (written) verbal endeavor with the goal of local verbal equivalence. They direct the translator's

attention to the local (written) verbal dialogue template and downplay the significance or even hinder the consideration of all audiovisual resources together—locally, let alone globally. Obviously, the multimodal nature of ST, TT, and AVT calls for a more differentiated application of both templates and MTPE. It accentuates the need to identify genres, domains, and language pairs where the complementarity of resources and the role of holistic interpretation on the one hand, and *the multimodal textuality requirements of subtitled audiovisual content* on the other, might be less pronounced. Regarding MT, it provides weighty theoretical arguments in support of AVTE's (2021) concept of the augmented translator where the translator decides *if* and *how* they use MT.

As a third consideration, I address the implications of the initial point of view in the approach to text, its translation, and analysis. The initial point of view seems important specifically for TS, which studies mediation on behalf of several actors other than the translator themselves, underscoring the primacy of context and, thus, whole texts (cf. multimodality studies).<sup>12</sup> Approaches with different foci might consider similar influencing factors as relevant in translation but emphasize their impact differently. Indeed, a parts-to-whole approach may even arrest our focus on the meaning of ST parts and their equivalent transfer, forestalling further questioning. At worst, then, local—verbal or multimodal—equivalence as an ideal provides a rather static starting point, accommodating and maintaining mechanistic and simplistic conceptualizations of subtitling and all translation.

An initial whole-to-parts approach, in turn, brings attention to bear on the complexity of whole texts and their translation process in their context. It more readily acknowledges change—along with similarity—in intermodal functions and meanings in redesigning a coherent “new” audiovisual text, relevant for the new situation. Thus, an initial whole-to-parts approach represents yet another epistemological shift vis-à-vis the verbally driven approach in AVT: the equivalence of text parts, such as local verbal or multimodal meanings or functions, is assigned a subordinate even if not irrelevant role.

Epistemologically, an initial whole-to-parts approach postulates two things. First, it is not possible—for translational purposes—to decide on the function, meaning, or style of local mono- or multimodal resources in the source audiovisual text *before* considering their function in the *whole text* in its source context; second, it is not possible nor useful to determine which local source resources should be mediated and how (e.g., what meaning potentials, including style, to choose, and whether their equivalence would be the goal in translation) *before* considering their function in the *target audiovisual text* and its purpose in its target context (cf. functional theories in, e.g., Nord 1997, or complexity thinking in Marais and Meylaerts 2019). As such, a whole-to-parts approach brings to the fore the role of immersion into both the audiovisual narrative *and* its translation process on the one hand, and the design character of all translation (Holz-Mänttari 1993) on the other, highlighting the translator's agency and competences. In subtitling, instead of condensing the verbal, the task might be defined as designing a segmented, written “new” script that is coherent with the audiovisual text in its new context in terms of function, rhythm, content, cohesion and style, and serves its purpose as a subtitled version of the source audiovisual text.

Studies examining, for example, characterization or interpersonal relations in subtitled audiovisual products are not necessarily able to gauge their research topic

adequately if they rely on a verbal ST concept and focus their comparisons on the micro-level (see, e.g., Díaz-Pérez 2020). The verbal ST concept postulates functional constancy between the spoken and written verbal resources regarding, for instance, characterization. This tends to lead to a comparison of linguistic features in subtitles with those in the ST spoken verbal resources and to the drawing of conclusions from this for characterization. The “neglect of macro-perspectives in approaching subtitle text” and the failure to systematically examine subtitles as “a text genre in its own right” (Guillot 2019: 38-40), including *the subtitled audiovisual text as a product in its own right* is—this paper argues—an inevitable result of a verbally driven ST concept and a parts-to-whole approach to text and translation.

Similarly, analysis models with a parts-to-whole point of view, such as the multimodal transcription analysis (Baldry and Thibault 2006), cannot account for the role of immersion in AVT, treating subtitling as a solely analytical endeavor with a focus on ST local meanings (see, e.g., Taylor 2018: 49). While the multimodal framework is a welcome asset, its analytical tools might be improved to better cater for the study of translation—as opposed to multimodality studies—as involving whole texts in contexts, and both similarity and change. Gauging change and the role of immersion in AVT more systematically could benefit from a prospective rather than retrospective, equivalence-oriented approach that tends to cast change in a suspicious light, and make equivalent micro-level solutions seem, by default, acceptable.

A prospective, initial whole-to-parts approach could enable scholars to better distinguish between motivated and unmotivated change in translated (subtitled) audiovisual texts. Instead of (ST) modes and (micro-level) meaning and their transfer “in context,” the initial focus regarding the text itself could more consistently be steered to medial and generic functions, and to the narrative elements and *their* dynamic, multimodal construction in both the ST and TT. Equally importantly, an initial whole-to-parts approach highlights the need to take TT contextual factors—such as the context of purpose, that is, whether the TT is supposed to offer a subtitled or a dubbed viewing experience—seriously, as primary guiding factors in AVT that necessarily contribute to TTs, their multimodal textuality, and the function, meaning and style of the ‘new’ script.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper’s main interest lies in showing how the initial point of view manifests itself in the approach to texts and highlighting its relevance for translation. I hope to have illustrated how not merely the ST concept but also the initial point of view affects what variables we consider in translation and, particularly, how we weight the myriad source and target factors involved. Given the multiple semiotic resources and their dynamic interplay in both the original and the translated audiovisual text in function and meaning-making, AVT would seem to cast light onto this old debate. It provides a strong epistemological argument for an initial whole-to-parts approach to text and translation, making local-level (verbal or multimodal) meaning equivalence—still prevalent in studies—seem reductive as a primary goal. An initial whole-to-parts approach makes visible the complexity of whole texts, their translation process and the immersive design character of translation involving both similarity and change. Indeed, regarding subtitling, a whole-to-parts point of view might explain a fair

amount of the verbal-level change in subtitles that has puzzled research over the past decades. It provides solid theoretical support for using MT output primarily as an additional resource for subtitlers. Finally, this approach challenges research within the multimodal framework in AVT and TS: it highlights the need to consider the intermediary aspect of translation more systematically. This, again, stresses the need to shift the primary focus from (*ST*) *modes* and *meaning* (what) to *whole texts* and their *purpose* and *functions* (what for and how), calling for a more consistent and weighted consideration of target extra-textual and macro-textual factors in future research.

#### NOTES

1. For example, multiple script versions or a script based on a novel.
2. See Gambier and Lautenbacher (2024) for a problematization of the concepts of “text” and “context.” In this paper, “context” refers primarily to the sociocultural, actional and communicative situations of ST and TT, to the extent that this information is accessible to or inferable by the translator. Eventually, in translation—in the interpretation of the ST and redesigning of the TT—“context” is seen to intertwine with the “text.” Moreover, “source” and “target” should not be understood in a dichotomous sense.
3. Georgakopoulou (2003: 220) defines a template file as “a subtitle file consisting of the spotted subtitles of a film done in the SL [Source Language], usually English, [...] which is then translated into as many languages as necessary.”
4. See Guillot (2019: 33) for definitions of subtitles, which may all be considered verbally driven in the described sense.
5. In practice, scholars and practitioners may view translation, and act when translating, in a variety of ways.
6. For instance, referring to Reiss (1971/2000), Díaz Cintas and Remael (2021: 4) state: “One of the early scholars to discuss *the multimodal nature of the source text* (ST)...” (emphasis added).
7. See also Ramos Pinto and Adami (2020).
8. Zabalbeascoa (2008) builds on the work by, e.g., Delabastita (1989), Chaume (2000) and Sokoli (2000).
9. Adami and Ramos Pinto (2020) do not refer to Zabalbeascoa (2008).
10. Adami and Ramos Pinto (2020) are aware of the reservations regarding the notion of “equivalence” (78), making a note that it should not be framed “in terms of faithfulness” (83).
11. The linguistically biased notion of AVT as “constrained” translation, coined by Titford (1982) and expanded by Mayoral *et al.* (1988), has been challenged by many scholars (e.g., Zabalbeascoa 2008: 33). Nonetheless, constraints in AVT literature continue to be referred to in the sense of “restrictions” to translating the verbal (e.g., Chaume 2018: 43-45).
12. See Kaindl (2020: 54-55) for a comparison of functional theories, specifically Holz-Mänttari’s action theory, with social semiotics and multimodality studies.

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