Subtitling wit: the case of *Ridicule*

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Abstract

Subtitled films are often dismissed as unsatisfactory on the grounds that they contain, at best, inaccuracies, ellipses and omissions, or at worst, that they are misleading, distracting and discouraging foreign spectators. More generally, subtitles are often associated with translation loss and untranslatability. This article uses the case of the English version of a successful French period film, *Ridicule* (Leconte, 1996), to raise a number of issues relating to subtitling. Beyond the specific problems encountered in this special type of translation and the various strategies adopted, it considers the common assumptions of the foreign public and critics, and analyses, through specific examples, to what extent these are founded. The examples chosen focus on style, register, play on words, humour and cultural references.

In the 1990s, French cinema produced around 150 films per year. In 1996, *Ridicule* was one of 104 French films released in France and amongst the 20 which were exported to the USA and UK, despite the acknowledged crisis of international foreign language films. Few of the French films recently distributed in anglophone countries have been shown outside independent art cinemas, and hardly any have been issued in dubbed form. The preference for subtitling against dubbing in the Anglo-American culture should, however, be taken with caution, as there are indications that subtitles are frequently judged to represent a barrier to the success of foreign films, or at least, that they condition a number of assumptions and some prejudice from the general public. These films involve a specific audience — in short, urban educated cinephiles — and the image that they generally project includes qualifiers such as difficult, elitist, highbrow, boring, verbose ....

This article will elicit a number of issues relating to subtitled films, including the general public’s assumptions, current subtitling practices, and the impact of subtitles on foreign spectators. It will consider the case of Patrice Leconte’s *Ridicule* (1996), a period drama set in eighteenth-century France, which received international acclaim. We will analyse some of the subtitling strategies used for the treatment of style, register, wordplay, humour and cultural conventions, and try to determine to what extent the subtitles can have an impact on the perception and reception of the film outside France.

Subtitling: assumptions, reception, priorities and restrictions

The spectator with an interest in world cinema, but insufficient or no knowledge of the foreign language needs subtitles as a linguistic information complement. The term ‘complement’ is used here because, unlike dubbing, subtitling represents extra information added to both the original dialogue and other visual and sound input (Smith 1998: 143). The success of the subtitles is proportionate, therefore, to the spectator’s impression of quality, accuracy, and completeness leading to an illusion of equivalence, as a reviewer’s remark on *Ridicule*’s subtitles illustrates: ‘My French is not up to making much sense of the original, but my impression is that little of importance is lost — Waterhouse’s words are rendered into delightfully idiomatic English’ (Armstrong 1996).

Yet, subtitles are often perceived, in anglophone cultures especially, as an impediment to enjoyment and/or comprehension. Even reviewers’ comments reflect this, as the opening sentences of a couple of reviews of *Ridicule* illustrate:

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3. See for example the introduction of Durham’s study of French remakes in the American context (1998: 7), or general newspaper cinema reviews such as Adair 2000.
Entertaining foreign films are extremely rare— not because the actual movie lacks talent and an interesting plot, but because once subtitles appear at the bottom of the screen, viewing it suddenly becomes an incredible eye strain resulting in nothing more than exhaustion and a headache. (Flyer 1997)

*Ridicule* is a risky proposition to put to an American audience. Between the subtle wordplay in French and the blunt instrument of English subtitles, you're bound to miss a few things. (Trueheart 1996)

Recently, a number of press articles have also confirmed the negative perception of subtitles, with titles like ‘So Who’s Afraid of a Few Subtitles? We Are’ (Matheou 2000) or ‘Fellini, Go Home’ (Corliss 1997). The former clearly outlines ‘the almost pathological British fear of subtitles’, whilst the latter tries to understand why foreign language films no longer attract American audiences. These reactions are not unusual.

Even if the spectator is prepared to make the effort of reading subtitles, a commonly-raised reservation relates to the inevitable translation loss which is bound to occur in interlinguistic translation processes, as another review of *Ridicule* illustrates: ‘the intricacies of language are bound to be lost on all but the most enthusiastic Francophiles’ (Kempyle 1996). Subtitling is a ‘visible’ form of translation, as the source dialogue can be heard simultaneously. Attentive spectators may note some differences between the two texts, even if they do not fully understand the original: length of titles compared to the original dialogue; omissions; varying content and structure of the discourse. This may explain feelings of surprise, suspicion or frustration, once spectators realize that what they read is not a literal equivalent of what is being said on screen.

It has long been established in Translation Studies research that literal translation is hardly ever justified, except in special cases like poetry. Subtitling in particular involves applying specific strategies based on pragmatic decisions in keeping with specific constraints, and the general public is not normally aware of this fact.

Subtitling has its own restrictions and priorities. These have been the subject matter of extensive research and it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss them in detail. Let us say that the subtitling process is ruled by a series of well-defined technical restrictions in terms of space, number of characters per line and display time on the screen, all of which aim at reaching optimal readability (Beckemont 1996: 148). The editing of the shots and frames or the pace of delivery may also be important factors. Therefore, the subtitler is driven by a series of specific priorities which favour two main quality criteria: coherence and ‘discretion’ in the French sense of ‘inconspicuous’ (Beckemont 1996: 146). These priorities then translate into strategies which have been organized into various models, such as Delabastita’s classification of subtitling strategies in terms of five specific operations (addition, omission, substitution, transformation and repetition) (1989 and 1990), and Karamitroglou’s set of subtitling standards for Europe (1997).

Inserting extratextual information on the screen has obvious consequences: it causes an extra strain on the spectator’s attention; it interferes with the image; it creates multiple versions of a film, enabling several ‘readings’— image, sound and subtitles; it constitutes a switch in text type, as written text is ‘replacing’ spoken dialogue, and normally results in the standardization of language, due to different language norms (e.g. reduction of orality or personal interaction markers). The main objective of subtitled text/dialogue, therefore, is to produce a similar effect on the foreign spectator (e.g. humour, emotion or identification). Already, the notion of faithfulness, which has traditionally been a central issue in translation, becomes a less reliable criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of the subtitles, than say, readability, coherence or visual strain.
Having introduced some of the central issues inherent to the subtitling process, albeit very briefly, we can now study the specific case of *Ridicule* more closely to illustrate the constraints of film subtitling and some of the strategies adopted. We start from the assumptions that the difficulty to provide adequate subtitles is proportional to (1) the pace of the dialogue; (2) the role played by the dialogue in the development of the plot; (3) the register variety and the use of non-standard language; (4) humour and wordplay. Moreover, because the two languages involved here, French and English, have common historical features and origins, there may be occurrences of common reference systems providing implicit information. We therefore regard subtitles as a linguistic complement of information to ‘accompany the image’ (Becquemont 1996: 154).

**Ridicule: its reception and its subtitles**

*Ridicule* was a landmark in the career of Patrice Leconte. The film opened the Cannes Festival in 1996 and received four major Césars, a BAFTA award for best foreign language film, and an Academy Award nomination for best foreign film. It received critical and public acclaim with more than two million spectators in France and record box-office receipts abroad.

*Ridicule* is a costume drama set in the time of Louis XVI at the French Court in Versailles, a time when wit was a valuable weapon for social progress. It has been described as a period film relevant to the present which addresses universal issues (Murat 1996; Parent 1996) and is considered more consensual than previous Leconte films like *Le Mari de la coiffeuse* (1990) or *Tango* (1993). Rémi Waterhouse wrote the screenplay and worked closely with the director who was neither familiar with period films, nor particularly attracted to them. He himself claims that the emphasis when making *Ridicule* was never on lavish period reconstruction: ‘I have no taste for history (...), anything to do with the past bores me’ (Leconte 2000: 256-57). The focus was more on how to film wit and the power of language.

The reception of *Ridicule* in France concentrated on praising the quality of the screenplay, the skilful direction and the actors’ performance, three aspects contributing to a tradition of popular quality success. The film had a generally sympathetic reception in the press, and it was described as ‘charming, grave et profound’ in *Le Point*, ‘brilliant et grave’ in *Télérama* (Murat 1996), ‘futile, but funny’ in *Cahiers du cinéma* (Jousse 1996: 61) ‘light and bubbly’ in *Positif* (Sineux 1996: 23).

The publicity generated by the Cannes Festival certainly accelerated its international distribution. It was released in cinemas in the United States in November 1996 and attracted around 500,000 spectators (Leconte 2000: 267). The US reviews were positive on the whole, but used quite different qualifiers to their French counterparts, stressing its intelligence, sophistication or elegance. The film was marketed as glamorous, witty and ‘very French’ (Trueheart 1996), and as an original foreign film ‘using a genuine expressiveness of language often missing in US Culture’ (Schwartz 1996).

In the United Kingdom, it also had a successful release in November 1996, with 230,000 spectators (Leconte 2000: 267), and a reception focusing on style and wit, as exemplified in the *New Statesman’s* review:

*Ridicule* (...) works triumphantly on at least two levels: as a nourishing slab of French heritage cinema, complete with ludicrous wigs, lavish costumes and imitation-baroque music; and as a subtle, probing analysis of the role played by wit and satire in determining the course of political events. (Coe 1997)

6 The framework used draws mainly on models established by Delabastita 1989; Karagiozoglou 1997 and Zabalbeascoa 1996.

7 See the reserved reception in Jousse 1996 and Péron 1996.
Most of the anglophone reviews emphasize the historical background of the film, whilst the French ones are more tempted to see the film as relevant to the present. In most reviews however, the most commented aspect of the film is the use of wit and language as the thematic line of the film, but also as a dramatic device.

This leads to a noticeable shift in the perception of the film in terms of genre or audience. In France, the public was attracted to a quality popular film, consensual and entertaining, whilst the anglophone audiences were invited to see a more unusual film, both historical and artistic, in other words, one which promoted ‘otherness’, high culture and art cinema. To a French audience, there is an element of distance in terms of etiquette, formal register and humour. But to an anglophone audience (especially American), the perception of the foreign is also indebted to the ‘exotic’ historical subject matter (Versailles and the Court), the cultural distance of eighteenth-century France, and the use of a foreign language. These elements all have an impact on the image of the film abroad, and the subtitles contribute to suggest otherness, effort and access to a more cultural and artistic film (themes and style).

At least two distinct subtitled versions of the film are available in Britain, one commercial video (Electric, 1997) subtitled by Nigel Palmer, and the Channel Four version subtitled by Isabel Geesen-Leigh of Omni titles. We will use mainly the commercial video version (V) for our illustrations, and refer to the Channel Four subtitles (C4) if a comparison is deemed relevant. Our objective here, however, is not so much to provide a qualitative assessment of the existing subtitles, but rather to analyse the different subtitling issues raised by this film in the context of its reception and the priorities which determine the subtitler/translator strategies.

In a film which relies so heavily on dialogue rather than action, and on the expressive use of language in the form of wit, it is easy to gauge the crucial role played by the subtitles. It can also explain an assumption of difficulty and complexity associated with the specific nature of the dialogue. Use of language, humour and wit have multiple functions in this film, as powerful dramatic devices with social and political implications, and also as pure sources of entertainment. It is not by chance that the imagery of ‘rapier wit’, joust and fencing is recurrent in the reviews of the film (e.g. Billard 1996; Murat 1996; Armstrong 1996; Clark 1998). We have selected a number of aspects which include forms of address, register, humour and wordplay.

‘Politeness’, forms of address and register

‘Politeness’ markers in the context of subtitling have been analysed in detail by Hatim and Mason as ‘aspects of language usage which serve to establish, maintain or modify interpersonal relationships’ (Hatim and Mason 1997: 80). These are often erased in the subtitles as part of the strategy of ‘hierarchisation of verbal elements’ (Becquemont 1996: 153). For obvious reasons of space, they are often deemed redundant, and possibly, also sufficiently universal to be understood in the source language. Yet, forms of address represent strong cultural markers throughout Ridiсule, as they emphasize social formality at the Court and the important role played by rank distinctions and etiquette. ‘Comte’, ‘Baron’, ‘Monsieur’, or ‘Madame’ punctuate the French dialogue and they function as markers of the foreignness of the film in terms both of time and space. They are retained in the subtitles in specific cases: to create an emphasis; to fit with the timing of the spoken dialogue; or to maintain rhythmic or sound harmony where they serve as a kind of punctuation or caesura in the sentence (see underlined examples below).

The distinction between the usage of ‘tu’ and ‘vous’ is another commonly-raised
issue in terms of subtitling difficulties, because these personal markers provide
information relating to time, class or power relationship which are difficult to transpose
effectively. In Ridicule, the ‘tu/vous’ distinction is recurrent, functioning as a period,
cultural and social feature which carries a form of meaning that the foreign spectator is
not given in the subtitles. To give a few examples, Ponceludon addresses his farmers as
‘tu’, which indicates a familiar paternal attitude towards those that he calls ‘his peasants’.
More surprisingly, unlike the adults, Leonard, the peasant child addresses Ponceludon,
his master, as ‘tu’, which reveals that Ponceludon, in spite of his rank, treats the peasants
as family, which differentiates him from his peers from Versailles:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Léonard: Tu vas faire dire des messes?</th>
<th>By having masses sung?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ponceludon: Oh non, pas des messes. (...)</td>
<td>No masses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Léonard: Quand tu verras le Roi, donne-lui</td>
<td>When you see the King, ask him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ma médaille à bénir.</td>
<td>to bless this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ponceludon: Je te le promets, Léonard</td>
<td>I will, Leonard.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly, the Marquis de Bellegarde says ‘tu’ to his adult daughter, another sign of
closeness and affection uncharacteristic of the times, but in keeping with his admiration
for Rousseau. ‘Vous’ is the normal form of address at Court for all, regardless of
circumstances as is illustrated throughout the film.

In a cultural context of formality and strong social conventions, register becomes an
important element which is not always be conveyed by the subtitles. In keeping with
subtitling conventions, there is a tendency to standardize the illocutionary phrases and
various markers of register formality tend to be erased in the subtitles:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>J’en suis fort aise</th>
<th>Delighted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C’est fâcheux</td>
<td>I’m sorry [that’s very sad (C4)]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Je n’ai pas de fortune</td>
<td>I’m poor [I have no money (C4)]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comme intrigante, vous n’avez pas d’égale</td>
<td>How sly you are [You’re a brilliant schemer (C4)]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardez-moi un peu de votre amitié</td>
<td>Let’s be friends</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subtitling wit: the case of Ridicule
This standardization phenomenon takes place at lexical and syntactic levels. For example, the recurrent use of the imperfect subjunctive creates an effect of formality on the French spectator, combined with distance, as it is rarely used in conversation nowadays. It is also integrated into the main motif of the film, wit, when the Baron de Guéret is ridiculed by his poor command of the imperfect subjunctive: he uses the incorrect *échoissât/befat* instead of the correct *échût/befit*.

Guéret: Regardez notre grand-père. Look at our grandfather.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guines: Notre grand-père!</th>
<th>‘Our’ grand father?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ponceludon: Le sien est sans doute entre les jambes du vôtre.</td>
<td>His is the four legged one [He’s probably the one yours is sitting on (C4)].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guines: Mais, répondez, monsieur, la charge de l’assezser de l’académie ne saurait échoir à un homme de peu d’esprit.</td>
<td>Reply, Monsieur, with the wit that befits an Academy member.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guéret: Qu’elle ne m’échoissât pas, voilà qui serait bien extravagant.</td>
<td>It never befat anyone worthier than I!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blayac: ‘Échoissât’! Il serait bien plaisant que vous écoughassiez ainsi la langue, tout en veillant sur les débats de l’Académie.</td>
<td>‘Befat’! Droll language [odd grammar (C4)] for a would-be Academy member!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’Abbé: Rien de plus normal, ma chère, on confie le sérial à l’eunuque.</td>
<td>Don’t be surprised. Every harem has its eunuch.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this case, the subtitler’s choice represents a translation gain in terms of ridiculous effect in the English version, as ‘befat’ echoes the graceless physical appearance of the character. It offers a compensation for the impossibility of rendering the formality of the imperfect subjunctive ‘écoughassiez’ used by Madame de Blayac, which sounds more neutral in English, as is the case for the many subjunctives which punctuate the French dialogue and carry a strong period flavour. In other words, what cannot be rendered by the syntax is compensated by lexical wordplay. More than a strict translation, subtitling
balances loss and gain to obtain as close an effect as possible on the spectator. Within reason, this allows for some creative use of language.

Eighteenth-century French syntax is also conveyed by the recurrent use of passive and impersonal constructions, the specific word order and the formulation of questions, all of which can be attributed to the rhetoric of the period. In many cases, these stylistic turns of phrase are standardized in the subtitles, conforming with subtitling conventions. The subtitler will normally choose the most compact formulation, but also needs to avoid any potential distraction caused by diverging from current language norms, as these examples illustrate:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word order</th>
<th>Drôles de passe-temps que les vôtres, Monsieur.</th>
<th>You have odd pastimes.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impersonal constructions</td>
<td>Permettez-moi de l’espérer, Madame</td>
<td>I venture to hope so [I hope so (C4)]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Si l’inconfort ne vous fait pas peur, je peux vous assurer le gîte</td>
<td>If you don’t mind discomfort be my guest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maintenant l’erreur ne vous est plus permise</td>
<td>Make no mistakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrogatives</td>
<td>Puis-je vous prêter à souper?</td>
<td>Come and dine with me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ai-je besoin de vous inviter?</td>
<td>You need an invitation?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The strategies described in this section illustrate the need for a clear, concise message which prevails above any other consideration. This may reduce the period flavour of the French dialogue and result in a slightly less authentic perception of the use of language for the anglophone audience, but it certainly contributes to minimize the impression of effort and difficulty associated with subtitles by many spectators and reviewers. Moreover, the transfer from spoken dialogue to written text tends to help naturally to convey the general impression of formality deriving from the French script.
Wit and Humour

*Ridicule* stages two mimetic scenes in which humour is considered untranslatable. The Baron de Malenval’s example of English humour (‘hiouma’) is welcome in avyed silence by the French Court:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Baron, Comment avez-vous trouvé les Anglais?</th>
<th>How did you find the English?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malenval: Très distrayants. Ils ont là-bas une forme de conversation qu’il appellent ‘humour’ et qui fait beaucoup rire. Enfin, ce qu’ils appellent rire …</td>
<td>Amusing. They have a way of talking known as ‘hiouma’. It makes them laugh enormously [a lot (C4)].</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Hiouma’? C’est une forme d’esprit?</th>
<th>Is it like wit? [Is it a form of wit? (C4)]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malenval: Non. Pas vraiment …</td>
<td>Not really, no.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Et comment le traduisez-vous?</td>
<td>What is it in French? [How do you translate it? (C4)]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malenval: On ne peut le comparer à rien.</td>
<td>It’s untranslatable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mais enfin un art de conversation qui fait rire: il faut bien que ça soit une forme d’esprit!</td>
<td>Any talk that causes [provokes (C4)] laughter must be a form of wit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malenval: Ce n’est pas ‘esprit’ le mot juste. Il nous manque un terme à nous, Français.</td>
<td>It’s not exactly ‘wit’. We have no word for it. [There’s no French word for it. (C4)]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The 'play on signs' ('geste d'esprit') made by the deaf and dumb pupils of Mr de l'Épée cannot be translated into words either. The film, as a whole, seems to illustrate the common assumption of untranslatability associated with humour.

Yet, the subtitles of the film have to contend with various forms of wordplay, humour and wit – which Bellegarde carefully classifies in his notebooks as double entendres, repartees, quips, play on words and paradoxes. Several examples in the film tend to confirm that because English and French are close languages, with many references and cultural factors in common, lexical equivalents can be found to render wordplay (for a classification of wordplay see Delalaix 1996: 131). The film starts with Milletal's spectacular revenge on Mr de Blayac, the man who had forced him into exile by nicknaming him 'Marquis de Patatras' after a fall on the dance floor. It is translated as 'Marquis of Clatterbang', maintaining a lexical play on words. Similarly, when trying to illustrate English humour in a dinner party, the Baron de Maleval is a victim of a quip by Ponceludon, to the Court's delight:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Malenval: C'est le seul exemple qui me vient à l'esprit...</th>
<th>That the only example that comes to mind... comes to mouth.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ponceludon – Vous voulez dire... À la bouche.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Ponceludon: – Soyez sans crainte, votre secret ne sera pas éventé. | I will not fan the winds of gossip [I will not fan the gossip’s flame, (C4)] |

Lexical equivalence is again possible. Another example: after Ponceludon has realized that the Abbé and Madame de Blayac are cheating using her fan, he reassures her:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English gentleman: Cela vaut mieux que la tête, n'est ce pas?</td>
<td>You've kept your head! [It's better than losing your head (C4)]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Finally, the film ends on a positive note by providing an example of English humour which is fully appreciated by the exiled Marquis de Bellegarde after the Revolution:

Each of these examples illustrates how wordplay can be transferred effectively between two cognate languages. In the fan example, the translators have found two different idiomatic phrases which retain the polysemy on ‘fan’, achieving a similar effect with the same lexical element. In the head example, the subtitle uses the same lexical phrase, but creates a slightly different meaning with a direct reference to the Revolution (‘perdre la tête’ can also refer to madness). These examples highlight the element of choice and decision which can account for plural creative renderings in the subtitling process whilst revealing the absence of one-to-one equivalence between languages (Delabastita 1996: 134).

In a film in which the emphasis is placed on language as a form of power, the subtitles become all more visible and significant in the dramatic development of the film. Yet, because the pace of dialogue is sustained especially in the Court scenes, extreme concentration is required for the spectator to absorb all the information, be it visual, sound or written language. The subtitles therefore have to take into account the effect produced on the spectator, dosing the amount of information in the subtitles, their length, and duration on screen. Effect cannot easily be evaluated in objective terms. Yet, if the humour based on wordplay and wit is clearly rendered in the English subtitles, and if the subtitling conventions for optimal readability are in place, then the conditions for similar effect are fulfilled. Moreover, the information of the image and of the foreign dialogue can also be of use to spectators even if they do not understand the language. One of the reasons for the success of the film in France was the quality of the dialogue, its rhythm and sonority. For example, the use of alexandrine, rhyme, and alliteration all contribute to an effect of richness, eloquence and lyricism. These are not on the agenda of the subtitler, but they are part of the soundtrack and can be emphasized by judicious fragmentation and timing in the display of the titles. There are examples in the film of long complex sentences which are thus fragmented in the subtitles to echo the sound and rhythm of the dialogue.

A good illustration of this is the scene when the Court party is playing the rhyming epigrams game: pieces of paper containing random words are drawn which then have to be improvised into a poem. The Abbé composes the following one:

Je comptais en ces lieux voir le Roi à l’envie
L’entendre, lui parler, et m’instruire par ses soins
Mais c’est comme Jésus en son Eucharistie,
On le mange, on le boit, mais on ne le voit point.

The one joy here that I have missed
Has been to see our king so wise
Like Jesus at the Eucharistic
He feeds our mouths, but not our eyes.

[I hoped to see the King that I so missed
Hear Him, talk with Him and my cares share

Isabelle Vanderschelden
But like Jesus in the Eucharistic
You eat him drink him, but never see a king so rare. (C4)]

In the three versions we have a politically correct praise of the King in which the
semantic elements are quite similar. The individual choice of words is less
important than rhyme and sound patterns.

Ponceludon's epigram is much more personal and aggressive in tone. It
contains a direct attack on the Abbé which must be preserved to justify the
reaction of the offended, ridiculed Countess:

Toujours fidèle à sa conduite,
L'Abbé sans nuire à sa santé,
Peut faire deux mots d'esprit de suite,
L'un en hiver, l'autre en été.

The Abbé's great humorous skill
Is the envy of any newcomer.
He can be entertaining at will,
Once in winter and then once in summer.

[The abbot faithful to his ways
will effortlessly amaze,
with one quip after another.
one in winter one in summer. (C4)]

The priority of the subtitler in these specific cases is to preserve the rhyme rather
than the type of verse announced in the dialogue, which is unlikely to be checked.
The semantic content of the epigram has to be preserved — flattery of the king in
the first, mockery of the Abbé in the second, but the lexical units used are
considered secondary and explain some changes which may appear at first sight
incongruous to the spectator.

These examples confirm that the quality criteria usually applied to the
translation process have limited use in the subtitling of wit, because, in this case,
effectiveness prevails over strict linguistic equivalence. They also indicate how,
contrary to the common presuppositions raised at the beginning, the subtitles in
Ridicule effectively convey the wit, the humour and some of the sociolinguistic
features of the film without distorting its semantic content. The assumption of the
untranslatability of humour is unfounded in this case, and reservations based on the
intuitive and arbitrary impressions of certain spectators or reviewers are
contradicted by a close interlinguistic comparison. This success can be attributed
not only to the creative and technical skills of the subtitlers, but also to certain
characteristics of the film, such as formal literary dialogue, exportable period-
drama genre, and the expectations of foreign audiences.

Due to the prominence of dialogue in this film, as a dramatic device and as a
reflection of a period and its language, the subtitles have to express succinctly the
sense of dialogue, its diachronic dimension and the flow of the conversation.
Waterhouse's carefully scripted dialogue alleviates some translation problems, and his
screenplay cleverly anticipates the need to vary the demand on the spectator, by
alternating scenes at Court with more private, slower-paced ones. In this context,
literary and articulate dialogue poses fewer problems to the subtitler than, say, improvised conversations or regional dialect, as the distance between oral speech and written is reduced to a minimum. The changes in register and sociocultural indicators, which are harder to transpose in the subtitles, are also conveyed by the film's visual representation and the conventions attached to period drama (costumes, demeanour, expressiveness of the characters).

Moreover, the fact that the wit is based upon situations as well as language removes some of the pressure placed on the translation process, whilst implying that the spectator must not be too distracted from the visual medium. This constitutes an extra argument in favour of discreet subtitles, as the reaction of one reviewer illustrates:

What is fascinating about *Ridicule* is that so much depends on language, and so little is really said. The characters come and go, polishing their one-liners, memorising their comebacks, desperately walking the line between delectable rudeness and offending the king. None of what they say means anything. It is all words. The eyes carry the meaning. Watch the way the characters look at one another, and you can follow the real plot, while they spin their tortured fancies. (Ebert 1996)

These comments also emphasize that, beyond the transfer of purely linguistic elements, technical subtitling strategies, such as synchronization of titles and duration of display on screen, are just as essential to maximize readability for the spectator (Cornu 1996: 159).

This brings us to the impact of the subtitles on the spectator. The anglophone reviews generally highlight wit and history as the two main narrative lines of *Ridicule* which is read as a period drama. They also promote its cultural value and comment briefly on possible linguistic difficulties. Consequently, the film, which was received in France as mainstream quality entertainment, has become – as is often the case with subtitled films – a target for European art cinema enthusiasts abroad, and is considered representative of the image of contemporary French cinema. Thus, if the subtitled status of the film contributes to confine it to a niche distribution as art cinema in anglophone countries, it also satisfies a specific audience who are attracted to cultural 'otherness' and guaranteed a degree of authenticity.

References


