It is World War I. The soldiers in the trenches are exhausted – dazed, confused, their faces covered with mud (courtesy of Max Factor).

It is the last moment of calm before the climactic battle. Suddenly, a whirr. Faint at first, but growing stronger. One soldier takes a peek: Tanks, Tanks!” he shouts. At the bottom of the screen, the French subtitles blared: “Merci, merci!” It happened in Paris to Sam Peckinpah’s Cross of Iron; It is a subtitler’s ultimate nightmare.

Henri Béhar (2004)

Audio-visual translation (AVT) has been a latecomer when it comes to academically acknowledged subject areas and research on it has therefore been, until quite recently, a rare academic commodity. However, this lack of academic interest has been counterbalanced by several attempts to gain recognition through bibliographical compilations which are at pains to underline the (relatively) high number of recent published works in this field (see e.g. Gottlieb 2001, Gambier 2003, 2004, 2006) and the publication of special journal issues dedicated to this subject (i.e. The Translator 2003/9:2 “Special Issue: Screen Translation”; Meta 2004/49:1, 2).

Drawing on the information contained in BITRA (Bibliography of Interpretation and Translation),¹ Aixelá and Clavero have established a chronological list showing the development of the basic topics of interest within Audio Visual Translation (AVT). They point out that there was an unprecedented six fold rise from only 76 entries in the 1980s to 464 in the 1990s which leads them to argue

¹ BITRA is an international and interactive data base which is free to access at www.ua.es/df- ing/tra_int/bitra_en.htm

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that “audiovisual translation was, finally, fully emerging as a field on its own, and growing out of the sporadic appearance which had characterised it during most of the 20th century” (Aixelá, Clavero 2005:88). This increase means that the share of AVT publications within Translation Studies had increased from 1–1.5% to 4%.

Gambier pinpoints 1995 as the breakthrough year, arguing that before this particular year AVT was an under-researched subject area (a specialised bibliography published in 1994 includes only 730 references) and he describes the research undertaken fragmented and anecdotal “de manière parcellaire et souvent anecdotique” (2006:262). When the second edition of this bibliography appeared three years later (Gambier 1997) the number of entries had tripled. However, despite this recent research ‘boom’, at about 4%, AVT can still not be described as being in the centre of research interests. And when it comes to subtitling, the focus of this article, the marginalisation is even more pronounced.

One of the reasons for this rather undeserved positioning as a marginal subject area might be that subtitling is first of all a very specialised activity, more often than not, executed in small, cramped rooms by – in the best case scenario - linguistically and technically very dedicated, talented and committed people, who normally work for little money and generally don’t get any recognition for their work. If they get any feedback at all it is bound to be negative – a quote like: “I didn’t really like the film but the subtitles were great!” is a very unlikely reaction, as cinema audiences generally tend to be rather irritated by them, demonstrated convincingly by the following outburst: “It is likely that no one has ever come away from a foreign film admiring the translation. If the subtitles attract comment, it is...

2. Although every film deserves the best case scenario, reality could not be more different as there are no professional restrictions in place which dictate who is a qualified subtitler and who is not. Fawcett does not paint a pretty picture when he describes the general working condition of subtitlers: “… poor wages, … absurd deadlines, … poor originals …, and finally, poor training of translators” (1983:189). And even if conditions and wages are slowly improving, it needs to be pointed out that quality control varies from country to country and from company to company (see e.g. James 2001).

3. To stay out of the limelight and in the shadow actually seems to be part of a subtitler’s DNA: “Subtitling is a form of cultural ventriloquism, and the focus must remain on the puppet, not the puppeteer. Our task as subtitlers is to create subliminal subtitles so in sync with the mood and rhythm of the movie that the audience isn’t even aware it is reading. We want not to be noticed. If a subtitle is inadequate, clumsy, or distracting, it makes everyone look bad, but first and foremost the actors and the filmmakers. It can impact the film’s potential career” (Béhar 2004:85). Not everybody agrees with this job interpretation. The French subtitler of 8 Miles, Girard-Ygor was very disappointed when his name was not mentioned anywhere, when the film was released in France. Disappointed but not surprised, as he had been used to working behind the scenes and he also describes subtitling as ‘une activité de l’ombre’ (in: Taivalkoski-Shilov 2008:265).
only a desire for reciprocal violence, a revenge for the text in the face of its corruption. For as we shall see, all subtitles are corrupt” (Nornes 1999: 17).

The following is an attempt to explore a rather uncharted territory within subtitling: How do audio-visual translators or subtitlers respond to the challenge of (un)translatability of cultural references and/or culture-bound items. In order to set up the framework for this analysis, I will attempt to describe the special translation processes involved in subtitling by investigating its technical restraints and restrictions which make the translation of cultural references within subtitles particularly challenging. The starting point, however, will be a brief introduction to the history of subtitling by way of tracing the dubbing vs. subtitling debate as the advantages and disadvantages of subtitling are almost always discussed in opposition and/or in comparison with dubbing.

The dubbing vs. subtitling debate

Between 1895 and c.1930, in the ‘silent movies era’, ‘intertitles’ were used as a narrative aid cut into the film at strategic points. Subtitles grew out of these ‘intertitles’. Egoyan and Balfour (2004: 22) date the beginning of subtitling as early as 1907, although they admit that subtitles did not come into their own until the age of the talkies and their international distribution. The honour of being the first subtitled film is claimed by the Jazz Singer in Paris in 1929. When ‘talkies’ (sound films) were introduced in the 1930s, intertitles were slowly removed.

4. Despite the ever growing interest in subtitling (for an overview see Gambier 2006: 261–3, 265–75) the study of cultural references within AVT still remains almost virgin territory. However, there have been a few research projects initiated in this area, mostly for the purpose of gaining an MA or equivalent in some MA Translation Programmes, i.e. in SALIS, Dublin City University, Ireland (among others Nolan, Amanda, A cultural-semiotic perspective on subtitling as a form of translation, MA thesis, 1995; Calvo Ferrer, José Ramón, Translation argot: dubbing and subtitling of Stanley Kubrick’s A Clockwork Orange in to Spanish, MA thesis 2003; Kavanagh, Killian, ‘Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum’: the challenges of translating Heinrich Böll’s novel and subtitling Volker Schlöndorff’s and Margarethe von Trotta’s film adaptation, MA thesis, 2006) and Gambier also reports on similar projects ongoing at Finnish Universities in Kouvola, Savonlinna, Tampere und Turku (Gambier 2006: 273). However, published research in this particular area is still very rare and I could only identify Tomaszkievicz (2001), Aaltonen (1995) and Pedersen (1995).

5. The definition of ‘subtitling’ in this article is restricted to ‘interlingual’ subtitling, i.e. subtitling between different languages, as opposed to ‘intralingual’ subtitling, i.e. subtitling for the deaf or hard of hearing.

Dubbing (short for ‘lip-synchronized’ or ‘lip-sync dubbing’) seems to have originated in the United States and came to Europe in 1936. Since then both methods, subtitling and dubbing, have been used and different preferences have developed in different parts of Europe, and there has been an ongoing debate about the advantages and disadvantages of each language transfer method. According to Nornes (2007: 11f), the subtitling vs. dubbing debate was fuelled by the explosive growth of television and the rise of the art-film in the United States in the 1950s. It started out as an experiment to appeal to viewers who found subtitling annoying and it proved a big hit, bringing in viewers who normally would not go to the cinema to watch foreign films. The dubbing of *I Love Lucy* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* kick started the first ‘sub vs. dub’ debate and its tone is reflected in the following quote:

Intellectuals, who love to hang breathlessly on the subtle suprasegmental vocal inflections, even of languages they don’t understand, like films in the original language. Clods, like me – people who just want to enjoy the film and who don’t want to bounce their eyeballs constantly up and down form picture to subtitle to picture to subtitle – generally like their films dubbed.7

To counterbalance the public reaction in this debate, here is a letter to the *New York Times* on the issue:

Some despot in the upper echelons of the imported film industry has apparently decreed that pictures in languages other than English may be shown in the original with printed subtitles on the film only in first-run Manhattan theatres. This same tyrant has at the same time ruled that when these films are screened for us yokels in the neighbourhood houses or the suburbs, the sound-track and the subtitles must be ruthlessly erased and the original dialogue replaced with English spoken by an American cast reading from a script in which great ingenuity – but an appalling lack of creative imagination – has been exercised to match the original cast’s lip movements… For those of us who retain a little of our high school or college French, German, Spanish or Italian, an occasional good foreign film used to bring values over and above its function as entertainment. There was the challenging sense of first hand contact with another culture. There was a stimulation and painless form of educational refresher. The dubbed versions give us none of these while, at the same time, perpetrating a most sickening form of artistic vandalism.8

In the 1950s and 60s, it was not only the general public whose opinion seemed to have been divided, two of the most famous American film critics at the time, Bosley Crowther for the *New York Times* and Stanley Kauffman for the *New Republic* were equally confrontational on the subject. Crowther initially wrote about the merits of subtitling, swayed perhaps by the international success of foreign films by Godard,

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Fellini and Kurosawa. However, in the 1960s, he changed sides and argued:

The English subtitle is itself a thoroughly inartistic thing, (...) [the majority of American people] are compelled to accept a mechanism that inadequately and often ineloquently imparts what should be a very important element of the communication in a talking film (...) Now that the medium of motion pictures is becoming more internationalized, (..), it is foolish to hobble expression with an old device that was mainly contrived as a convenience to save the cost of dubbing foreign-language films when they had limited appeal. Now that the American market is crying out for more and varied films (...), it is particularly foolish to saddle the foreign product with an obsolete device. It is time we abandon the somewhat specious and even snobbish notion that foreign-language films (...) are linguistically inviolable. Let’s give the general audience a chance to hear what they are saying. Subtitles must go!

In the firestorm of criticism which Crowther’s article provoked, Kauffman’s voice stood out when he retorted:

If he had written his article 30 years ago and if it had succeeded in its purpose, I would never have heard the voices of Louis Jouvet, Raimu, Edwige Feuillère, Shimura Takashi, Vittorio De Sica, and Victor Sjöström... Certainly, I, too prefer to see Miss Bardot’s bosom without typographic obscuration. But the subtitle gives you the gist of the dialogue and allows you to enjoy the actor’s whole performance (Scheuer 1960).

These days, it is acknowledged that both forms have their advantages and disadvantages. The decision which method to choose seems to depend more on economic considerations than on artistic ones, with smaller countries with more limited funds for investment and production favouring subtitling, as it is the cheaper method. It seems that bigger countries tend to favour dubbing because it potentially attracts a larger number of viewers. In Europe, subtitling is favoured in i.e. Portugal, Greece, Wales, Holland, Luxembourg, Ireland and parts of Belgium. Countries like France, Germany, Britain, Spain, and Italy seem to prefer dubbing (De Linde and Kay 1999: 1)

Both the UK and Ireland belong to the large Anglophone audiovisual market, hence there has never been a need to develop a language transfer industry of its own, and neither is a classical ‘subtitling’ or ‘dubbing’ country; rather, both use both methods in a mixed manner (Luyken et al. 1991: 31f). The Welsh channel 4, Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C),9 takes up a special position, as it began experimenting with dubbing and subtitling of English and other foreign programmes into the Welsh language and Welsh produced programmes into English and other languages of potential export markets, such as French and German.

9. Due to the demand for trained subtitlers, the University of Wales, Lampeter created a Screen Translation Course, which combines translation skills with information technology to provide hands-on training in subtitling for television programs which was the first course and the only University Certificate of its kind in the UK. For more details on this course see James (1995).
What both sides seem to agree on is that over time, audiences accept and are then strongly pre-conditioned by the respective predominant methods. As a consequence, different or new methods take a long time to find acceptance.

The technical challenges in subtitling

The big challenge in subtitling lies in projecting lines of text onto a pre-existing canvass of sound and image while being severely restricted by the negotiation of space and time. Or, as Luyken et al. put it: “They [subtitling and dubbing] represent a meeting-point of science, art, technology, linguistics, drama and aesthetics” with the quality of the end product resulting “directly form the harmonious fusion of these parts” (1991: 39).

These spatial and temporal restrictions place special demands on the subtitler as (s)he has to negotiate the screen space available for the subtitle text, the time available for and between subtitle exposures, the timing of subtitle insertion and removal and the display and format of the subtitles.

The first restraint, the screen space available, might be the most limiting restriction of them all and is, therefore, also the one that shapes the translation process the most. Here, not only the physical limitations of the screen must be taken into consideration but also the good practice of trying to avoid obscuring the picture. The temporal restrictions mostly derive from the amount of text to be translated, the average reading speed of the viewers, the constant minimum interval between subtitles and the need for synchronicity. It is generally accepted that the reading speeds hovers around 150 to 180 words per minute. However, reading speeds vary according to the quantity and complexity of linguistic information, the manner in which the text is presented, the subject matter of the program and also according to the type of visual information on screen at any given moment (De Linde and Kay 1999: 6, Luyken et al. 1991: 43f). Subtitles of two lines should not be exposed longer than 6 seconds as overexposure seems to invite duplicate reading. It is also accepted that even the shortest of subtitles should be exposed for at least 1.5 seconds to prevent a flashing effect.

Visual cuts normally present subtitlers with huge challenges as a subtitle should not be retained on screen during a shot change but a clear margin should be left on either side of visual cuts. Eye movement research indicates that confusion is caused when the eyes return to the beginning of the text as the change of shot or scene is perceived. However, this rule is by no means universally observed and there might be scenes where it is impossible to avoid overlapping.
The process of translation

As already mentioned above, subtitling as an academic research subject is still in its infancy resulting in a lack of research on specific and often complex linguistic and/or translational issues involved. Despite the need for a better understanding of the deeper linguistic forces at work in subtitling, there is no theory of Language Transfer, and as Luyken et al. (1991: 165) point out, there is no literature on its aesthetics and no universally accepted modus operandi. One of the reasons for this lack of theoretical framework might lie in fact that due to the enormous restrictions involved in the subtitling process and the shortened and often radically changed outcome, the status of subtitling as a ‘proper’ translation has not yet been universally accepted. The — as yet — undefined status of subtitling is not helped by the fact that in a ‘normal’ translation a word, sentence, paragraph or whole text in one language is replaced by a word, sentence, paragraph or text in another language. Subtitling, however, leaves the original almost perfectly intact and only interferes with it by translating part of what is spoken into a subtitle and by adding it on to the picture.

Editing

When the professional subtitler Henri Behar, who has subtitled more than hundred French and English language films, was asked to subtitle American Buffalo, he soon realised that to subtitle David Mamet is more difficult than to subtitle Shakespeare:

Mamet’s dialogue is extremely fast, and the overlapping dialogue and editing can drive you nuts. That, plus the staccato rhythms and Chicago slang, made subtitling American Buffalo one of my most difficult assignments. Add to that the inescapable fact that English is one-third more compact than French and you soon realize that subtitling is an exercise in frustration. Word-for-word transcriptions are out of the question; your job is not that of the literary translator, it is to give the Cliffs Notes to a movie. Or, as critic Carrie Rickey put it, “condensing sonnets into haikus” (Béhar 2004:84).

Or in other words (and as a possible subtitle): the aforementioned time and space restrictions will only allow a very altered and abridged version of the original dialogue. In some cases, all of what is left amounts to a mere fraction of what is actually being said on screen. These decisions (of what to keep in and what to leave out) turn the subtitler into (among other things) an editor. And in his role as edi-

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10. Studies in this direction are indeed few and far between and if undertaken at all they tend to produce guidelines rather than a ‘theory of subtitling’, see, for instance, Díaz-Cintas (1998; 2001; 2004).
tor, the subtitler will have to make omissions on a very selective basis because even the slightest omissions can cause a significant change in meaning.

As an example, among the units which are most often omitted in subtitling are cohesive elements because they are non-content bearing. However, they normally play an important role in text comprehension. Therefore, when a dialogue is transformed into subtitles, there will be important cohesive devices to be considered. According to De Linde and Kay (1999: 28), the most comprehensive study of these devices has been carried out by Halliday and Hasan (1976), who identified four principle types: referential, substitution and ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion.

Examples of referential cohesion would be personal pronouns, demonstrative references (this, that), comparative references (’smaller than’, ‘the other’ . . . ), which refer either backwards (anaphorically) or forwards (cataphorically) to related elements in a text (De Linde and Kay 1999: 28–30):

The meaning of a text can be (slightly) altered through the removal of a few cohesive elements:

Speech: It’s what I call the vicious cycle syndrome. You start with drug A and then they put you on drug B, and drug C, and pretty soon you are taking a handful of pills, all because of the first drug.

Subtitle: It’s a vicious cycle. You start with drug A, then drug B, then soon you are taking a handful of drugs. (Oprah Winfrey Show, Channel 4, 07.03.94)

While the original speech points to the self-perpetuating nature of certain medical pills, the subtitles suggests that the speaker was talking about accumulative drug taking.

Another important area where editorial choices will have to be made is the simplification of the syntax. Simple syntactic structures tend to be shorter that complex ones and the difference in terms of meaning is sometimes negligible. Some examples to demonstrate this:

Original: Here is something we haven’t seen before.
Subtitle: Here’s something new.

Original: We’ll go when we’ve had dinner.
Subtitle: We’ll go after dinner.

Original: I wonder if you can find the car.
Subtitle: Can you find the car? (Ivarsson 1992: 94)

The same also applies to vocabulary: Here the subtitler always strives for easier, shorter, simpler and more familiar words then longer and more complex ones. A very convincing example to demonstrate this point would be:

Original: Gorged with awe, he espied sundry foes thronging the aceldama.
As Ivarsson points out this version “might be true to the style and meaning of the original”, but the following is “probably a better version for the general viewing public” (1992: 95):

Subtitle: Filled with terror, he detected several enemies gathering on the battlefield.

When it comes to choosing one particular word over another, the heterogeneity of the cinema or television audience in terms of linguistic awareness and education should always be kept in mind (Ivarsson 1992: 95). However, films and other programmes with high artistic, educational or scientific ambitions (i.e. documentaries) represent the exception to this rule and the linguistic threshold in these programmes will naturally be higher.

The next example clearly demonstrates the sometimes quite brutal editorial decisions which a subtitler needs to take and which sometimes only leaves a skeleton version of the original speech by ‘cutting straight to the point’:

Original: Once in a while the thought reiterated itself that it was very cold and that he had never experienced such cold. It certainly was cold.
Subtitle: There was no mistake about it, it was cold. (De Linde and Kay 1999: 31)

Spoken vs. written

Another big challenge in subtitling lies in the fact that a spoken dialogue is transformed into a written one, which has consequences on the stylistic and structural level. The differences in speech and writing have been well documented (Biber 1988, Halliday 1985, Halliday and Hasan 1976, Nunan 1993). In the context of subtitles, the vital differences between speech and writing can be described in terms of contrasting lexico-syntactic features: written texts typically have a higher lexical density coupled with a simpler sentence structure (Halliday 1994), which normally results in a greater economy of expression. De Linde/Kay state that when applying these contrasts to subtitles:

It is important to take account of two factors: most subtitles are a representation of spoken dialogue, thus they still need to maintain an oral flavour; secondly, their ‘written features’ are likely to be as much due to the need to condense utterances as to the written format of subtitles. It is also possible that the more structured syntax of written language partly compensates for the absence of phonetic and physical cues which support spoken language (1999: 26).

The following dialogue - first transcripted as the actual dialogue and than as a corresponding subtitle - should serve as an example:

Dialogue: Now, the reason that I don’t think you could, you might have learned to drive in a white Rolls-Royce, but I don’t believe that you would do it and take your test in it simply because you have to take, you have to take your test in a gear-change car, and if it was White Shadow like their automatic, so you couldn’t do it.
Subtitle: Now I don’t believe you would take your test in a white Rolls-Royce because you have to take your test in a gear-change car and a White Shadow like that is automatic.  
(Home Truths, BBC 1 25.02.94, from De Linde/Kay, 1999: 27)

Both dialogue and subtitle contain the same information. However, compared to the dialogue, the subtitle has a much higher lexical density while still showing enough features to be counted as speech rather than written language.

The difference of speech and written language can also affect the semantic level.

Cultural references

If all these problems were not stretching his/her abilities enough, the subtitler will also be challenged by cultural references or culture-bound items which are tied up with a country’s culture, history, society or geography. Due to the technical restrictions of the medium itself, problems of (un)translatability (i.e. cultural references for which no similar items exist in the target culture and/or which are unknown to the majority of the target audience and which in texts call for well documented different translational devices like substitution, compensation, omission, addition, explication and so on) must be tackled without any ‘get-out-of-prison’ card whatsoever: In subtitling there is no room for footnotes, explanations in the foreword, asterisks or asides.

The very few studies undertaken on how subtitlers tackle cultural references restrict themselves mostly to categorising different translational approaches to specific cultural items. Nedergaard-Larsen (1993: 207–40) offers strategies ranging from verbatim transfer, via culturally neutral explicitation and paraphrase, to target language adaptation. Tomaszkiewicz (2001: 239–47) distinguishes between omission, transfert direct, périphrase définitionnelle, équivalence, adaption, substitution par la référence énonciative and allusions au “déjà connu” and Pederson (2005: 115–21 and 2007: 30–48) similarly suggests official equivalent, retention, specification, explicitation, addition, direct translation, generalization, substitution and omission. And although these studies certainly do have their merits and also, to a certain degree, tell us more about subtitlers’ techniques to overcome these cultural hurdles,\(^\text{11}\) they are, however, also potentially misleading in that they suggest that cultural references in subtitles do not, to a large extent, differ from cultural references in texts. However, due to the technical restrictions mentioned above, the fact

\(^{11}\) Ramière (2006) questions whether it is possible to observe any form of consistency in these strategies and argues that a more pragmatic approach to the study of cultural transfer in audio-visual translation is needed.
that spoken language is transcribed into written text, the extreme editing through which the original speech is dramatically shortened and the fact, that the original as such is not interfered with but the subtitled is ‘added-on’ to the picture, the study of cultural references in subtitles should possibly not take the form of ‘categorising’, but should be approached in a broader and more general way in order to establish if there are or have been any distinguishable shifts or changes in how cultural references have been translated in the short period of time since AVT has achieved the status of an ‘academic’ subject.

As a starting point, it should be noted that cultural references come in many different disguises such as i.e. sociolects, dialect and slang.

As such, they sometimes very easily turn into the ‘insurmountable hurdles’ as they are so often described. Béhar, who describes himself as a “subtitler - among other things” (2004: 80) had to turn himself into an expert on – among other things – American slang and something that he describes as the “American equivalent of Cockney rhyming slang” 12 (2004: 83, 84) when he was asked to subtitle Boyz N the Hood in 1991. In the following example, it would be very difficult to establish where the cultural reference ends and the American equivalent of ‘Cockney rhyming slang’ starts:

At the end of Boyz N the Hood, Ice Cube decides to leave the neighbourhood. “Five thousand” he says, as he turns and walks into the sunset. Cinq mille didn’t make sense and, pressed for time (and helped by the fact that the line was just muttered and the action was quite explicit), I decided, for the Cannes presentation, not to translate it. A few months later, by the time the film came out, I had learned the “Five thousand” stood for “Audi 5000”, meaning “I’m outta here.” And by then, I had added the missing subtitle: Je me casse (Béhar, 2004: 84).

The challenge of this particular cultural reference lies in the understanding rather than in the translating of it. Once understood, the translation came easy.

What this example clearly demonstrates is that the translation process of cultural references in general, but in subtitling in particular, will always challenge the translator to decide between either amending the reference to fit foreign target audiences or leaving it untouched, a struggle which points to the well-known ‘dilemma of accuracy’. This dilemma is particularly big when speeches of public figures like politicians or indeed, any unscripted speeches need to be subtitled, as spoken language can be, ambiguous, repetitive, contradictory and incoherent. In these cases, the subtitler is torn between the obligation to provide a faithful rendition of the speech or his duty to clarify it and make it understandable and sometimes even more important, culturally acceptable.

12. Alexander Whitelaw and Stephen O’Shea found themselves in a very similar situation when they were asked to subtitle ‘La Haine’ in which they were faced with verlan, franglais, local colloquialisms, slang, bad grammar and misuse of words. For more details see Jäckel (2001).
But not only highly emotional and emotive speeches might cause a national and/or international crisis, even highly emotional and emotive words demand extra vigilance and research from the subtitler. As Béhar reports:

In 1991, while preparing *Boyz N the Hood* for Cannes, I was shocked to hear blacks calling each other “nigger”. Was it an epithet? A term of endearment? An epithet used as a term of endearment? Did we have an equivalent in French? Did I have the space to explain it? (Mercifully, I didn’t.) By 1993 and *Menace II Society*, the word “nigger”, when it was synonymous with “friend”, got subtitled as *copain* or *mec* – “pal” or “guy” – or even “man” (in English). But by then, French slang had caught up (Béhar 2004: 83).

In other cases translational decisions regarding cultural references do not seem to be purely driven by semantics. When associated with cultural customs, traditions and institutions, the subtitler tends to be less concerned about the accurate and detailed translation of every spoken word, but (s)he will be mostly guided by the intention of what the speaker wants to say, by editorial choices and content-related judgments. In brief, the translation will be a plot-oriented rather than strictly semantic one. By way of example:

The hero of a television series says: “You mustn’t forget: I went to a public school, of course”. Even in the English-speaking world the term ‘public school’, as used in England, might be misunderstood. In other English-speaking countries it would be called a ‘private school’ or a ‘boarding school’, while in the United States the term ‘public school’ refers to the state system of education. Even if a suitable translation could be found, no Language Transfer could ever render all the emotional associations linked with the idea of the public school in England (single-sex education, monastic life, separation from parents, social privilege, sports and, not so long ago, corporal punishment). In Language Transfer, therefore, the one aspect of public school education will have to be selected which is most significant for the story and somehow conveyed to the audience. The Language Transfer worker must decide, within the context, if the person who has had a public school education feels ill at ease with women, resentful of his parents for having sent him away in his childhood, or socially superior. The Language Transfer worker must know of all of these subtleties and select the words which fit the context. (…) The interpretative objective therefore is not: What does it say? What does it mean? But: Does my translation make clear what it says? (Luyken et al. 1991: 157)

Kavanagh (2006) analysed another example of a tricky cultural reference which pops up in Volker Schlöndorff’s and Margarethe von Trotta’s film adaptation of *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* (‘The lost honour of Katharina Blum’). Throughout the film, intertitles are used to signal a change form one day to the next. One of these intertitles reads:

**Donnerstag, 6. Februar 1975**

**Weiberfastnacht**

*Weiberfastnacht* refers to the Thursday before *Ash Wednesday*, which is regard-
ed in some parts of Germany (mostly western Germany) as an unofficial holiday, when the working day stops around midday and the festivities begin. Although Weiberfastnacht is celebrated differently in different parts of the country, it does include the cutting off of men’s ties (a symbol of male power of dominance) for which the men are then compensated with a kiss. ‘Weiberfastnacht’ does not exist in English speaking countries thus leaving a ‘gap’. The subtitle for this intertitle in the film reads:

Thursdays, Women’s Shrovetide

The subtitler has first of all omitted the date of the original, probably reasoning that the date is still on screen in the intertitle. The problem with the translation though stems from the fact, that ‘Shrovetide’ refers to the three days before Ash Wednesday which were traditionally a time for confession and absolution in preparation for lent. Weiberfastnacht however, conjures up pictures of celebrations and festivities. Therefore, the translation here does not really provide the ‘cultural equivalent’ one would normally hope for. However, the subtitler did try to imply the time of year in which the story is taking place (see Kavanagh 2006: 8, 9).

Béhar reports on another cultural challenge:

In Boys [N the Hood], Laurence Fishburne upbraids his son, Cuba Gooding, Jr., for hanging out with bad company by using a pejorative reference to African-American comics: “What are y’all, Amos and Andy? Are you Stepin and he’s Fetchit?” Amos and Andy and Stepin Fetchit are not part of French culture and I needed a reference the French could understand. The subtitle reads: Vous jouez à quoi, Laurel et Hardy? Il est Abbott, t’es Costello? The racial element was lost. Ten years later, I haven’t found a better alternative (Robinson and Friday?) but I am still working on it (2004: 84).

In a wider context, it is interesting to note that the degree to which subtitlers expect their audiences\(^{13}\) to know culture-bound items varies from country to country. Diaz-Cintas and Remael point out that whereas e.g. Spanish subtitlers will usually look for translations, Flemish and Dutch subtitlers increasingly tend to just retain cultural references in the case of English or American films, even if this might be quite mystifying for a large part of the audience. And even more interestingly, this trend to keep cultural references unchanged in the subtitles seems to be also becoming more popular in languages like Italian and Spanish, raising issues regarding comprehensibility (Diaz-Cintas & Remael 2007: 205). As an example:

Original: You’ve been a hot topic of conversation ever since you’ve joined the Structure Family.
(N. B. Structure is the name of a retailer.)

\(^{13}\) McQuail points out that the term 'audience' has as abstract and debatable character as for most mass media it is not strictly knowable at all (1994: 283), a fact that doesn’t necessarily help the subtitler when it comes to transferring cultural references.
Subtitle: Sei spesso argomento di conversazione da quando sei alla Structure.
[You’re often a topic of conversation since you’ve been in Structure.]
(Diaz-Cintas/Remael 2007: 206)

Another challenging example:

Original: A: You seem to be in a strange mood.
B: No, no, no. I’m just probably a little bit drunk.
A: On Perrier?

Subtitles: A: Te noto un poco raro.
B: Estaré algo borracho.
[I notice you a bit strange.
–I may be a bit drunk.]
A: ¿Con Perrier?
[With Perrier?]
(Diaz-Cintas and Remael 2007: 206)

With some films, subtitlers are even provided with quite a specific brief14 to leave the culture-specific references intact, as i.e. in the case of 8 Mile::

Even in cases when it is felt that factual references or names of known rappers will not be understood, it is advised to keep them in English, in order to preserve the historical value of the film and to reach local hip-hop fans.
(8 Mile Lyric Translation Guidelines, page 2, in: Taivalkoski-Shilov 2008: 258)15

With a film like ‘8 Mile’, where the main protagonist is a musician, and where the original musical element is a core component of the film, the studio probably rightly advised to leave culture specific names and references in English. But what are the underlying reasons for this seemingly growing trend of not translating cultural references?

The first reason lies in the fast advances and enormous progress of digital technology and the internet which forms the basis of the digital globalisation and which allows us to introduce market and promote new ideas, live styles and products at an as yet unseen speed and with an as yet unseen coverage by digitally abolishing national and geographical borders.

Secondly, with the dissolving of cultural borders, a global ‘melting-pot culture’ seems to emerge, where cultural identity is being redefined by the merging of local

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14. Disney, for instance, has recently forbidden translators to change, and thus domesticate proper names in Disney films (see Oittinen 2004: 104). Woody Allen’s approach to the translation and subtitling of his films on the other hand, could not be more different: For the Spanish translation of Manhattan Murder Mystery he provided an accurate, detailed and 329 page long dialogue list, with a large quantity of detail and explanation, including an introductory note on behalf of Woody Allen, addressed to all translators and thanking them for their ingenuity (see Díaz Cintas 2001:202).

15. However, this turned out to be a guideline which was not rigidly adhered to (see Taivalkoski-Shilov 2008: 259–65).
and global, own and foreign. Our world seems to be developing, or rather melting, into a somewhat unified world of generally known brands, merchandise, TV programs, fashion icons and pop- and sport stars. Nowadays, we seem to be, indeed, living in McLuhan’s ‘global village’. This homogenisation of the world, in which influences from all over the planet play their part, also seems to have taken foot in subtitles. This particular form of globalisation, which does not promote cultural unification but accepts local identities and idiosyncrasies, allows subtitlers to leave cultural references untouched, not because they are difficult to translate but because they have become (or are on the way to become) their own generally recognised, and therefore untranslated, cultural items.

Categorising cultural elements by the method that is applied to translate or not to translate them, as it has been done in the past (i.e. Pederson (2005: 115–21) and Tomaszkiewicz (2001: 239–47) as mentioned above) does have its own merits. However, this relatively narrow definition process also fosters the idea that these cultural references are just yet another ‘translation hurdle’ for the subtitler to overcome. This rather descriptive approach neglects the much wider implication the subtitler’s choice not to translate these references has: The non-translation of these items mirrors the advance, progress and speed of the globalisation of our cultures. Indeed, it could be suggested that these non-translated cultural references should be considered as a measuring device to what degree cultures have become intertwined and how audience are now being regarded as global citizens. So, if the makers of *8 Mile* (and all the other film companies mentioned, who distribute quite rigorous translation instructions with their films) did not want the names of known rappers changed and if they were willing to take the risk that these names might not be fully understood, they not only put – in their own words – “the historical value of the film” above the comprehension of the audience, they, more importantly, reached out to hip-hop fans from all over the world. *Perrier* is surely eager to become an international brand rather than a local one and would - without any doubt - be delighted that in the above mentioned subtitles, at least, they have achieved this already. And who knows, maybe one day we will mention the ‘Structure’ family along with Dynasty and Dallas.

**Conclusion**

To summarize the demands on a subtitler: The subtitler undertakes two language transfers at two different levels simultaneously, firstly the transfer from one language to another while at the same time abbreviating or condensing the text (editorial work), and secondly, the transfer from spoken to written language which (s)he then has to accommodate in a very restricted space and time frame on screen.
Any good translator’s tools of the trade will include the understanding of the nuances of the source language, good writing skills in the target language and a detailed knowledge of the culture of the country or countries in which the source language is spoken. These qualities and qualifications are essential to any translator but will not be sufficient for a subtitler, as (s)he also requires “an empathy with the new audience and an understanding of the audiovisual medium” (Luyken et al. 1991:155) This understanding of the audiovisual medium which includes the aforementioned restrictions and constraints is particularly vital when it comes to translate — or not to translate — (as we have also seen) cultural references.

There seem to be a trend of just leaving cultural references untouched (sometimes at the cost of the audience’s understanding and enjoyment). These non-translated culture-bound items could, among other things, potentially be interpreted as indicators or measuring devices to what degree culture-pairs have become entangled and share and/or exchange certain culture bound items and of how many ‘cultural gaps’ have been narrowed – at least in the minds of subtitlers.

Cultural references in subtitles could be regarded as indicators of how much processes like globalisation have progressed and of how powerful the internet is in terms of sharing information and connecting people. In Mc Luhan’s ‘global village’, where technological devices allow us to communicate and share information with people all of the world and where pictures and films can be send around the globe by each one of us by pressing a button, regardless of any geographical and/or national border, cultures have become ever more inextricably interconnected and entangled. Translational decisions by subtitlers or translational briefs by film companies who increasingly tend to leave cultural references intact should be interpreted as practical consequence of these processes and as a consequence, cultural references represent a measuring indicator of the degree of interculturality of the cultures involved. In order to be able to properly analyse this growing interculturality, and also to answer the call for a “theory of Language Transfer” and a “universally accepted modus operandi” (Luyken et al. 1991:165) for subtitling, more research and, above all, an ongoing monitoring process with regard to how (and if) cultural references are translated, is needed.

Bibliography

Cultural references in subtitles


Abstract

This article seeks to address the lack of research in the field of subtitles by firstly giving a brief introduction into the history of subtitling by way of tracing the dubbing vs. subtitling debate as the advantages and disadvantages of subtitling are almost always discussed in opposition and/or in comparison with dubbing. Also, the challenges of translating culture-bound items described here for subtitling also apply to dubbing, which, again, has its own range of technical and temporal restrictions.

Secondly, this article tries to highlight the extremely difficult and challenging demands on subtitlers by investigating the technical restraints and restrictions, which make the translation of cultural references within subtitles particularly challenging.

In order to set up the framework for this analysis, I will attempt to describe the special translation processes involved in subtitling by analysing different translational approaches for cultural references in subtitles. The main objective of this paper, however, is to argue that a subtitler’s decision of how and, more importantly, if to translate cultural references in subtitles has wider implications than might be perceived at first glance. This paper argues that these cultural references are indicators of how cultures are becoming more and more intertwined through the progress and the advances of digital technology.

Keywords: Audio-visual translation, subtitling, interculturality

Résumé

Cet article cherche à remédier à l’absence de recherche dans le domaine des sous-titres en présentant d’abord une brève introduction sur l’histoire du sous-titrage. Il retrace le débat qui oppose le doublage et le sous-titrage étant donné que les avantages et inconvénients du sous-titrage sont presque toujours débattus par opposition ou en comparaison avec le doublage. De plus, les défis posés par la traduction d’éléments culturels que nous décrivons ici pour le sous-titrage s’appliquent également au doublage qui a lui aussi sa propre gamme de restrictions techniques et temporelles.

En second lieu, cet article cherche à souligner les demandes extrêmement difficiles et exigeantes imposées aux sous-titreurs en examinant les contraintes et les restrictions techniques qui rendent la traduction de références culturelles dans les sous-titres particulièrement difficile.
Afin d’établir le cadre de cette analyse, je tenterai de décrire les processus de traduction spéciaux impliqués dans le sous-titrage en analysant différentes approches de traduction des références culturelles dans les sous-titres. Cependant, le principal objectif de cet article est d’affirmer qu’une décision d’un sous-titreur quant à la manière – ou plus important encore – à l’opportunité de traduire des références culturelles dans les sous-titres a des implications plus larges que ce que l’on pourrait penser au premier abord. Cet article affirme que ces références culturelles sont des indicateurs de la manière dont les cultures s’entrelacent de plus en plus grâce au progrès et aux avancées de la technologie numérique.

Mots-clés: Traduction audio-visuelle, sous-titrage, interculturalité

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