

Comparative Humanities Review

Volume 3 *Translation: Comparative Perspectives*
(Spring 2009)

Article 1

2009

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Allison M. Rittmayer
Bucknell University

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Recommended Citation

Rittmayer, Allison M. (2009) "Translation and Film: Slang, Dialects, Accents and Multiple Languages," *Comparative Humanities Review*: Vol. 3, Article 1.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/chr/vol3/iss1/1>

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Translation and Film: Slang, Dialects, Accents and Multiple Languages

Allison M. Rittmayer
Bucknell University

The birth of the cinema was initially regarded with great promise as a universal method of communication. This was partially true in the era of silent films as there was no need for translation before the introduction of inter-titles. The images filmed may have contained distinct cultural markers, thus rendering them somewhat foreign to spectators outside of the source culture; however, these markers could be absorbed in the way a painting is absorbed. Without linguistic intrusion, it was possible for spectators of foreign films to simply identify characters in regards to their appearance. This identification could also be made easier if the spectator knew what culture the film was coming from, in the way that paintings are understood by virtue of the culture that produced them. More often than not though, early silent films portrayed subjects that did not need any cultural translation. The films of the Lumière Brothers capture events that cross cultural boundaries—the arrival of a train, children fighting, factories letting out. It was not until films began to take on narrative structures and incorporate inter-titles that translation became an issue.

Still in the silent film era, the introduction of inter-titles, narration or dialogue presented on a blank screen between segments of action, brought translation to film in a very basic way. Most inter-titles were not complex or lengthy in order to accommodate audiences of varying levels of literacy. This made translation somewhat easier because there was not as much need to translate style as is seen in the translation of literature. Aside from an absence of elaborate style (which was provided by the acting, rather than the inter-titles), the problems of translating inter-titles are the same problems seen in translating literature. The translator had to choose whether to pursue a word for word translation, or a translation based on the general sense or the inter-titles in their source language. The fact that inter-titles generally were descriptive of the actions carried out on screen may have aided translation because the action could clarify or support any difficulties found in the source text of the inter-titles.

With the introduction of sound, the universality of film was largely destroyed. This also provided the impetus for the creation of national cinemas; directors could now produce films that were specifically targeted to members of their own language group, which is a main component of national identity. As such, characters presented in films could take on distinct identities through their use of language. Every language has multiple forms, whether they differ by formality of tone, or regional pronunciation, or representation of other social characteristics. Suddenly, it became easy for directors to portray differences in characters by the way they spoke, rather through exaggerated actions, expressions, or costumes as in silent films. This also introduced a subtlety into character development because spectators were no longer presented with matter-of-fact inter-titles, which acted somewhat like footnotes to the film, explaining important details about the characters that could not be portrayed on-screen. This nuance did not immediately develop, and exaggeration of action and costume is still an integral part of character development in some modern-day comedies, however the introduction of sound eliminated the need for directors and actors to rely on exaggeration.¹

¹ Exaggeration has mainly been replaced by stock characters, which retain boiled-down elements of exaggerated characters from the early days of cinema.

In the beginning, sound films did attempt to retain some of their universality through the production of multiple language versions.² MLVs were made through the process of “double shooting,” or shooting the same scenes on the same sets but with different casts and crews representative of the language versions to be produced. In some cases, multilingual actors were able to be used, so the same cast would appear in two or three language versions, as was the case for Jean Renoir’s *The Golden Coach*, which was filmed in English, French and Italian.³ The translation of the actual scripts may have given the translated films a higher degree of fidelity to the originals than present day dubbed or subtitled productions. This increased fidelity would come from two sources. First, the translation of the script would allow for a more imitative target text because the translator would not be worried about making the dubbing match the lips of the actor, nor would the translator need to try and paraphrase the dialogue or narration in order to make the subtitles fit on the screen and keep up with the pace of the action. Additionally, in the cases where multilingual actors were used, they would have some access to the source text, as well as the target texts they were trying to produce. Unlike voice actors reading a script for a dubbing, the multilingual actors would not need to simply rely on the target text produced by the translator. The production of such multilingual films seems very similar to translation by committee to me because the actors would be aware of discrepancies between the translations and the source text, and could provide recommendations on the translation in the same way that actors generally have some input on any script they work with.

There are two other types of multiple language version films: remakes and double versions. Remakes are simply instances where a production company will purchase the rights to a foreign film and readapting the scenario to fit the target culture.⁴ The fact that this is called “remaking” or “adaptation” implies that there are varying degrees of fidelity to the original film in such productions. An example of a remake would be the American movie *Three Men*

² Marc Betz, “The Name above the (Sub)Title: Internationalism, Coproduction, and Polyglot European Art Cinema,” *Camera Obscura*. 16.1 (2001): 28.

³ Ibid., 28.

⁴ Ibid., 29.

and a Baby,⁵ a remake of the French comedy *Trois homes et un couffin*⁶ (trans. *Three Men and a Cradle*) by Coline Serreau. The American version of the film makes some minor plot and character adjustments, but overall appears very similar to the original plot of the French movie. However, when a bilingual spectator watches both films, it becomes apparent that the biggest difference between the two versions is the tone of the film's humor, and not on the level of the plot.

The last type of multiple language version film, the double version, is split into two types. The first version is what spectators normally think of when they think of a dubbed film; the actors are all speaking the same foreign language in the original (regardless of the actor's nationality), but the voices have been dubbed over in the target text. The second version is slightly more complicated and is called either a "Babelonian" or polyglot⁷ film.⁸ This is perhaps most popularly seen in "spaghetti westerns" such as *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*, where the actors come from different language groups (in this case, English and Italian), and they recite their dialogue in their native languages during the filming. The dialogue and narration is then completely dubbed over into whatever languages a target text is wanted in. In many cases of Babelonian films, including this practice can be attributed to the use of non-professional actors who fit the appearance or nationality demanded of a role, but do not speak the language the movie is being filmed in.

I have already discussed some of the challenges faced when translating dialogue and narration in film: synchronizing dubbed dialogue with the on-screen movement of lips, the spatial limitations of subtitling, and the need in both dubbing and subtitling for the translation to keep up with the pace of the on-

⁵ *Three Men and a Baby*. DVD, directed by Leonard Nimoy, 1987, Walt Disney Video, 2002.

⁶ *Trois homes et un couffin*. DVD, directed by Coline Serreau, 1985, Home Vision Entertainment, 2005.

⁷ I choose to use the term "Babelonian" because the actors speaking different languages could not understand each other, and the film is not really speaking multiple languages like a polyglot since the dialogue is standardized in the dubbing process. I will discuss what I consider to be a true polyglot film later in this paper.

⁸ Betz, "The Name above the (Sub)Title," 29.

screen dialogue and action. The other general problem of translation in film is distraction of the audience. Because American film produces the largest body of work, American audiences are underexposed to translated films, as compared with their European counterparts. In 2004 in Germany, 85 percent of films shown in theaters were of non-German origin, and of those films between 70 and 80 percent were from America.⁹ This leads to the European population being more accustomed to seeing dubbed films or reading subtitles than Americans. Robin Queen states that “Audiences generally prefer that type of film translation with which they are most familiar.”¹⁰ Herman Weinberg adds that “American audiences will not accept dubbed films.”¹¹

I feel that this rejection of dubbing is mainly apparent in “serious” films and is a result of the mockery made of dubbed versions of Asian Kung-Fu and science fiction films where the dubbed dialogue is often much shorter than the spoken dialogue. This mockery in turn grew out of what Queen stated — since general American audiences are most accustomed to seeing movies filmed in English, they do not prefer any type of film translation, no matter how well intentioned. Watching a dubbed movie distracts the spectator from the action of the film because they are faced with the lack of synchronization between the English dialogue and the movement of the speaker’s lips. With subtitles, aside from Americans not wanting to exert the effort to read, Weinberg quotes Russian director Vsevolod Pudovkin saying that the concentration and attention required to read subtitles means that the spectator, “cannot be expected to gain any impression from the pictorial composition of the original film.”¹² I can attest to Pudovkin’s assertion in that while attempting to analyze specific scenes of French films, I have to watch the scenes twice as many times as I would watch a scene in English. First to fully understand the dialogue I watch the scene at least four times, although I do combine the translation of the subtitles with my own

⁹ Robin Queen, “‘Du hast jar keene Ahnung’: African American English Dubbed into German,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics*. 8.4 (2004): 520.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 520.

¹¹ Herman G. Weinberg, “The Language Barrier,” *Hollywood Quarterly*. 2.4 (July 1947): 334.

¹² *Ibid.*, 336.

translation of the source dialogue rather than rely on the subtitles alone.¹³ Only after I understand the dialogue can I pay sufficient attention to the cinematographic techniques used by the director.

I will now present a series of issues in translation that I feel are particularly important or problematic in the translation of film, including the translation of slang, dialects, accents, and the use of multiple languages within a single film. The issue of translating slang terms is probably the one most common with literary translation, and it is here that I will begin my discussion. Translating slang is problematic in more than one way. First, there is not always an equivalent slang expression in the target language to what is used in the source text. There may also be more than one equivalent expression in the target language, which would force the translator to choose between expressions which might have slightly different connotations. The biggest problem in translating slang is censorship — either performed willingly by the translator, or imposed by some outside body. This censorship can greatly alter the impact a text has in the target language, especially if the use of slang is important to character development or plot development.

In “Translation Effects: How Beauvoir Talks Sex in English,” Louise von Flotow discussed how Simone de Beauvoir’s use of explicit sexual terms was censored, reducing the repetition of specific words within sections of narration, and replacing them with more euphemistic terms.¹⁴ This same type of censorship can be seen in film translations. In *Romance*¹⁵ (1999), directed by Catherine Breillat, some of the script falls victim to this censorship. It is particularly notable in this case because *Romance* is viewed as one of the most, if not *the* most, scandalous, sexually

¹³ If anything, my access to the source language in the case of French films is further distracting and complicating because I am torn between trying to listen and understand, but wanting to read the subtitles to make sure I am understanding correctly. It is even more difficult when I am listening to the French and come across a word I do not know, but that section of dialogue has already disappeared from the subtitles.

¹⁴ Louise von Flotow, “Translation Effects: How Beauvoir Talks Sex in English,” *Contingent Loves: Simone de Beauvoir and Sexuality*, ed. Melanie C. Hawthorne, (Charlottesville, VA: U Virginia Press, 2000), 13-33.

¹⁵ *Romance*. DVD, directed by Catherine Breillat, 1999, Lions Gate, 2002.

explicit films produced in France in recent years. The film follows the sexual discovery of Marie and presents frank depictions of rape, bondage and sadomasochism, and birth amongst other things.

One of the most memorable, and more lighthearted scenes, is also one that succumbs to different levels of censorship in subtitling and dubbing. Marie is shown making out with, and being groped by Paolo, the stranger she met at a bar the night before. They are sitting in Marie's boyfriend's car outside their apartment when Paolo poses the question "*Est-ce que tu veux me faire une pipe?*" — "Do you want to give me a blowjob?" Saying "une pipe" is the most polite way of referring to fellatio in French, but it is technically a slang term. The term "la fellation" is not commonly used. The ensuing dialogue has Marie using the term "une pipe" quite frequently as she explains that she doesn't want to give him a blowjob now, but would rather give him a blowjob the next time they see each other. The English subtitles do a relatively good job of conveying Marie's openness in talking about sex, and consistently use the term "blowjob" as a translation. Perhaps a slightly more polite choice would have been the expression "go down on," but since that can be used to refer to oral sex performed on either a man or a woman whereas "une pipe" is specifically male-oriented, the choice of "blowjob" is not a bad one.

The dubbed version of the scene, however, is quite different. Instead of Paolo asking "Do you want to give me a blowjob," the voice actor demands "Blow me, baby." The effect is quite hysterical to the American viewer, and this distracts the spectator from the earnestness of the conversation. For as much as that makes Paolo's dialogue more vulgar or masculine (a point to which I will return later), Marie's dialogue becomes much more polite. Instead of using "blowjob," she simply refers to "blowing" Paolo, and this only occurs once. In all the other instances where Marie would have said "une pipe" (there are at least 4), the voice actress euphemistically refers to "*that*." The resulting effect makes Marie appear much more reserved about sexuality than she is in the French version. In the case of *Romance* the distraction caused by the need to read subtitles is worth it because the dubbed dialogue is an even greater distraction.

As I mentioned, the dubbing of “*Est-ce que tu veux me faire une pipe?*” into “Blow me, baby,” does serve to give Paolo’s dialogue a hyper-masculine quality, something that is lost in the act of dubbing. The actor intentionally chosen to play Paolo is Rocco Siffredi, a European porn star who was born in Italy. While Siffredi is speaking French in *Romance*, he does speak it with a distinctly Italian accent. The spectator can still get this effect when watching *Romance* with subtitles because they can hear that Siffredi’s pronunciation is different from that of all the other characters. When the voice is dubbed over, the accent is lost, and Paolo is simply given a very deep voice. I think this really changes the presentation of Paolo as “*l’étranger*” — both the stranger and the foreigner, and very much an “Other” to Marie. In the English dubbed version the dual notion of stranger/foreigner is lost and Paolo becomes just a man Marie picked up and doesn’t know. The eroticization of Paolo as the masculine Other could have been retained by choosing a voice actor with an Italian, or other exotic accent.

Another obstacle of translation closely associate with the use of slang is the use of dialects or regional speech. In literature dialects are often produced in their source language through the use of non-standard spelling and grammar conventions. In a sense, this is a first act of translation of an oral form of communication into a written form, and although a dialect is merely a variation of a standard language and can be understood when heard, the transliteration often produces a very foreignizing effect, as is experience with the use of multiple Southern dialects in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. In literary translation, a similar effect can be achieved in the target text by several means. At the very least, if the dialect is not reproduced, the use of dialect in the original can be footnoted by the translator, with some of the use of dialect being described in narrative passages from the original. The translator may also find it possible to produce a similar effect in the target language through non-standard spellings or sentence constructions. In translating film, footnotes obviously cannot be used, and narrative explanations that could explain the use of dialect cannot easily be incorporated. In the case of translating with non-standard spellings and grammar, this is not often done in film because it makes reading subtitles

much more difficult, and cannot necessarily be picked up in dubbing. In some cases however, it is possible to translate from a source dialect to a target dialect within a source and target language.

An example of this is found in German translations of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Robin Queen describes that this translation is not performed along racial lines, but rather focuses on the use of AAVE in urban, working-class settings, and a connection between the use of AAVE and street life.¹⁶ The German translations of AAVE incorporate colloquialisms from across many dialects, mainly *Berlinisch*, *Jugendsprache*, and the more general *Umgangssprachen* into what is called the “urban dubbing style.”¹⁷ The combinative nature of the “urban dubbing style” reflects the fact that in American reproductions of AAVE and other dialects in film, the most common characteristics of the dialect are emphasized to the point of stereotyping the dialect and its speakers. The fact that this is very much an “urban dubbing style,” rather than a style specifically developed for translations of AAVE is illustrated by the fact that the same principles are used to translate AAVE as dialogue between other urban, male characters involved in street life. Queen presents two very complementary examples, the first a section of dialogue from *Boyz N the Hood* between three black men, and a section of dialogue from *Jungle Fever* between three Italian American men from the urban working class. The linguistic characters shared by the German translations of both dialogues include “a palatal realization of /g/ (*jeht’s*); pronominal cliticization (*dassde, kannste*); final consonant deletion (*nich, gefas*); reduction of unstressed syllables (*unser* rather than *unsere*); and informal phrasal and lexical items (*flicken*).”¹⁸ A similar use of “urban dubbing” is seen in the German version of *Good Will Hunting*, where the main characters come from an urban working class background in Boston.¹⁹

¹⁶ Queen, “Du hast jar keene Ahnung,” 521-522, 524.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 521-522.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 533.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 533.

A big challenge to translating film that I have not found addressed in current scholarship is how to translate what I consider to be true polyglot films—films where more than one language is spoken. I will look at the use of both Arabic and French in two different ways: in isolated scenes in *Chaos*²⁰ (2001) directed by Coline Serreau, and integrated with French dialogue in *Inch'Allah Dimanche*²¹ (2001) directed by Yamina Benguigui. In both cases, the challenge for translation is how to translate the language that would already be foreign and subtitled in the original French films.

In *Chaos* the act of translating is made somewhat easier because the scene where Arabic is spoken is separated from the rest of the action of the story because it is a flashback. The flashback features narration in French of Malika's childhood as an immigrant from Algeria, but also includes dialogue in Arabic between Malika's father and the man he wants to marry her to. The effect of the use of Arabic on the French audience is reflected in Malika's confusion over the man's visit and her initial incomprehension of the situation. Some of this feeling of incomprehension is lost on American audiences because there is no difference between the subtitled French and the subtitled Arabic. A spectator must be actively listening while reading in order to sense the difference in languages. With dubbing it is even worse because everything is dubbed into English, with no sense of foreignness inherent in the visitor.

In *Inch'Allah Dimanche* the situation is somewhat different. The use of both French and Arabic occurs throughout the film, and access to language is very important to the action. The story is a family drama, focused again on immigrants from Algeria, although *Inch'Allah Dimanche* is set around 1976, much earlier than *Chaos*. Zouina comes to live with her husband Ahmed in France as part of the *regroupement familial* which allowed Algerian men working in France on permits to bring their families to live with them. Zouina brings with her two sons and one daughter, all of school age, and her mother-in-law, Aïcha. Aïcha is a very traditional Algerian, Muslim woman, and she only speaks a limited amount of French. As she plays a major role in the story,

²⁰ *Chaos*, DVD, directed by Coline Serreau, 2001, New Yorker Video, 2003.

²¹ *Inch'Allah Dimanche*, DVD, directed by Yamina Benguigui, 2001, Filmmovement, 2002.

there is necessarily an intermingling of languages. Zouina speaks both Arabic and French, as do Ahmed and their children, although the children are only seen speaking in French. In a pivotal scene in the film, Aïcha scolds Zouina in Arabic for letting the children draw rather than practice writing. The eldest son asks her why she is so mean (*méchante*) to their mother, and Aïcha replies asking, “*Méchante? Qu’est que c’est méchant? Je ne sais pas qu’est-ce que ça veut dire.*” The son gives her the Arabic equivalent and she dismisses his accusation. Aïcha then tells him that he will now be responsible for teaching his father how to write and read French.

It is very clear that the multilingual nature of this household is central in this scene, however, the complexities are lost in the English subtitles to a spectator who does not know Arabic, or cannot differentiate it from the French in the rapid, and rapidly alternating dialogue. I cannot think of a way to convey this complexity through subtitling in any way other than introducing the subtitle as in Arabic (which would get tedious because of its frequent use in the film), or some other system of identification, such as color-coding the languages. I would be most likely to recommend a sort of hybrid film translation. Well done dubbing would give the possibility of retaining the foreignness and multiplicity. The French dialogue could be translated into English, while the Arabic was left un-dubbed, and translated through subtitles — delivered to American audiences in the same way French audiences would encounter it.

While there are many similarities between literary translation and film translation, these occur at a very basic level. Translating film becomes very complicated because of the need to make sure the translated dialogue and narration, in subtitles or dubbing, is somewhat synchronized with the movements of the speakers lips, gestures, and other actions portrayed on the screen. These contribute to the problems of translating dialects and multiple languages because there is only so much space for subtitling, and dubbing must be done in a manner that is understandable, yet distinguishable. Many of these challenges arise from the fact that, except in the case of remakes and adaptations, film translations are only half-translations. The source text remains half intact in the images projected on screen. This is

what makes it so hard for film translations to be effective. The source text is always present, reminding the spectator that they are hearing or reading a translation. This is tantamount to an actor crossing the cinematic “fourth wall” by directly looking at and addressing the audience, thus reminding them that they are watching a film, and not experiencing a reality.