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## Stylisation and representation in subtitles: can less be more?

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This article considers film dialogues and interlingual subtitles from the point of view of linguistic and cultural representation, and revisits from that perspective the question of loss, as a platform for considering alternative views on the topic and broader theoretical issues. The cross-cultural pragmatics perspective and focus on viewers' reactions that dealing with representation entails cast the question of loss in a different light and opens up avenues for alternative modes of analysis. They make room for subtitles to be construed as producing their own systems of multimodal textual representation and modes of interpretation, and for their text to be recognised as having a greater expressive and representational potential than face values might suggest. This is the argument, informed by Fowler's Theory of Mode (1991, 2000), that is taken up in the paper, and harnessed to the review of examples or observations from recent studies on subtitles, and complementary evidence from dubbing. The capacity of subtitles to produce insights into the cultures and languages represented is of particular interest, and has wider implications for the culturally instrumental functions of subtitles and translation strategies.

**Keywords:** audiovisual translation; linguistic and cultural representation; cross-cultural pragmatics; audience point of view; loss

### Introduction

This article takes up issues about film dialogues and interlingual subtitles in relation to linguistic and cultural representation, and revisits from that perspective the question of loss, as a platform for considering alternative views on the topic and broader theoretical issues. The specificities of audiovisual translation (AVT) and their impact on translation choices have made loss a legitimate and topical concern, not least in subtitling where constraints are perhaps greatest. There are signs that debates may be shifting or broadening their scope, however, with views recognising in AVT a potential to transcend its own inevitable limitations, and to trigger expressivity in and on its own terms. That is the hypothesis that underpins this paper. The capacity of subtitles to produce insights into the cultures and languages represented is of particular interest, and has wider implications for the culturally instrumental functions of subtitles and translation strategies.

The discussion has two distinguishing methodological features. It considers subtitles from a cross-cultural pragmatics perspective, that is from the point of view of communicative practices and their representation; it is not concerned with culture-specific references, already well accounted for in AVT (cf. Aixelá, 1996; Tomaskiewicz,

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2001; Wylter, 2003; Ramière, 2006; Pedersen, 2007; Gottlieb, 2009; Pettit, 2009 and others), but focuses instead on pragmatic aspects of language use in film dialogues and their subtitles, on which work has been more limited, though important (cf. Hatim & Mason, 1997; Remael, 2004; Bruti, 2006, 2009; Pinto, 2010). Its second specificity is that it approaches linguistic and cultural representation from the point of view of audiences.

Shifting away from the relationship between source dialogues and their subtitles, the standard perspective in contrastive studies, and focusing instead on the representations that subtitles may convey to viewers about other languages and cultures is topical, given the ever-increasing public exposure to AV products with multi-language options. It also casts debates in a different light, and opens up avenues for alternative modes of analysis. It makes room for subtitles to be construed as producing their own systems of multimodal textual representation and modes of interpretation, and for their text to be recognised as having a greater expressive and representational potential than face values might suggest. This is the argument, informed by Fowler's Theory of Mode (1991, 2000) and broached in earlier work (e.g. Guillot, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2012), that is taken up in the paper, and harnessed in this case to the review of examples or observations from recent studies on subtitles and complementary evidence from dubbing. The first sections (re-)consider familiar aspects and features of subtitling, but from the point of view of audiences, and assess their implications, from that perspective, as regards loss and other questions. Instances of work that point to alternative outlooks on text analysis in AVT are then examined against the background of the Theory of Mode. The concluding section considers their implications in a broader translation studies context. Examples in the paper are handled primarily from the target language end throughout, in keeping with the line of approach.

### **Subtitles from the audience end**

The main constraints affecting language choice in the cross-over from source to target language in interlingual subtitling are well-documented and hardly need further glossing. Time, space and synchronization constraints, intersemiotic shift from speech to writing, sharing of space with other (visual and aural) sign systems and pressure on short term memory, and the resulting need to enhance readability all combine to make a challenge of the interlingual shift and of attendant textual reductions, adaptations, and transpositions (of registers, connotations, culture specific, or phonostylistic features, for example; cf. de Linde & Kay, 1999; Gambier, 2001, 2003, 2008; Díaz Cintaz & Remael, 2007; Pérez-González, 2007). As a by-product of these specificities, the text of subtitles is inevitably stylised by comparison with corresponding source text, pared down to essentials, in content and form: concise, syntactically simple, paratactic in its mode of expression in stand-alone units (cf. Guillot, 2007; Bruti, 2009). How this unavoidable stylisation might be an asset for subtitling is seldom considered. It has instead fuelled justifiable concerns about 'loss' – of connotations, humour, orality, sociolinguistic markers, etc. – generally identified by reference to parallel ST/TT segments of text, i.e. on the basis of assumptions of comparability, often in short decontextualised extracts. But once the focus shifts to audience reactions,<sup>1</sup> as it must if representation is the concern, it is hard to pin down a locus of comparison. This in turn draws attention to latent methodological blind spots in contrastive studies of source and target texts (ST/TT)

alone. Underlying issues were discussed in an earlier article, but are sketched out below as a backdrop for the discussion (see Guillot, 2012 for a full account). They include cultural asynchrony and receptive variability, and also encompass features of source dialogues and of the film medium, likewise unevenly represented in analyses of subtitles.

### ***Cultural asynchrony and variable reactions to subtitles***

A main methodological problem stems from questions about comparability that arise from an idiosyncrasy of interlingual subtitles, made particularly conspicuous by the focus on representation and audience perception: the target text shown on screen remains inescapably tied to the ST context of what is heard and seen, thereby creating opportunities for covert comparison and uneasy synthesis for viewers,<sup>2</sup> even those for whom overt comparison is not an option, i.e. viewers with no knowledge of the source language (SL). On the other hand, the juxtaposition also encourages viewers to assume that there is a match between the parallel text of source dialogues and their subtitles, and, in particular, that the communicative practices depicted in the (stylised) TT text may coincide with communicative practices in the SL,<sup>3</sup> e.g. that the unmoderated utterances in the examples of subtitles (1) and (2) below may represent the standard practice of native speakers of the source dialogues in the contexts represented.

- (1) Carla? Where's le Henry? (from Guillot, 2012)
- (2) *La riposta è no.* [The answer is no.] (from Bruti, 2009, p. 231)

My argument is that the subtitles have the potential to override literal pragmatic associations of this kind, as the Theory of Mode will help to show below, when the examples are discussed in the broader context, from which they are intentionally removed here.

The point for now is that the ST context/TT juxtapositions produce a cultural asynchrony which makes it a challenge to account for viewers' reactions to subtitles, and for the representations conveyed, because several possible frames of linguistic and cultural reference are activated. These include the frames of reference projected by the film and rooted in foreign practices, and viewers' own frames of reference, rooted in their own native linguistic and cultural practices. Critically, they also include the frames of reference of their assumptions about the foreign language and culture represented second hand in subtitles, and probably others (as Compte & Dageron (2008) suggest for films and Lehtonen (2000) for text in general<sup>4</sup>).

In the examples above, for instance, the formal directness of the request for information in (1) and of the disagreement response in (2) could raise questions for viewers about verbal habits in the source language represented, and prompt others about their reactions. Both utterances are face-threatening acts normally produced with mitigating features in some languages (i.e. indirectly e.g. in (British) English, as against romance languages like French or Italian, where mitigation is more situated, thus less systematically observed). How then is the directness likely to be perceived by native speakers of the TTs, e.g. English for (1), where indirectness would be expected? More critical still, how is this directness likely to be reacted to, in relation to preconceptions viewers may have about the foreign language/culture (e.g. rudeness associated with directness, as is stereotypically the case for German or French;

House, 2006; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005)? In short, what is the impact on audiences of cultural mismatches between the language of the subtitle, the communicative preferences associated with it (e.g. mitigation for English), and what is heard and seen on screen?

These questions have no ready answer, but one thing at least is clear. There is inevitably a great deal of variability in the reactions that result from the interaction of these different frames, a variability compounded by the socio-cultural heterogeneity of viewing publics<sup>5</sup> noted in some work on subtitles, but rarely paid more than lip service to in analysis, as is also the case for cultural asynchrony (with rare exceptions, notably Baumgarten, 2005). As far as linguistic and cultural representation is concerned, this variability alone is enough to expose the limitations of taking the text of subtitles at face value in analysis, which, in turn, raises questions about over-literal comparison. It also has bearings on issues of loss.

### *Intra- to interlingual representations: subtitles as a discrete mode of expression*

Another point to bear in mind is that whatever representations subtitles may convey, they are in any case (interlingual) representations of representations. They correspond to dialogues that are themselves streamlined intralingual depictions of naturally occurring speech, i.e. spoken-aloud fictional written exchanges constructed to serve film narratives and keep eavesdropping audiences in the loop. The organisation of these fictional scripts along a vertical and horizontal dimension (cf. Vanoye, 1985; also Bell, 1984),<sup>6</sup> structural and narrative considerations, cinematic structure, camera work, editing montage, economy, and efficiency concerns, all combine to affect discourse representations and harness linguistic and pragmatic choices to an overall macrostructure (cf. Pérez-González, 2007).

The artefactual language of film has a foot in natural speech, and affords insights into native speakers' sense of their own language practices, as do fictional dialogues generally (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005, pp. 312–37). It also has a life and features of its own, as is comprehensively demonstrated in the work of the Pavia film corpus team, for instance (cf. Freddi, 2009; Pavesi, 2009b). Given the global currency of AV products today, the sociolinguistic impact of film dialogues in both their original and translated forms is an urgent justification for their study (Freddi & Pavesi, 2009, pp. 11–12; Ramière, 2006, p. 153 and others). But we should not lose track of the fact that the text of subtitles is twice removed from its natural source, as it is also in dubbing, and that the constraints that shape it, including the speech-to-writing shift and (macro-)structural features, make it even more idiosyncratic in relation to both the source text and the source language.

Like the variability of the reactions that subtitles are likely to elicit, their uniqueness is an invitation to be circumspect when looking at linguistic and cultural representation and to beware of face-value interpretation and/or textual contextualisation limited to the immediate context. It also casts the question of loss in a different light. Subtitles can fully emulate neither source dialogues nor natural speech; their particularities make them a discrete mode of expression, and challenge comparability. The question then, becomes how their features may shape their expressive capacity and their capacity for representation.

**Representation through the lens of the Theory of Mode: can less be more?*****Loss, representation and the Theory of Mode***

The notion of loss has been critical in drawing attention to important problems of transfer in subtitling, and to strategies for dealing with them, notably for culture-specific references. It is nonetheless based on a methodological fallacy, since it is implicitly predicated on the assumption of a match that the very features of subtitles often make impossible to achieve, if only for purely technical reasons, i.e. before cultural, linguistic, or pragmatic specificities of the languages involved are even considered (e.g. extent of mitigation, as in examples (1) and (2), for instance, or address and modality). The same objection extends to the techniques advocated for circumventing or minimising loss. Compensation, in particular, presupposes loss, whatever the subject of the compensation, e.g. co-text, polysemiotic context (visual elements, sound, costumes, montage, etc.), or narrative situations depicted, as noted in Ramière (2010), where compensation is a linchpin in a welcome discussion about the relativity of loss and about AV researchers' misguided tendency to consider subtitling constraints as impediments. Ramière's argument relates to culturally bound references only, which, as she notes, have to be dealt with directly by translators (Ramière, 2010, p. 101), but emphasises the highly individual nature of responses: foreign audiences do not experience translation solutions as loss since they are not aware of the source, native speaker viewers do not necessarily share all the same references or derive all that is to be derived from source dialogues anyway, and the success of a film does not in any case depend on the completeness of our understanding of references (Ramière, 2010, p. 112).

These observations to some extent undermine the assumption of comparability, which underpins the notion of loss, and lay bare the paradoxical limitations of compensation strategies, at least for features like culture specific references. They do not extend to linguistic and pragmatic features more generally, however, for which there are always opportunities for covert comparison by dint of the intersection of conceptual frames, as shown in the previous section. All the same, they do underscore the key role played by audience factors in shaping reactions to dialogues and their subtitles, and how critical these factors ought to be, too, in appraising the expressive potential of subtitles and their (cross-)linguistic and pragmatic impact. With its cognitive dimension and focus on the interaction between features of text and readers' perceptions, the Theory of Mode (Fowler, 1991, 2000) gives scope to do just that.

The basic idea behind the theory, designed by Fowler to account for the multimodality of written text intended to produce the illusion of speech, is that cues in text are sufficient to trigger particular types of experiences and reactions; it only takes a few cues of orality in a written text, for example, for the text to be experienced and responded to as speech. Texts are not characterised as categories of text or structure, in other words, but as categories of experience. Speech and writing use different channels and cannot strictly speaking coexist in text, but we are all able to recognise the oral in the written and the written in the oral by virtue of our knowledge of the modes and registers of communication, if only passive, on the basis of just a few activating triggers (linguistic features like words, expressions, syntactic or morphological details, e.g. parataxis and elision for orality; Fowler, 1991, 2000, p. 34).

The theory is particularly helpful in addressing the issue of orality in subtitles (see Guillot, 2007), but its principles are also an effective heuristic for dealing with other aspects of text, including linguistic and cultural representation, with the important proviso that the interplay of cues that activate the experience of text should be structured, and not random. In the ‘Carla? Where’s Le Henry?’ example (1), used to illustrate issues here and in the earlier paper,<sup>7</sup> the term of address, ‘Carla’, works as a trigger for response modes that deflects from taking the direct form of the request at its face value, hence from its formal directness being projected as representative of communicative practices in the SL. It is, however, a function of other linguistic choices in the broader context, and one element in an interplay with other features, as sketched out below (see full account in Guillot, 2012). Example (2) then highlights other points about form.

### *Subtitles as networks of cues and representational potential*

In example (1), the use of the first name ‘Carla’ is marked at this point as a conspicuous shift from *mademoiselle Behm* (Miss Behm), used hitherto by the same locutor, the character’s boss, as the expected distance-keeping default mode of address in the work context depicted and for the relationship shown (boss/PA).<sup>8</sup> The interpersonal empathy cued by the shift primes the ensuing request, ‘Where’s Le Henry?’, as non-threatening, despite the absence of moderating features. Punctuation is a key feature: the question mark after ‘Carla’ signals a rising intonation and caring tentativeness in the prompt for attention, and produces a *de facto* pause which also serves to pre-mitigate the request; while the request is overtly direct in form, its perlocutionary impact is not. The shifts in address and in punctuation thus work together to activate a particular mode of interpretation and set the pragmatic value of the text’s linguistic features; they help keep at bay misguided perceptions of communicative practices in the source language. As it happens, the source dialogue line represented, *!Carla je vous demandais où était Le Henry!* (‘Carla I was asking you where Le Henry was’), is heavily mitigated (indirect form of the question, past tense of its verb), and gives evidence that the preference for mitigating face-threatening acts is also observed in French, contrary to its stereotypical reputation for directness and rudeness in relation to English.

The key point from the perspective of representation is that directness in the subtitle is not projected as an attribute of French, but is, rather, an attribute of the subtitle itself, with a value set from within a system with the capacity to generate its own pragmatic meanings dynamically, and project its own representations, for better or for worse.

This feature is also illustrated by a different route in example (2) from Bruti (2009), the first in three unmitigated second pair parts lines in an interaction with a disingenuous and manipulative interlocutor, shown in Table 1 (lines 2, 4, 6), and part of a pragmatic study of compliments in subtitles (see next section).

The paratactic quality, elliptical starkness and pragmatic directness of the subtitles typically exaggerate contrasts, and make the coherence of the text as dialogue correspondingly covert, with each speaker’s contributions standing out on their own, almost as monologues, and producing incongruous propositional juxtapositions. In the sequence *‘Anthea, proprio l’assistente legale!che speravo di incontrare.// Cena al Felicia.// -Ho dei casi che vanno rivisti.’* (Anthea, just the paralegal assistant/I was hoping to meet. // Dinner at Felicia’s.// I’ve got some cases

that need to be revised.//) (Table 1, lines 1, 3 and 5), the stylised bluntness of the statements and invitation provide a context for the stylised bluntness of Anthea's own unmitigated responses, to be responded to first and foremost as a situated feature of the exchange, rather than as a feature of the source text represented. In fact, it is arguably enough to cue the humour that Bruti suggests is lost as a result of the deletion of the postposed adjective 'extraordinaire' in the opening compliment line ('Anthea, just the paralegal extraordinaire I was hoping to see'; Table 1, line 1). The paratactic compliment/dinner invitation/motive juxtaposition heightens the blatantness of the covert causal relationship between them, and raises misgivings about sincerity and motives, triggering a sense of ironical disingenuousness that echoes the tongue-in-cheekness cued by the adjective in the source dialogue line.

Even a cursory read-through of the source dialogue is enough to give a sense, by contrast, of the effectiveness of the subtitles in cueing their own responses, and of the impact of form, as shaped by the constraints of the medium, in triggering them. As was the case for example (1), it is likely that pragmatic settings here, hence reactions to the exchange at this point, are also a function of pragmatic choices cueing aspects of characters' interpersonal relationships earlier in the film. There is indirect evidence for this in the source dialogue, where moderating prefaces in Anthea's otherwise also blunt dialogue lines point back to prior exchanges and sanction a directness in the rejection of the invitation that is otherwise marked in the SL, English (Table 1, line 2, 'I know what that means. [The answer is no]'; Table 1, line 6, 'you've got to [exploit somebody else]'). It is not possible to tell without prior context whether the subtitle in Italian can also register as marked, even if directness is more standard in Italian, by dint of an interplay with possible contrasting depictions of communicative preferences earlier. But even just in this short extract, features of the subtitles still give the sense of internal pragmatic settings.

The capacity of subtitles to capitalise on their specificities to generate their own system of representation has little to do with compensation for loss, but it highlights the interdependence of linguistic choices and narrative/filmic structure, and so reaffirms the desirability to approach subtitle text from a macro-perspective and guard against the limitations of fragmented, micro-level analyses of individual

Table 1. Extract from the film *Philadelphia* (Bruti, 2009, p. 231).

	<i>Subtitles in Italian</i>	Back translation
1	<i>Anthea, proprio l'assistente legale che speravo di incontrare.</i>	Anthea, just the paralegal assistant I was hoping to meet.
2	<b>La risposta è no.</b>	<b>The answer is no.</b>
3	<i>Cena al Felicia.</i>	Dinner at Felicia's.
4	<b>-Devo andare a lezione.</b>	<b>-I must go to a class.</b>
5	<i>-Ho dei casi che vanno rivisti.</i>	-I've got some cases that need to be revised.
6	<b>Sfrutta qualcun'altro</b> [...]	<b>Exploit somebody else</b> [...]
	Source dialogue	
1	Andy: Anthea, just the paralegal extraordinaire I was hoping to see.	
2	<b>Anthea: I know what that means. The answer is no.</b>	
3	Andy: I'm talking of dinner at Felicia's.	
4	<b>Anthea: I've got a class.</b>	
5	Andy: I've got some crazy compelling briefs that need proofing.	
6	<b>Anthea: You've got to exploit somebody else [...]</b>	



subtitles also noted elsewhere (Hatim & Mason, 1997; Ulrych, 2000; Pérez-González, 2007 (for dubbing)), but magnified through the question of representation.

The representation/audience perspective on subtitles and their analysis through the Theory of Mode helps to highlight the autonomy and creative potential of the subtitle system from a cross-cultural pragmatics perspective. There are findings in other recent studies that show convergence with this argument and provide similar reasons for conceiving of translated AV texts as systems in their own right, triggering their own set of pragmatic values for, and reactions to, the language represented. They point to different stances and options on how this potential is, or can be, harnessed, and re-focus attention on questions about the representational functions of AV texts and their relationship with translation strategies.

### **Creative potential of AV text: other perspectives, different applications**

#### *Views from dubbing*

The most empirical observations about pragmatic specificities of translated AV texts and their potential come from corpus work on dubbing, but have implications for subtitling and provide a critical grounding for comments also emerging in studies of subtitles. Two of the findings in Pavesi's work stand out in this respect: the mimetic capacity of some of the features studied and the capacity of selected target features to convey pragmatic meaning and sociolinguistic variation symbolically (Pavesi, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c).

The first derives from Pavesi's study of a subset of features of standard Italian critical in defining conversational text, i.e. personal pronouns, syntactic organisation, connectors, and marked word orders (right and left dislocation, it-clefts; Pavesi, 2009a), in which she explores and confirms the hypothesis that the Italian of films translated from English in the (Pavia) corpus is placed within a specific sociolinguistic space of Italian. In the process, she also demonstrates that some 'spoken features [are] being used as carriers of orality, not randomly but with a degree of consistency and regularity' (Pavesi, 2009a, p. 198), i.e. are 'systematically chosen as privileged carriers of orality from which the impression of spontaneity is derived' (Pavesi, 2009a, p. 209). The connection with the Theory of Mode is clear: the features identified appear to take on conventionalised functions, with a capacity to cue particular responses, and Pavesi's findings closely echo conclusions about features of orality in subtitling and the relative nature of loss derived from application of the Theory of Mode (Guillot, 2007).

Pavesi's second important finding for the foregoing argument relates to a later study of pronominal use in a larger corpus which draws on qualitative analyses (Pavesi, 2009b). The work highlights striking phenomena. It focuses on third person personal pronouns, which, in Italian, have deictic, anaphoric, and pragmatic functions as well as the grammatical functions they have in English, and confirms that, quantitatively, there is overall alignment with spoken Italian (i.e. that there is no undue source language/source text influence on the dubbed dialogues in the corpus). On the other hand, it also draws attention to instances of pronominal usage which stand out as 'marked' for Italian. Some are shown to result from explicitation and some degree of SL transfer, for example to facilitate the identification of referents where no pronoun would normally be required in Italian. Others, however, are shown to fulfil more creative and idiosyncratic functions: some uses are thus identified as

becoming peculiar to dubbing and as symbolic vehicles of sociolinguistic meanings, specifically the foreignness of foreigners' or outsiders' speech in the films and examples discussed. Pavesi sees these instances of overt third person subject pronouns as the kind of feature that may contribute to the 'otherness' that is reported in some evaluations of the language of dubbing (Pavesi, 2009c, p. 141), in studies that presumably advocate naturalness of expression and acculturation as the preferred approach to AVT.

By confirming that some attributes of target texts can become privileged carriers of particular traits and that dubbing can and does 'exploit selected target language features to convey pragmatic meaning and sociolinguistic variation' (Pavesi, 2009b, p. 125), Pavesi provides evidence by a different route of the kind of phenomena revealed by the Theory of Mode, and directs attention to alternative modes of analysis, for dubbing and for subtitling. These observations find an echo in Ranzato (2010), with reference to features that are designed to capture the experience of dialectal or stylistic specificity (of cockney in an Italian adaptation of *My Fair Lady* and rhyming slang in *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, through an unlocalisable form of Italian and magnified use of rhyme respectively), and are argued to point to imaginative strategies for promoting an awareness of difference (see also Ranzato, 2011). The stance here is markedly at odds with acculturation-driven approaches. These points are taken up below in connection with subtitling.

### *Views from subtitling*

Evidence of the expressive potential of AV translated text is also emerging from the few studies of subtitles with a cross-cultural pragmatics focus, and likewise raises questions about translation approaches and strategies. I will refer to three: Bruti's (2009) pragmatic study of compliments in subtitles and of the impact of reduction/simplification on politeness phenomena; Gartzonika and Şerban's (2009) case study of politeness strategies in a Greek comedy with English subtitles; and Longo's (2009) critical account of subtitling Italian dialects into standard Italian in a series of experimental films.

Bruti's study (2009) interestingly finds an unexpected variety of syntactic patterns and linguistic expressions representing compliments in subtitles, i.e. greater than in frameworks of reference (Manes & Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson & Manes, 1980, for compliment formulas; and Rose, 2001, for their representation in film dialogues). The result is said to be surprising in view of the standard tendency to edit out features considered less critical for conveying conceptual meaning, i.e. with expressive or pragmalinguistic rather than factual import (Bruti, 2006, 2009; Hatim & Mason 1997, 2000). Importantly from the point of view of the foregoing argument, it points to the capacity of subtitling language to harness the resources of the linguistic medium as cues to fulfil its own expressive and pragmatic objectives despite constraints, with no compelling need to conform to language manifestations in authentic speech (as also noted in Rose (2001) about compliments in film dialogues, with the same implications). This is an interesting counterpoint to questions of loss adverted to elsewhere in Bruti's study (e.g. of humour, as mentioned in the previous section).

There are comments with similar kinds of implication in Gartzonika and Şerban's (2009) study, in relation to differential uses of non-standard language in the English subtitles of the film's Greek dialogues. Gartzonika and Şerban note an interplay of

exaggerated and toned-down uses of offensive language in the subtitles, which produces marked contrasts in the text. This interplay is queried as curious, but is not random, and suggests that the differentiation may work strategically with an internal setting of values and conventionalisation of function, as Gartzonika and Şerban themselves imply (and is observed in Guillot, 2010). The approach that implicitly underpins these observations is acculturation, but some of the examples and comments in this and other studies open up other perspectives, as do Ranzato's (2010) for dubbing.

This is the case in an example of literal translation that Gartzonika and Şerban identify as offensive and marked from the point of view of English, but perfectly acceptable for the Greek context shown (i.e. 'The little whores, how they grew up in two months!' [Greek soldier's exclamation about his baby girls]). The line is said to be incongruous with what is shown on screen, i.e. body language and facial expression showing up the character's joy and love for his children. The example is seen as illustrating different politeness strategies across languages and possibly poor translation management of cross-cultural pragmatic differences, and the incongruity is presented as likely to trigger misguided reactions (that something is wrong with the subtitle; Gartzonika & Şerban, 2009, p. 249). The text/action mismatch could also be argued to cue that the text represented should *not* be taken literally in relation to English language expectations, however, and that perceptions should adjust to values conveyed, albeit through English, about the source language itself. The cueing is compounded by features of the subtitle, i.e. the tell-tale exaggeration and orality conveyed by the exclamation and the foregrounding of the offensive term through left-dislocation. The possibility is implicitly recognised in comments about audiences in the study: Gartzonika and Şerban account for the 'literal, nonmediated (and, ultimately, foreignising) translation' as designed to fulfil the expectations of particular audiences of second or third generation Greek immigrants in the UK or the US, likely to be exposed to the Greek language and culture at home or elsewhere and to have a sense of communicative practices in the Greek source (Gartzonika & Şerban, 2009, p. 249). Their observation makes room for the same reaction to be triggered for audiences generally, by virtue of the discrepancy. Apart from drawing attention to the key function of visual features in the interplay of cues triggering responses to the text of subtitles, the analysis from this angle highlights the capacity of this interplay to cue difference and otherness, and points to alternative ways of conceiving of approaches to subtitles.

This capacity is illustrated in the strategies discussed in Longo's (2009) article on subtitling dialects into standard Italian in films specifically intended to sensitize Italian audiences to otherness, in discriminated-against varieties or dialects of their language and the culture they represent (Longo, 2009, p. 99). The context and justification for subtitling in this instance, i.e. to make the South of the country project itself as it sees itself, rather than being determined and constructed by prevailing dominant views, prompted distinctive subtitling methods and strategies: captions were kept to the minimum necessary to follow the plot, there was no attempt to render idiomatic expressions in an equivalent Italian, no translation was provided where contextual inferencing could be enough to recover meaning, and Italian itself was foreignised to retain the sense of the dialects represented. The overall intent was that the 'spectator should not only abandon the source language text but also have a critical approach to it' (Longo, 2009, p. 103) and be helped to penetrate the dialects represented and their culture. As Longo notes, the subtitles in

the films discussed in the case study ‘do not try to recreate an equivalent in Italian of what is said in the source language, but rather provide the audience with a key to the source language, so that it is not only dialect which retains its predominance but also the culture’ (Longo, 2009, p. 105). What audiences are exposed to, in other words, are stylised forms of language and cues of different types that cumulatively trigger modes of interpretation with critical attributes; they preclude taking subtitles at their face value and they help ensure that the language represented in the subtitles is responded to by reference to the frames activated by the culture shown on screen, and not by reference to the features of the viewers’ own language.

### **Concluding comments: strategies revisited**

The examples discussed in Longo’s case study are of course a very special case, since the assumption is that the source language/dialect, as a variety of speech deviating from the standard language, can be understood to some extent. All the same, the principles adopted, the rationale behind them, and the film directors’ decision to magnify cultural asynchrony as a means of keeping its adverse effects in check provide an interesting counterpoint to other more standard approaches. Inevitable losses pale into insignificance, relatively, by comparison with what is safeguarded in the negotiation of conflicting ends, as Longo himself notes in his concluding comments (Longo, 2009, pp. 107–8), and by comparison with what is safeguarded of the essence of the source language and culture. These film directors’ experiments are a compelling embodiment of subtitles’ capacity to work as a code, generating its own system of multimodal representation, in line with the principles discussed here with reference to the Theory of Mode and converging analyses in AVT. Their stance and approach may well seem extreme. It is also difficult to reconcile with market pressures or the supposed expectations of audiences (i.e. achieving economic viability, safeguarding entertainment value) and with translators’ practices and the pressures of their trade. But they are at least an incentive to reconsider some of the assumptions associated with subtitling in terms of representational functions and strategies.

The tensions between acculturation and the foreignising tendencies seen in Ranzato and Longo’s examples are not new. They have been vigorously exposed in Nornes’ confrontation of ‘corrupt’ and ‘abusive’ subtitling, for example, i.e. subtitling that ‘conforms the foreign to the framework of the TL and its cultural codes’, as against a subtitling that avoids the erasure of difference and seeks to ‘intensify the interaction between the reader and the foreign’ (Nornes, 2007, p. 178; first published 1999). They reflect wider debates in translation studies (see Berman, 1999; Venuti, 1995; and others). These debates have had a relatively limited echo in AVT, and acculturation remains by and large the strategy of choice,<sup>9</sup> despite the boost given to alternatives by amateur subtitling, for example, and its ideologically unbound target text-resistant creativity. Díaz Cintas sees these practices as generating ‘hybrid forms that could well be the seeds of future conventions and norms’ (Díaz Cintas, 2008, p. 7; cf. also Pérez-González, 2006; Nornes, 2007) and they are indeed beginning to percolate into mainstream practices (e.g. as in the UK BBC *Human Planet* programmes<sup>10</sup> (2011), for example, with their subtitles in different fonts, phased in and out at different paces and in different places, and sharing the space with audio commentaries). What is particularly interesting about these hybrid forms is that they recognise in audiences a capacity to respond to otherness in form and

language and to competing sources of information that challenge the traditional ideals of readability and invisibility that have often underpinned acculturation strategies (cf. Pedersen, 2010), e.g. that the best subtitle is the one that the viewer reads unknowingly (Díaz Cintaz & Remael, 2007, p. 151). With their ever-increasing exposure to new technologies and new media, viewers are now able to manage complex text-image relations. Nornes considers the time ripe for ‘abuse’, i.e. for taking advantage of these talents to alert viewers to the foreign (Nornes, 2007, p. 186). It is ripe also to acknowledge Gambier’s call to approach AVT ‘not as a constellation of problems, but as a valuable asset addressing the need for multilingual and multicultural communication in the international arena’ (Gambier, 2008, p. 12).

There are many challenges along the way, as Gambier’s review of developments in AV research make clear. What the discussion in this paper highlights is the desirability to get to grips with the perceptual and cognitive mechanisms that govern reactions and responses to subtitles as text, of which the Theory of Mode is only able to give an intimation, and to better understand how they may shape sensitivity to otherness. Recent reception studies focusing on volume of textual information and comprehension of content confirm that viewers have greater processing responsiveness and resilience than current norms give them credit for (cf. Bairstow, 2011; Künzli & Ehrensberger-Dow, 2011; Tuominen, 2011) and also pave the way methodologically. With linguistic and cultural representations, collecting audience responses and appraising the cross-cultural impact of subtitles is complicated by the kinds of variability identified in earlier sections, and the specificities of audiences in different contexts (e.g. as in the example reported in Longo). The task also presupposes other critical activities: building up and extending to subtitles film corpora like the Pavia or the Forlì corpora (Heiss & Soffritti, 2008; Valentini, 2008; Freddi & Pavesi, 2009), to make it more practicable to work with macro-structures and assess the relationship between subtitle systems and film narratives, thus systematising studies of representation and giving empirical validity to findings (including by cross-reference to contrastive work) (as done for dubbing with the Pavia corpus, for example); and extending corpora to languages and cultures with fundamentally different cultural, linguistic, cinematic, or indeed research assumptions. And it may go hand in hand with associating the public in our debates by putting them into the public sphere, in line with the controversial but challenging research impact agenda currently promoted in the UK, so that they can make their own minds up about whether things get ‘lost in translation’, or about the critical value of what may or may not be wacky experiments, like Godard’s subtitles of his 2010 *Film socialisme*.

## Notes

1. The use of the term ‘reaction’ reflects the distinctions borrowed from Chesterman (2007) in Gambier (2008) to draw to attention the absence of consensus on the question of reception of AV products, i.e. *reactions* on the cognitive level, *responses* in behavioural terms, and *repercussions* of a cultural order.
2. This feature is what makes Díaz Cintas describe subtitling as ‘vulnerable translation’, i.e. open to criticism to anyone with even only minimal knowledge of the ST (cf. Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007, p. 57). The focus here is not on the spotting of differences, however, but on assumptions of sameness in communicative preferences.
3. However aware audiences may be of other types of discrepancies, e.g. in length, as famously highlighted through interpreting in Copolla’s 2003 film *Lost in Translation*.

4. See also discussions of uncertainty in Pym (2009) and others, and Tomasziewicz's comments about the impact of different cultural cognitive backgrounds on source and target viewers' responses to non-verbal signs (Tomasziewicz, 2001, 2009).
5. In terms of age, gender, background, education, experience of (foreign) media products, etc.
6. Film dialogues overtly portray the interaction of the fictional characters involved, but ultimately and covertly address the audience, i.e. are thus, according to Vanoye (1985), organised along a 'horizontal' and 'vertical' dimension (see also Pérez-González, 2007; Remael, 2004).
7. From the 2001 Jacques Audiard film *Sur mes lèvres* (Read my lips), DVD version. ©2001 Sédif-Cine B-Pathé. Image Production – France 2 Cinema.
8. The character is now addressed at a personal level rather than as an employee. This is an overt sign of the compassion that her boss has shown towards his stressed PA, unlike all her other abusive male colleagues throughout the film and at this point (Carla has just missed a question in an important staff meeting).
9. Neither reaching a wide foreign audience and achieving high box-office records nor making new audiences cry, laugh, or learn as much with subtitled or dubbed film versions as with their original, as their aim is typically defined in Hurtado by reference to Skopos' theory (Hurtado, 2009, p. 76), for example, is in fact necessarily dependent on acculturation (see Gottlieb, 2009, for example), nor indeed on a match between source and target text (as the entertaining examples of film or video extracts shown on YouTube with different sets of soundtracks or subtitles and their popularity with the public make clear; see e.g. the parodies of the film *Downfall*).
10. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/humanplanetexplorer/>

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