Sociolinguistics and linguistic variation in audiovisual translation

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Introduction

This chapter examines audiovisual translation (AVT) from the perspective of sociolinguistics, with an emphasis on linguistic variation, i.e. the ways in which language is used differently in different places by different people in different situations. Special attention will be paid to issues arising from the growing awareness of the importance and implications of the different forms of language that are used in different social contexts. To explore these issues, this chapter will rely on a range of key sociolinguistic concepts that are defined and critiqued in the next section.

Key concepts in sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is usefully defined by Spolsky (1998: 3) as ‘the field that studies the relation between language and society, between the uses of language and the social structures in which the users of language live’. A basic premise of sociolinguistics is that ‘a language—any language—is full of systematic variation, variation that can only be accounted for by appealing, outside language, to socially relevant forces and facts’ (ibid.: 4). Sociolinguistics seeks to ‘map linguistic variation on to social conditions’ in order to find out how language varies synchronically (at a particular period) and diachronically (through time) (ibid.). Sociolinguistics, as Spolsky stresses (ibid.: 24), is therefore ‘concerned with language in situ and in vivo, alive in its geographical and social setting and space’.

In its attempt to understand linguistic variation, sociolinguistics focuses attention on the ways in which members of a ‘speech community’ communicate by drawing on a ‘repertoire’ comprising ‘a set of language varieties’ as well as ‘a set of norms for using them’ (ibid.: 25). This approach is capable of wide, flexible application, with ‘no theoretical limitation on the location and size of a speech community’ (ibid.). Thus, depending on the purpose of study, a speech community can be located at, below or above the national level, and may refer to, for example, a neighbourhood, a city, a region, a country, or a transnational, digitally linked network. Moreover, the concept of ‘variety’, which can be broadly defined as ‘any identifiable kind of language’ (ibid.: 6), allows patterns of linguistic variation to be studied in terms
of a wide range of categories including dialect, style, register, genre, sociolect, diglossia, and code-switching. A discussion about these categories will be useful to analyze audiovisual translation from a sociolinguistic perspective.

A dialect can be defined as a ‘variety of language used recognizably in a specific region’ (Spolsky 1998: 122). The first point to note is that, important as they are, geographical differences alone may not fully explain linguistic variation; social factors may come into consideration. Thus, in Britain, the same term ‘headache’ will be used, and pronounced with the educated accent, by those from the top social class, whereas ‘speakers from the lowest class will use skullache, headwarch, sore head, and other forms, in a variety of pronunciations, depending on where they are from’ (Crystal 1997: 39; emphasis in the original). This example also illustrates the extent to which dialects may be stigmatized as ‘sub-standard varieties of a language, spoken only by low-status groups—implicit in such comments as “He speaks correct English, without a trace of dialect”’ (Crystal ibid.: 24). Indeed, as Spolsky (1998: 30) notes, dialectal differences ‘are regularly transformed into powerful mechanisms for asserting and recognizing social differences’. But the dichotomy between dialect and language is problematic, not least because dialects form a linguistic continuum that can be broken by political factors into languages. For example, with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the dialect continuum of Serbo-Croatian split into Serbian and Croatian as separate languages (ibid.). In fact, in sociolinguistics, ‘all languages are analysed into a range of dialects’, and ‘everyone speaks a dialect—whether urban or rural, standard or non-standard, upper class or lower class’ (Crystal 1997: 24).

The process and attendant problems of creating a standard language are often discussed by sociolinguists under the heading of ‘standardization’. Standardization may involve selecting a regional variety as the official medium of communication. The standard variety, codified in grammars, dictionaries and works of literature, will then be taught in schools, used in the media and other institutions, and considered to be the correct form of the language. As Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015: 37) note, ‘the standard variety of any language is actually only the preferred dialect of that language’, although it is often seen as ‘the natural, proper, and fitting language of those who use—or should use—it’ (ibid.: 34). This popular perception promotes what Wardhaugh and Fuller refer to as ‘the standard language ideology’, i.e. the fact that ‘[p]eople tend to think of a language as a legitimate and fixed system which can be objectively described and regard dialects as deviations from this norm’ (ibid.: 33). Because command of the standard variety confers power and prestige, standardization may be resisted on the grounds that the standard variety ‘enhances the powerful position of those who speak it, while diminishing all other varieties, their speakers, and any possible competing norms’ (ibid.: 35). As will be discussed below, researchers of audiovisual translation have paid increasing attention to the interaction of social and geographical factors in linguistic variation, as well as the ideological implications of the use of dialect.

Whatever the dialect they use, speakers can choose different styles, registers and genres that they consider suitable for different social contexts. Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015: 52) use the term style to refer to the level of formality adopted in speech or writing, which can be affected by a variety of factors, including the type of occasion, the level of intimacy between the participants, and their differences in terms of, for example, age and social class. It is also worth noting that shifts in levels of formality can be indicated by switching between the standard language and a non-standard variety. As Crystal (1997: 42) explains, a ‘Berlin business manager may use standard German at the office and lapse into local dialect on returning home’.
Register, on the other hand, denotes ‘specific ways of speaking associated with particular professions or social groups’ (Wardhaugh and Fuller 2015: 52). Speakers acquire different registers through interaction with different social groups, and can use a register to ‘construct an identity at a specific time and place’ (ibid.: 53). In particular, a sense of group identity can be created or upheld by using the associated jargon. As Spolsky (1998: 34) notes, ‘[j]angs and other closed peer groups often develop their own forms of jargon to serve as markers of group membership and also to make their speech less intelligible to outsiders.’ Of particular interest to the remit of this chapter is ‘slang’, which Spolsky (1998: 35) defines as ‘a kind of jargon marked by its rejection of formal rules, its comparative freshness and its common ephemerality, and its marked use to claim solidarity’. With its frequent use of taboo expressions (such as ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’), slang may be indicative of liberation, subversion or dissent. Unsurprisingly, as Spolsky notes, ‘[s]lang is a feature of the speech of the young and the powerless’ (ibid.: 36).

Genre also connects linguistic analysis to the context of use, but differs from style and register in its emphasis on ‘the conventional structures used to construct a complete text within the variety’ (Biber and Conrad 2009: 2). The genre of humour, which has attracted considerable attention in the study of audiovisual translation, is especially amenable to analysis from a sociolinguistic perspective. Humour ‘frequently plays on stereotypes’ (Chiaro 1992: 7) and makes extensive use of cultural signs such as ‘institutions, attitudes, beliefs, typical practices, characteristic artefacts, etc.’ (Nash 1985: 9). These references provide humour with an effective means of creating a sense of self and community. As Nash (ibid.: 9) notes, ‘[h]umour is not for babes, Martians, or congenital idiots. We share our humour with those who have shared our history and who understand our way of interpreting experience.’ Researchers of audiovisual translation have long been preoccupied with translation problems concerning humour, jargon, slang, taboo expressions, different levels of formality, and stylistic shifts between a standard and a non-standard variety, but conceptualizing such issues from a sociolinguistic perspective encourages a closer scrutiny of the connection between these linguistic forms and the social contexts in which they are used.

Sociolect (also called social dialect) ‘describes a language variety that is characteristic for a socially defined group’ (Bussmann 1996: 439). Factors involved in defining a social group may include ‘occupation, place of residence, education, income, “new” versus “old” money, racial or ethnic category, cultural background, caste, religion, and so on’ (Wardhaugh and Fuller 2015: 42). There seems an obvious correspondence between social and linguistic differences in such cases as the British public-school sociolect (ibid.). But analysis of sociolect may in fact involve complex issues, some of which are illustrated by research on ‘Kiezdeutsch’, a sociolect spoken by ‘multiethnic groups of urban youths in Germany’ (ibid.: 43). To start with, while non-standard sociolects are often negatively perceived (‘lazy, sloppy, and degenerate’ are some common adjectives used to describe these varieties), it has been argued that features of Kiezdeutsch ‘are part of normal language development and variation, not a bastardization through foreign influence’ (ibid.). Furthermore, it has been argued that speakers of Kiezdeutsch are not limited to ‘socially marginalized youths of immigrant background’, but also include monolingual German speakers (ibid.). This suggests that a sociolect is acquired through social interaction, and that ‘the identification with a group is a key element in the development of a social dialect’ (ibid.: 45). In recent years, as will be discussed below, issues of power relations and sense of identity concerning the use of sociolects have been brought to the fore in the study of audiovisual translation.

Diglossia refers to ‘a situation in which there are two distinct codes with clear functional separation’ (Wardhaugh and Fuller 2015: 90). Used originally to refer to varieties of the
The definition of terms such as style and register adopted here are
widely used by sociolinguists, but scholars of audiovisual translation may employ such terms in slightly different ways depending on the theoretical frame of reference. For example, register is used by Hatim and Munday (2004: 347) within a functional systemic framework to refer to ‘variation in context, relating to the language user (geographical dialect, idiolect, etc.) and/or language use (field or subject matter, tenor or level of formality and mode or speaking vs writing)’, so that register analysis covers regional dialect, sociolect as well as level of formality. It should be noted that such tools of analysis, as used in functional systemic linguistics, are compatible with a sociolinguistic approach to the study of audiovisual translation, because in sociolinguistics, as noted above, social and geographical factors often come into consideration in the study of linguistic variation, and terms such as style, register and genre overlap in meaning. The remainder of this chapter discusses different issues of audiovisual translation from a sociolinguistic perspective, but it is worth remembering that these issues are in fact interrelated.

Subtitling and dubbing of linguistic variation

Medial constraints

Problems of translating dialect, slang, taboo expressions, and different levels of formality have been much researched, with special attention given to medium-specific and other constraints facing the audiovisual translator. Audiovisual translation differs from literary translation in one crucial aspect: an audiovisual text is directed at both hearing and sight. Whether it is dubbing or subtitling, the translation of dialogue is directly affected by the mise-en-scène, music and written signs on the screen. In professional practice, the dubber faces the challenge of lip synchronization, while the subtitler must fit the subtitles into the available space on the screen, follow the rhythm of the original dialogue, and ensure sufficient time for the viewer to read the subtitles.

These medium-specific constraints are discussed by Pettit (2005) in connection with translation problems concerning levels of formality. Pettit examines a range of examples from the dubbed and subtitled versions of three films—Wayne Wang and Paul Auster’s 1995 films *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face*, and Jane Campion’s 1993 film *The Piano*—to determine whether and why levels of formality are retained or not. The sample shows an interesting diversity: *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face* are set in 1990s Brooklyn and characterized by the frequent use of colloquialisms, whereas in *The Piano*, set in mid-nineteenth century New Zealand, ‘the mode of expression tends to be more formal, in keeping with Victorian conventions of the era’ (Pettit 2005: 53). This sample is studied in order to ‘establish the extent to which coherence is secured in relation to verbal, non-verbal, audio and visual signs of the audiovisual text’ (*ibid.*: 51). In *Smoke*, for example, the shopkeeper Auggie makes a compliment to his regular customer Paul for becoming a contributor to *The New York Times*: ‘That’s a feather in your cap, man.’ In both the dubbed and subtitled versions, this idiomatic expression is translated as the colloquial *Tu devrais être fier comme un pou* (‘You must be as proud as a peacock’), in coherence with the characters’ demeanour and mode of communication on the screen (*ibid.*: 54). In *The Piano*, on the other hand, we hear the mute Ada’s inner thought about her fiancé: ‘Were it good he had God’s patience.’ In both the dubbed and subtitled versions, this sentence is translated literally as *Il serait bon qu’il ait une patience divine*, so as to ‘fit the eloquent style of the character’ (*ibid.*: 56). In each of these examples, the level of formality is maintained in both the dubbed and subtitled versions.
But retaining the style of the original dialogue may prove difficult, and Pettit’s analysis of stylistic shifts yields useful findings. First, lip synchronization often causes a shift in the level of formality and a reduction in the coherence of the dubbed dialogue with narrative elements such as characterization. In *Smoke*, Auggie suggests to Paul: ‘You’ll never get it if you don’t slow down, my friend.’ The first part of that sentence is rendered as *Tu ne verras pas* (‘You won’t see [the point]’) in the dubbed version, probably in order to achieve partial synchronization between ‘you’ll never’ and *tu ne verras*, thus resulting in a loss of the familiar tone of the original dialogue. This informal style, however, is more successfully reproduced as *Tu ne pigeras pas* in the subtitled version, ‘in keeping with Auggie’s easygoing character and the informal setting of the sequence’ (Pettit 2005: 57).

Second, a colloquial expression in the original dialogue may be deleted or substituted with a more formal expression if a shorter subtitle is required. In *Smoke*, the black teenager Rashid says, ‘If the guy from the check-cashing place hadn’t run off screaming bloody murder, he would have shot me.’ The subtitler leaves out ‘screaming bloody murder’ and uses the more formal term *employé* (‘employee’) for the sake of condensation, whereas the dubbed dialogue displays a colloquial vividness with the additions of *le gars* (‘the bloke’) and *hurlant comme un malade* (‘yelling like a madman’) (*ibid.*: 58).

Third, in the absence of an equivalent expression in the target language, the dubber or subtitler may focus on the denotative meaning at the expense of the speaker’s stylistic identity. In *The Piano*, Morag is a middle-aged immigrant from England with racist views about the Maoris, and ‘upholds British traditions and etiquette at every occasion’ (Pettit 2005: 59). Referring to Ada’s wedding dress, Morag says, ‘Careful, the lace is most fragile.’ Here, the use of the term ‘most’, in the sense of ‘very’, suggests a formal style that is ‘indicative of social class and formal setting’ (*ibid.*). The dubber translates ‘most’ as ‘très’, while the subtitler leaves out the term and uses an exclamation mark ‘to portray the pedantic nature of the speaker’ (*ibid.*). Both translations miss the social and cultural connotations of the English term.

Finally, the dubber or subtitler may use an expression which is more colloquial than the original one in order to enhance characterization, or to compensate for failing to reflect the informal style elsewhere. In *Blue in the Face*, the ‘man with unusual glasses’ (played by Lou Reed) says, ‘And if there was probably a childhood trauma that I had . . .’ Here, the dubber uses a more colloquial term *gosse* (‘kid’), because the character usually ‘talks about various events in a relaxed, informal manner’ (Pettit 2005: 60). In this connection it is worth noting that ‘the voice of the dubbing actor can compensate, to a certain extent, for meaning which been changed or lost’ (*ibid.*: 62).

**Censorship**

In addition to medium-specific constraints, the audiovisual translator also works under the constraint of censorship concerning the use of slang and taboo expressions. According to Rittmayer (2009: 6), the ‘biggest problem for translating slang is censorship—either performed willingly by the translator, or imposed by some outside body’, because 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’. This point is illustrated by an example drawn from Catherine Breillat’s 1999 film *Romance*. In one scene, the central character Marie ‘is shown making out with, and being groped by Paolo, the stranger she met at a bar the night before’, and at one point Paolo asks, *Est-ce que tu veux me faire une pipe?* (‘Do you want to give me a blowjob?’) (Rittmayer 2009: 7). In French, using ‘une pipe’, which is
‘technically a slang term’, is ‘the most polite way of referring to fellatio’, and the term is used by Marie several times in the scene. Marie’s ‘openness in talking about sex’ is successfully brought out in the English subtitles, which ‘consistently use the term “blowjob” as a translation’ (ibid.). In the dubbed version, however, ‘the voice actor demands “Blow me baby”, so that Paolo becomes more vulgar or masculine’ (ibid.). At the same time, Marie ‘becomes much more polite’ and ‘much more reserved about sexuality’, as she mentions ‘blowing’ only once and ‘euphemistically refers to “that”’ throughout the scene (ibid.). Moreover, in the original dialogue, Paolo—played by the Italian-born porn star Rocco Siffredi—speaks French with an Italian accent, and is portrayed as ““l’étranger”—both the stranger and the foreigner, and very much an “Other” to Marie’ (ibid.). In the dubbed version, the accent is gone, and with it, the ‘dual notion of stranger/foreigner’ (ibid.).

Taboo expressions

Apart from censorship and medium-specific limitations, Fernández Fernández (2009) identifies two other important issues involved in the translation of taboo expressions. The first concerns the use of the standard language in audiovisual translation. Using the standard accent for dubbing means excluding regional expressions and pronunciations, such that ‘the translation of swearwords tends to be watered-down and generalised’ (ibid.: 213). In Spain, this ‘imperative’ to use the standard language for dubbing comes as a consequence of economic constraints, insofar as ‘it allows film-makers to commercialise the same film throughout the Spanish-speaking market, reducing costs in marketing and distribution’ (ibid.). The second issue concerns excessive literalism, which leads Fernández Fernández to caution against the potential pitfalls of the strategy of foreignization, as advocated by Venuti (1995). By ‘allowing cultural and linguistic differences to stay intact in the translation’, the audiovisual translator risks rendering the dialogue unnatural (Fernández Fernández 2009: 213). Examples include maldita sea (‘damn it’) and hijo de perra (‘son of a bitch’) (ibid.: 212). From a sociolinguistic perspective, it is important to situate the word of caution offered by Fernández Fernández in the context of the sharp differences of power between countries: ‘not only do we imitate America’s way of life, we also transfer America’s way of speaking to the Spanish language’ (ibid.). In response to excessive literalism, Fernández Fernández (ibid.: 213) recommends that the strategies of domestication and foreignization ‘be applied in a balanced way according to specific situations’.

Greenall (2012), on the other hand, uses Alan Parker’s 1991 film The Commitments as an occasion for reflection on the target audience as a determinant of translation strategy concerning the use of taboo expressions. Of the 274 instances of swearing, only 148 appear in the Norwegian subtitled version (ibid.: 53). This radical reduction in swearing is unlikely to be the result of censorship or the constraints of screen time and space, so Greenall (ibid.: 57) concludes that probably ‘the subtitler is operating on the assumption that the swearing that is missing in the subtitles should somehow be available to the audience by virtue of the larger context’. Furthermore, Greenall (ibid.: 58) notes that ‘in Norway today, a large part of the audience of a film such as The Commitments will be fairly fluent in English’. Thus Greenall (ibid.) suggests that researchers of audiovisual translation critically reflect on the common assumption that ‘the audience has no knowledge of the source language, and hence is completely at the mercy of the translator or subtitler’ (ibid.). Hjort (2009: 6) revisits another common assumption about the audience of audiovisual translation, namely that ‘swearwords are stronger when written than when spoken’. Hjort’s research in Finland shows that viewers ‘are tolerant of swearwords and expect to see them rendered as faithfully to the original as
possible in terms of harshness’ (ibid.). Studies such as these suggest that assumptions about the audience of audiovisual translation need to be tested to establish the extent to which they are valid across societies and cultures.

**Dialect**

Dubbing or subtitling dialect presents particular problems. It seems reasonable to retain the use of dialect if it plays an important part in the original dialogue, but one of the thorny problems facing the audiovisual translator is that dialects carry social and cultural connotations. Thus there is unlikely to be a one-to-one correspondence between dialects in the source and target languages. Moreover, transcribing dialectal speech may make the subtitles difficult to read. Furthermore, dialogue dubbed or subtitled into a local dialect may not be intelligible or acceptable to a wide audience. These problems have led many audiovisual translators to adopt the standard language in preference to a dialect-for-dialect approach. As Chiaro (2009b: 181) notes, audiovisual translators tend to follow the norm of ‘replacing non-standard forms in the S[ource]L[anguage] with standard forms, typical of the written language, in the target version’. Following Sternberg (1981), Chiaro (ibid.: 181) describes this norm for translating dialect as the ‘homogenizing convention’. But Chiaro (ibid.) suggests that ‘non-standard language can also be connoted through the insertion of linguistic features common in colloquial speech, such as fillers and discourse markers (e.g. like; you know; I mean, etc.) as well as deliberate mistakes’. This norm for translating dialect is studied by Goris (1993) with reference to dubbing in France. Goris (ibid.: 174) notes that dialectal features are left out, and distinctive characteristics of spoken language drastically reduced ‘to the point that they are not even considered ungrammatical or even specifically oral anymore’. Standardization is often accompanied by naturalization. For example, ‘ten inches’ becomes vingt-cinq centimetres (‘25 centimetres’); ‘a girl with typical Brooklyn tact’ is rendered as une petite banlieusarde sans tête (‘an empty-headed little suburban girl’); and ‘I know we’re not selling California’ is rendered as [c]’est pas l’Eldorado ce terrain, mais . . . (‘this land is not El Dorado, but . . .’) (ibid.: 177–178). The removal of such socio-cultural references, Goris argues, aims ‘to give the impression that the French translations are in fact originals’ (ibid.: 178).

The problems of standardization are discussed by Herbst (1997) in the context of dubbing in Germany. Herbst (ibid.: 294) notes that the extensive use of the standard language results in ‘a certain unnaturalness’ of the dubbed dialogue. In his view (ibid.: 295), standardization is ‘inevitable’, given that ‘no regional or social accent (apart from the standard language) can be used as a target variety in translation without producing a comical or strange effect’. As a result of standardization, there is a loss of ‘social meaning’, as well as a lack of contrast between different ‘speech styles’ (ibid.). For example, accent contrasts between British and American varieties of English cannot be reproduced in the German dubbed version, because ‘all varieties other than the standard language are regionally marked within the target culture’ (ibid.). An additional problem is that ‘in the German-speaking world the standard accent Hochdeutsch is hardly ever used in natural speech; at least not in informal conversation’ (ibid.). Thus German dubbed films are characterized by ‘the use of a regionally neutral pronunciation (in situations where it would not normally be expected)’ (ibid.).

While the above discussion focuses attention on the economic imperative (Fernández Fernández 2009) and the quality of translation in terms of features of orality and dialectal variation (Goris 1993 and Herbst 1997), Erkazanci-Durmuş (2011) argues that standardization should be resisted on ideological grounds. Erkazanci-Durmuş (ibid.: 21–22) discusses
‘how language perpetuates inequitable social relations and why different varieties of language have unequal access to social power’, paying special attention to ‘the power relations between the standard language and such varieties of language as dialects, ethnolects, sociolects, and so on’. In particular, Erkazanci-Durmuş (ibid.: 23) argues that standardization promotes ‘the ideology of legitimate language’, which ‘may close off the target language to any kind of variation’ and ‘force the translator to adopt an “authoritative plain style”’. Standardization enforces a form of ‘social governance’, to the extent that ‘the use of a non-standard variety where the standard variety is expected constitutes a violation of communicative competence rules’ (ibid.). Because of its ‘taken-for-granted superiority’, the standard variety acts as a ‘sociolinguistic dogma’ that places translators ‘in the hierarchies of language and social success’ (ibid.: 24). This ideology, Erkazanci-Durmuş postulates, permeates institutions such as ‘the media, literature, translation, art, and music’ (ibid.). In Turkey, for example, an official broadcasting policy is put in place to preserve the standard language as a tool of ‘national unity and integrity’ against encroachment by non-standard varieties (ibid.: 26). Consequently, ‘dialects, sociolects, ethnolects and other varieties of language in numerous source texts have been systematically translated into perfectly standard Turkish’ (ibid.: 27). An example is Aziz Üstel’s 2001 Turkish translation of Anthony Burgess’s 1962 novel *A Clockwork Orange*. This translation, which seeks conformity with standard Turkish and ‘systematically avoids re-lexicalization, over-lexicalization, and the Russian effect on language’, was awarded The Best Translation Prize (ibid.: 28). Against ‘systematic standardization’, Erkazanci-Durmuş argues for a critical sociolinguistic approach to the study of translation that addresses linguistic variation as a vehicle for ‘marginal voices’ (ibid.: 21).

Longo (2009: 107) discusses how marginal voices are expressed through a ‘dialectization’ of the standard language in the subtitling of two films shot predominantly in dialect. Alessandro Piva’s 2000 film *LaCapaGira* and Daniele Cipri and Franco Maresco’s 1998 film *Totò che visse due volte* are part of a wave of films depicting characters ‘living on the margins of society’ in the Italian south (Longo 2009: 99). Both films explore ‘a new way for the south to see itself, to become the subject of its own way of thinking as opposed continuing to be determined and constructed by others’ (ibid.). Longo stresses that the ‘predominance of the local dialect’, which plays a crucial part in this ‘process of self-discovery’, is ‘enhanced’ by the subtitles. In both films, ‘subtitles combine with the visuals and the soundtrack to create different layers of signification’ (ibid.: 100). The dialogue is subtitled into standard Italian in a way that prompts viewers ‘to penetrate the dialect and its culture’ (ibid.: 107). In other words, the subtitles provide ‘a key to understand dialect rather than a tool to transpose it’ (ibid.: 101). This is achieved in two ways. First, the subtitles are minimal, with just sufficient details for the audience to ‘follow the plot’; viewers ‘are asked to concentrate, without switching off, on the language spoken on the screen’, on the assumption that, though difficult, dialect as a variety of the language can be understood (ibid. 100). Second, idiomatic expressions said in dialect are often translated literally or left untranslated, so that standard Italian is ‘foreignised’ (ibid.). In *LaCapaGira*, for example, the dialectal expression *fare tum e tum* (meaning ‘being noisy’ and/or ‘not being able to keep silent’) is transcribed in the subtitle: *fare* (literally, ‘make’) combines effectively with the onomatopoeic *tum e tum* to suggest the ‘puerility’ of ‘the characters of the film who seem like grown up children’ (ibid.: 104). It is important to understand that there has been discrimination against southern dialects since Italy achieved unification in 1861. In *Totò*, however, it is standard Italian that is parodied, put to ridicule, and presented as ‘the Other’ (ibid.: 102). In the film, standard Italian is spoken only by a prostitute (whose escapism is encapsulated by her ‘saccharine Italian’) and a gay couple (whose ‘mannered Italian’ smacks of ‘1950s popular fiction’).
standard Italian is ‘strongly stereotyped and limited in its use’ (ibid.: 103). In LaCapaGira, on the other hand, the ‘inexpressive stiltedness’ of standard Italian used in ‘a badly dubbed soap opera’ contrasts sharply with ‘the lively and vibrant dialect’ used by the characters. In both films, the parodic impulse combines with the subtitling strategy to create a cultural vision: the dialects ‘bear witness to the rich and varied linguistic and cultural traditions of the south which, as the subtitling of these films show, can also be understood by the rest of the country’ (ibid.: 106).

Problems of translating sociolect are discussed by Jäckel (2001) with reference to the English subtitled version of Mathieu Kassovitz’s 1995 film La Haine. The film presents France as a ‘multicultural and divided society’ through the portrayal of three protagonists speaking a sociolect typical of young people living in housing estates (ibid.: 223). This sociolect ‘offers an almost perfect example of every possible deviation from standard French: sloppy language, bad grammar, misuse of words, use of local colloquialisms, slang, verlan (back-slang), Americanisms, Arabic, and all this intermingled with funk rhythm’ (ibid.: 224). These features represent a ‘reaction against the standard modern French language used by a largely middle-class French society’. For its users, this sociolect serves as ‘a way of asserting their right to be different and to challenge authority’ (ibid.). This sociolect functions as a form of protest against social exclusion: ‘[f]eeling excluded from mainstream society, people develop their own mechanisms of exclusion, in this instance, a verbally aggressive language mainly comprehensive to peers’ (ibid.). The subtitles are, in the words of one critic, ‘frankly geared towards the American market’ (ibid.: 227). Referring to the use of African American English in the subtitles, one critic notes that the characters ‘Vinz and Hubert talk as if they were homeboys in the hood’ (ibid.; italics in the original). But this sociolect-for-sociolect approach is problematic in several ways. To start with, slang terms carry social and cultural connotations and may not be applicable to other contexts. In the case of verlan, the subtitlers ‘could not hope to be understood if they borrowed or invented American back-slang’, and therefore ‘opted instead for simplicity’; for example, ‘keuf’ (‘cop’) becomes ‘pig’ (ibid.). But ‘pig’ has different associations and lacks the linguistic creativity and ‘ludic’ character of verlan, which ‘functions as caricature’ of standard French and its values (ibid.: 229). The preference for simplicity, along with the limitations of screen time and space, also leads to a loss of the idiosyncratic features of speech. For example, the ‘verbosity’ of those with an imperfect command of French is not reflected in the subtitles (ibid.: 228). Moreover, the adoption of African American English is accompanied by what Goris (1993: 177) calls ‘naturalization’. For example, Astérix becomes ‘Snoopy’; Les Schtroumpfs (the Smurfs) becomes ‘Donald Duck’; and Darty becomes ‘WalMart’ (Jäckel 2001: 229). Added to this loss of cultural specificity is the decision not to subtitle the lyrics of two sampled songs—Non, je ne regrette rien (‘No, I have no regrets’) and Nique la Police (‘Fuck the Police’) —which combine to create ‘a sense of community at a time of disillusionment and economic hardship’ (ibid.: 230).

The sociolect-for-sociolect approach is explored by Queen (2004) in the context of German dubbing. Queen is aware of the problems arising from the lack of a one-to-one correspondence between sociolects, but argues that ‘ideas about language as an index to social groupings are transferrable to the degree that the ideas overlap in the cultures in question’ (ibid.: 515). Queen stresses that scholars and practitioners of audiovisual translation should pay attention to ‘the socio-cultural and specificity of translation, particularly in terms of target cultural norms and expectations’ (ibid.: 518–519). Queen refers to the history of German translations of Mark Twain’s novel Huckleberry Finn as an example to illustrate the importance of awareness about the ideological consequences of choices made by translators.
Whereas the earliest translations use ‘a more or less L2 [second language] or pidgin-like model for portraying [the African American character] Jim’s speech’, more recent translations adopt ‘a colloquial variety depicted primarily through non-standard spelling’, thus corresponding to a ‘rise in anti-racist and anti-discriminatory discourses in Germany’ (ibid.: 518). Queen notes that, given the difficulty of matching dialects, the practice of dubbing into standard German is common and understandable, even though this may ‘erase most linguistic variation, especially regional variation’ (ibid.: 520).

Queen’s sample of study ‘provides a broad range of A[frican]A[merican]E[nglish] usage that includes variation based on age, socio-economic class, region, gender and other sorts of affiliations, especially affiliations with a local, urban “street” culture’ (ibid.: 518). AAE is usually dubbed into standard German, but Queen notes that a sociolect-for-sociolect approach has been adopted in some contexts. In particular, in films ‘set in urban contexts’, African American English may be rendered in an ‘urban dubbing style’, which shows linguistic features ‘linked to general informality, Jugendsprache (‘youth language’), and the urban working class’ (ibid.: 521). Queen explains that most features of this style ‘are not regionally specific and index the generally colloquial varieties of German known as Umgangsprachen and the youth-based register known as Jugendsprache’ (ibid.: 522). ‘The ideologies concerning these varieties of German and their relationships to one another’, Queen argues, ‘represent the backdrop against which the urban dubbing style may be interpreted’ (ibid.). Features of the urban dubbing style are ‘generally associated with the German industrial working class’ and ‘particularly with working-class males’ (ibid.: 521). In other words, ‘this style helps align AAE speakers with speakers of German urban varieties and in so doing constitutes them ideologically along similar lines’ (ibid.: 522–523).

Berthele (2000: 607, quoted in Queen ibid.: 523) observes that ‘[t]his solution gives the German parallel to A[frican]A[merican]V[ernacular]E[nglish] a clear proletarian over-tone.’ For example, Queen’s analysis of the dubbed version of the film Boyz N the Hood shows that ‘the primary linguistic marker of the street affiliation of the characters occurs with the use of an informal, youth-marked variety of German rather than with an ethnically marked variety’. Several patterns emerge from the use of the urban dubbing style. First, characters dubbed in this style use its features ‘relatively infrequently’ (ibid.: 527). Second, related to the first, the dubbed version shows a sharp contrast between ‘a character who is strongly street-oriented’ and ‘a character with weaker ties to the street’, as opposed to the ‘gradient differentiation’ in the source text (ibid.: 529). Third, the urban dubbing style is never used ‘to distinguish female speakers of AAE from non-speakers’, even ‘in films that feature primarily female casts’ (ibid.: 531). Fourth, the urban dubbing style is also used for ‘urban, working-class characters who are not African American English speakers’, but not for characters from ‘an urban, African American middle or upper middle class’ (ibid.). In other words, ‘the different ethnic links (African American, Italian American, Irish American) indexed in the originals are elided while the class-based indexes remain’ (ibid.: 533). In fact, Germany has a sociolect involving ‘more recent migrant populations, particularly those from Turkey and other parts of the Mediterranean’, who ‘share many of the characteristics of urban African American populations in the U.S.’ (ibid.: 531). But this sociolect may not be suitable for dubbing African American English, because ‘the sociolinguistic indexes for these migrant populations primarily involve non-nativeness rather than ethnicity specifically’ (ibid.). Queen’s findings are useful for exploring an alternative to standardization, one that attends to both overlaps and differences between dialects, whether regional or social, and to the ideological consequences of the translator’s choices.
Humour

The genre of humour provides a fascinating site for the study of audiovisual translation from a sociolinguistic perspective: because humour depends on verbal inventiveness as well as on stereotypes and other socio-cultural references, how well humour travels is a telling indication of social uses of language in both source and target cultures. Researchers have concentrated on the problems presented by ‘the close interplay of visuals and acoustics combined with words’, the strategies for solving these problems, and the effects of the strategies adopted (Chiaro 2009a: 163).

Armstrong’s (2004) case study of the voicing of the American television animation The Simpsons from English to French serves as a useful example. Armstrong analyzes the ways in which accents are used for three characters in The Simpsons and the dubbed version to makes references to stereotypes and other socio-cultural signs that help to create humour. First, Bart, voiced in a Cockney accent, is shown in an episode using the archaic slang terms ‘noggin’ (head) and ‘peepers’ (eyes), whose ‘old-fashioned flavour’ works with the low-class accent to create associations with Oliver Twist and My Fair Lady: ‘the attribution to Bart of a stretch of archaic Cockney is meant to reinforce our perception of the “Artful Dodger” side of his character’ (ibid.: 102). In the absence of a parallel dialect pattern, the French dubbed version can only use slang for Bart’s dialogue. Second, ‘Monty’ Burns, who is ‘almost always represented negatively, as a heartless, grasping megalomaniac’, is given ‘a pronunciation that shares characteristics of a UK English accent and the anglicised, upper-class US New England accent’ (ibid.: 104). This strategy follows ‘a long US tradition that gives movie villains an English or anglicised accent’ (ibid.). In the French version, ‘Monty’ Burns is voiced in ‘an upper-class accent sometimes referred to as “seizième”, referring to the prosperous sixteenth district of Paris’ (ibid.). Thus, in the French version, ‘Monty’ Burns is voiced in a way that ‘attributes to him superiority but not otherness, or only to a lesser degree’ (ibid.: 108). Finally, ‘Diamond’ Joe Quimby, the major of ‘Springfield’, is portrayed as a populist, corrupt womaniser’ by being voiced in a Boston accent in a way that is ‘designed to refer to the speech of John F. Kennedy, and perhaps the male members of the Kennedy “clan” more generally’ (ibid.: 104–105). In the French version, Quimby is given ‘a deep and harsh, “gravely” voice quality’ and ‘the accent of a small-time crook, an unsuccessful gangster of the type featured in films like those by Tarantino’ (ibid.: 105). Armstrong’s analysis shows how ‘social identity is mediated through social-regional accents’ (ibid.: 97).

Diglossia

Problems arising from the functional separation of language varieties in a diglossic society are discussed by Yau (2012) in the context of audiovisual translation in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, standard Chinese (the H variety) has traditionally been used for subtitles, but since the 1990s Cantonese (the L variety; a Chinese dialect spoken by most people in Hong Kong) has been increasingly used to translate slang and taboo expressions. For example, Chen (2004) advocates the use of Cantonese subtitles as the most effective means to translate swearing. But Yau (2012: 565) argues that this approach reinforces the ‘social stigma attached to written Cantonese’ and confines it to a ‘linguistic ghetto’. For example, in the subtitled version of Michael Winterbottom’s 2004 film 9 Songs, slang terms and taboo expressions are subtitled into Cantonese, whereas standard Chinese is ‘reserved for a public form of communication such as lyrics of songs performed by established music groups’ (ibid.: 567). This subtitling strategy in fact ‘reinforces the rigid boundaries between the H and the L variety’, so that ‘the asymmetrical power relations inscribed in this dichotomy remains unaltered’ (ibid.).
Yau argues that to use Cantonese subtitles for the Cockney English in *My Fair Lady* would be ‘to treat Cantonese as inferior, deficient, ungrammatical—in other words, as bad Chinese’ (*ibid.*: 567). But it is possible to use the L variety ‘as a means of stressing the sub-cultural status of a marginal group’ (*ibid.*: 568). In the subtitled version of Curtis Hanson’s 2002 film *8 Mile*, for example, the ‘angry, defiant lyrics’ of the protagonist’s freestyle rap are ‘rendered with a locally marked vocabulary of colloquialisms, slang terms and swear words’, in such a way that the use of Cantonese subtitles ‘stresses a sense of alienation from the dominant culture, underlines rap as a form of articulating identity against a specific social background, and at the same time calls attention to the status of Cantonese as a marginalised discourse’ (*ibid.*: 569). Moreover, Yau argues that it is possible to create a ‘hybrid language’ that ‘dissolves the dichotomy between the standard and the non-standard variety’ (*ibid.*: 570). In the subtitled version of Woody Allen’s 2005 film *Match Point*, for example, formal and colloquial expressions in both Cantonese and standard Chinese combine to create a prose that is different from the spoken form of either Cantonese or standard Chinese and yet still intelligible (*ibid.*: 571). In this way, the subtitles ‘acquire a thickness that is not quite opacity’ (*ibid.*: 572). The audience is asked to read the subtitles ‘not mimetically as a transparent medium, but rather rhetorically as textual practice that provides possibilities for constructing identities and transforming power relations’ (*ibid.*). This subtitling practice suggests a form of code-switching that provides a way of creating identities and exploring alternatives to diglossia.

**Summary**

In the study of audiovisual translation, problems concerning linguistic variation have often been discussed with a view to finding ways to create coherence, to secure intelligibility, and to synchronize dubbing and subtitling with original speech. Increasing attention is paid to issues of identity, otherness, relations of power between different cultural constituencies, and the social contexts in which audiovisual translation is produced and received. This chapter has discussed significant research trends such as: studying audiovisual translation in terms of the relation between language and identity; examining the ideological implications of strategies for translating dialect, sociolect, style, register and other forms of linguistic variation; interrogating strategies of domestication that risk removing the traces of the other; exploring innovative strategies for creating identities and transforming power relations. These trends reflect an increasing awareness of the need to recognize the heterogeneity of language use across communities, social groups and individuals, and to investigate the consequences of the translator’s choices. A sociolinguistic perspective with an emphasis on linguistic variation will be useful for examining audiovisual translation in a wide range of contexts (to avoid overlap, research on translating linguistic variation in areas such as gender and non-professional practices of audiovisual translation have not been discussed here). Research within a sociolinguistic framework is likely to continue to play an important role in the study of audiovisual translation.

**Further reading**


Sternberg, M. (1981) ‘Polylingualism as Reality and Translation as Mimesis’, Poetics Today 2(4): 221–239 | This essay discusses the ‘homogenizing convention’ as one option in a range of strategies for the verbal rendering of situations involving different languages or different varieties of a language. The examples, though drawn mainly from literary works, are of clear relevance to audiovisual translation.


Related topics

3 Subtitling on the cusp of its futures
4 Investigating dubbing: learning from the past, looking to the future
19 Gender in audiovisual translation: advocating for gender awareness
25 Minority languages, language planning and audiovisual translation
28 Audiovisual translation and activism

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Filmography

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