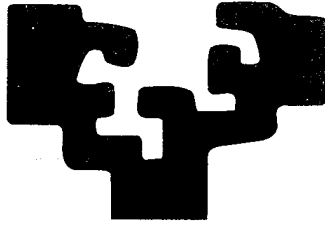


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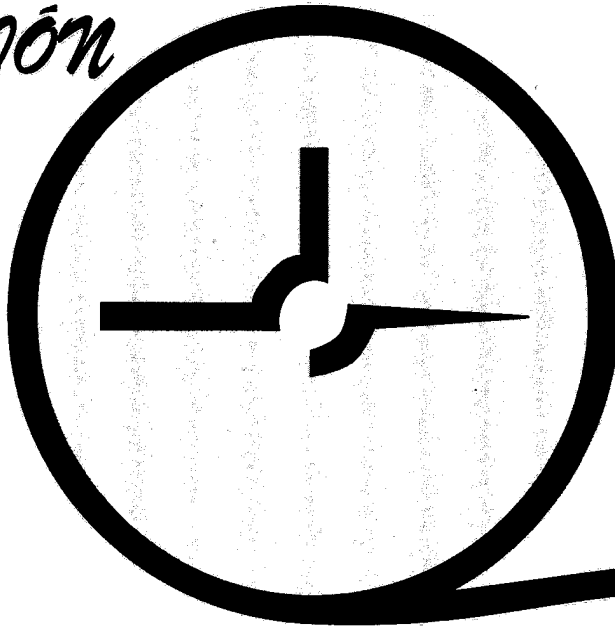
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**CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN FILM TRANSLATION A
STUDY OF THE ENGLISH SUBTITLED AND DUBBED VERSIONS
OF *LE DÉCLIN DE L'EMPIRE AMÉRICAIN***

Janine MOUTSATSOS

Translator

While doing some light reading in preparation for this conference, I came across the following definition of translation:

[Translation is] ... a labour of acculturation which domesticates the foreign text, making it intelligible and even familiar to the target-language reader ... [who then is able to] recognize his own culture in a cultural other.¹

This quote is most appropriate for such a gathering because it emphasizes translation and culture, two of the central themes on the agenda, and brings to light the unique avenue of communication that is created by the meshing of these two concepts.

This avenue, or cross-cultural communication via translation, is the theme I addressed in my recently-completed Master's in Translation thesis. A vast area that can be explored from a number of angles, I chose to examine it from a cinematographic viewpoint, analysing the English subtitles and dubbing of a French-language original film to determine whether the cultural messages woven into the screenplay had been effectively conveyed from the source language (Quebec French) to the target language (North-American English). An ambitious project, given the complexities of the main areas involved — film studies, culture and film translation — and the comparative lack of background material in the field, it became feasible once the scope had been defined, and experts in the fields of culture and film translation (including the main subtitler and two members of the dubbing team) had been interviewed for their views on the film and for their answers to the many questions that I had.

Once the paper had been outlined, I had to find a film that depicted a culture other than my own (North-American anglophone), and one that was predominantly dialogue, in order to compile sufficient data for analysis. Being a fan of the movies by Denys Arcand, a renowned Quebec filmmaker, it was easy deciding on his 1986 hit, *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*, as my source text.

In this script that is exceptionally rich in cultural connotations, I chose to analyse the translation of messages selected from certain excerpts of the film that best depicted Quebec culture. Currently a topic in vogue across Canada — how distinct is Quebec culture from Canadian or North-American culture — it is

also a leitmotif of this 10-year-old film that chronicles some Quebec baby boomers who have been strongly influenced by events that shaped the tumultuous eras of the '60s and '80s. For the purposes of my study, these messages about Quebec culture, as voiced by the central characters, were called "socio-cultural references" and were defined as "the individual words or sets of words that provided clues about the culture to which these speakers belonged."²

Once the most insightful references had been isolated, it came time to define the notion of culture. Relying on information gleaned from my research into Quebec culture, be it from various printed materials, my interview with Professor Sherry Simon of Concordia University in Montreal, or my experience as a former resident of that city, I decided to consider only the sub-areas of language, social stratification and ideals, as they pertained to the eras depicted in the movie.

For those unfamiliar with contemporary Quebec culture, it is no longer that distinct, in my opinion, because the elements that used to predominate, e.g. French language, ethnic foods, traditional dances, etc., are fading, and Quebecers are adopting North American trends, such as the rejection of the Roman Catholic Church, acceptance of American pop culture and lifestyle choices, and use of the English language. These characteristics made up three groups of socio-cultural references that were isolated in the screenplay. A fourth category, localizing references, or those references highlighting specific events or famous people who characterized the eras in question, was also included. Although these clues were scattered throughout the screenplay, it was determined that limiting the analysis to four reasonably-long segments of the film would prove as useful for research purposes.

Having defined culture, I then had to consider how best to describe the effect that film translation has on culture. Numerous studies have been conducted on the translation of poetry and/or literature and their cultural impact, but few have made mention of film and how translation of this medium affects the interpretation of cultural signs. It was for this reason that the popular theory whereby film translation differs from the other types of translation had to be slightly modified.

As is common knowledge, most visual mass media are one-dimensional, employing only one channel of communication. The exception, film, is multi-dimensional, in that the narrative structure combines with cinematographic technique that includes not only the spoken word, but also the visual and sound tracks.³ In order to apply some of the ideas regarding the translation of prose, for example, and its cultural significance, the translation of film had to be made comparable, and this was accomplished by focussing *only* on the verbal or linguistic dimension of film, music and background noise excepting, and using this characteristic as the main text for analysis. The filmic dimensions could only be separated because the target and source cultures turned out to be very similar,

with language being the major differentiating factor. In this case, non-verbal signs would most likely be understood by the target culture, and not require incorporation into the dubbing and/or subtitling.

With regard to methodology, this was relatively straightforward. The first step was to read the published French screenplay and view the English subtitled and dubbed video versions of the movie to isolate the socio-cultural references. Next, with no published versions of the English transcripts available, it was necessary to manually transcribe both versions. Once completed, the three screen-plays were then placed in chart form, matching the characters' dialogues.

While some of the translations provided by the dubbers and subtitlers were grammatically incorrect, this was irrelevant because my analysis of the transcripts was based solely on whether or not the English effectively conveyed the original message in French. In other words, and to use a metaphor, was an appropriate picture of the socio-cultural reference painted for the viewer in North-American English? Here are four examples to better illustrate my point.

The first category covers socio-cultural messages with religious overtones. Early in the movie, there is a scene where the four central male characters exchange views on a number of issues. Rémy refers to Quebec's religious past with the following statement:

[Original French Script]

RÉMY: Mais il y a pas moyen de faire autrement! Pierre, le mensonge est la base de la vie amoureuse, comme c'est le ciment de la vie sociale. Refuser le mensonge, ce serait aller au prochain congrès de l'Association, rencontrer un de nos éminents collègues de l'Université Laval, qui vient de passer vingt ans de sa vie sur l'histoire du catholicisme canadien, et lui dire que les mandements de *Monseigneur Bourget*, il peut se les rouler très serrés et se les fourrer...lentement...dans le cul.

[Transcription of Subtitled Script]

RÉMY: What else can one do? Lying is the basis of all love affairs of our very social existence. Refusing to lie would be much the same as telling an eminent colleague from *Laval University* who's devoted 20 years to the *history of Catholicism in Canada* that he can take *Bishop Bourget's* sermons, roll them very tightly, and slowly shove them up his ass.

[Transcription of Dubbed Script]

RÉMY: What option do any of us have? Pierre, the fine art of lying binds our love lives just as it provides the cement for our social lives. Refusing to lie would be like attending the next meeting of the Association and

telling one of our eminent colleagues visiting from *Notre-Dame* who spent the past 15 years of his life on the *history of Catholicism in America* that he's welcome to roll up the collective letters of *Cardinal Spellman* so very, very tightly before shoving them slowly up his ass.⁴

In this example, the translation of three expressions, which I have underlined, merited further examination. The subtitling is a very literal translation, requiring no analysis, but the dubbing deliberately reinterprets three essential elements of Quebec's cultural past (and present) — *Université Laval*, *catholicisme canadien*, and *Monseigneur Bourget* — as American cultural, religious icons — Notre-Dame, Catholicism in America and Cardinal Spellman.

This “doctoring” of the translation, something which I coined the “Americanization of the facts”⁵ could be deemed acceptable if there were synchrony in the dubbing, but there is none, from a phonetics point of view, when comparing the three pairs of expressions.

Moving on to the next category of socio-cultural references, American pop culture and lifestyle, an interesting example appears again early on in the movie when Rémy and his wife, Louise, have an early-morning conversation over coffee. In this excerpt, the dubbing is again pinpointed because its translation adds a phrase that does not exist in the French original, lending again an American flavour.

[Original French Script]

LOUISE: Ah oui, y a une fille qui a téléphoné hier soir.

RÉMY: Ah?

LOUISE: Une Anglaise.

RÉMY: Ah oui?

LOUISE: *J'avais de la difficulté à la comprendre.*

[Transcription of Subtitled Script]

LOUISE: A girl called you last night.

LOUISE: She spoke English.

RÉMY: Oh yeah?

LOUISE: *I didn't understand much.*

[Transcription of Dubbed Script]

LOUISE: Oh, by the way, a young woman called for you last night.

RÉMY: Ah?

LOUISE: An American, I think.

RÉMY: Is that right?

LOUISE: *It sounded like a valley girl. Her accent was hard to understand.*⁶

“It sounded like a valley girl” is the dubious addition in my viewpoint. It could be considered appropriate, in one way, because the viewers find out shortly thereafter that Rémy met this woman in California, which is where the expression, “valley girl,” was invented.⁷ However, given that Rémy is a university professor, it is unlikely that one of his colleagues would be a “valley girl,” since this term describes teenage girls talking “valleyspeak,” a form of slang originating in the San Fernando Valley in southern California.⁸ It is even more unlikely that Louise, a naïve woman who does not appear to speak English very well, would even be aware of such an expression.

While the exact reason for including this line may never be known, the dubbers certainly decided that the popularity of the expression at the time merited its addition. An obvious decision then, it appears dated and inappropriate now.

The next category of socio-cultural references relates to the use of the English language. The excerpt that follows highlights *joual*, a working-class French spoken in Quebec that incorporates many anglicisms, as spoken by the film’s token, archetypal Québécois, Mario.

[Original French Script]

MARIO: C’est rien que ça que vous faites, parler! Après-midi, les gars ont passé leur temps à parler de cul. Je pensais arriver dans une orgie. Ben non, *le gros fun*, c’est une tarte au poisson.

[Transcription of Subtitled Script]

MARIO: All you do is talk. All afternoon they went on about sex. I expected an orgy. Instead, *the big thrill* is a fish pie.

[Transcription of Dubbed Script]

MARIO: That’s all you do with your time, you talk. This afternoon, these guys spent all their time talking about sex. I thought I’d come back in the middle of an orgy. But what’s *the big thrill*? Fish pie!⁹

One of many examples where the dubbing and subtitling are identical, the translation of “*le gros fun*” at first glance does not appear to be wrong. However, after some contemplation, it is clear that a shift in register has occurred with

telling one of our eminent colleagues visiting from *Notre-Dame* who spent the past 15 years of his life on the *history of Catholicism in America* that he's welcome to roll up the collective letters of *Cardinal Spellman* so very, very tightly before shoving them slowly up his ass.⁴

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MARIO: All you do is talk. All afternoon they went on about sex. I expected an orgy. Instead, *the big thrill* is a fish pie.

[Transcription of Dubbed Script]

MARIO: That’s all you do with your time, you talk. This afternoon, these guys spent all their time talking about sex. I thought I’d come back in the middle of an orgy. But what’s *the big thrill*? Fish pie!⁹

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the homogenized translation. In other words, the all-English equivalent neutralized the linguistic impact inherent in the original expression.

The other examples of *joual*, as spoken by Mario, must have been as difficult to render for the dubbers and subtitlers because there was inconsistency in their translations. It is unfortunate that they did not better convey the alterity between Mario, the modern-day *coureur de bois*,¹⁰ and the other, upper-class, highly-educated characters, because his personality and speech are extremely important to the film plot, and to the accurate depiction of Quebec culture. While some may consider this characteristic a serious shortcoming of the translations, it is important to note that *joual* is not the main variety of French spoken in the original screenplay. In fact, Arcand made a conscious decision to have his main characters speak only academic French because he was well aware of the translation difficulties posed by *joual*.¹¹

Localizing references were the final expressions to be considered. The following two examples deal with current events that were not necessarily confined to Quebec, but nevertheless affected the population and clearly date the film to the mid-'80s.

[Original French Script]

RÉMY: “*Les pluies acides, quel drame!*”

PIERRE: “*Les centrales nucléaires, quelle horreur!*”

[Transcription of Subtitled Script]

RÉMY: “*Acid rain, terrible.*”

PIERRE: “*Nuclear reactors, dreadful!*”

[Transcription of Dubbed Script]

RÉMY: “*The environment. What a shame!*”

PIERRE: “*Chemical warfare, Agent Orange!*”¹²

“*Les pluies acides*” is the first of the two references. Translated as “acid rain” and “the environment” in the subtitled and dubbed versions respectively, the use of a more general expression in the dubbed version may be considered more appropriate because it makes for easier cross-cultural communication.

With the subsequent reference, “*centrales nucléaires, quelle horreur,*” mention must be made of the equivalent chosen by the dubbers: “chemical warfare, Agent Orange.” Unusual interpretations because they date the film to an earlier era, namely the '70s and the Vietnam War,¹³ “Agent Orange” was probably used because it is fairly synchronous with “*quelle horreur.*” A clever translation from

that perspective, it also isolates another example of the deliberate Americanization of some expressions.

Thus, from this very random sampling of the many socio-cultural messages found in the movie, it is obvious that the target culture chosen by the two teams of translation differed at times. The tendency by the dubbers to Americanize some translations and alienate Canadian viewers unfamiliar with American history and/or culture is the most significant difference between the two transcriptions. A finding that annoyed me initially, it was later made clear to me that American culture often wends its way into dubbed films.¹⁴ While the ethical merits of such a practice are debatable, one must keep in mind that dubbers, unlike subtitlers, are free to manipulate their translations and choose their target audience. Not surprisingly, the American audience is chosen most often because it is the largest English-speaking one, and, hence, the most lucrative one.

Also, while the subtitling was very predictable in its literal style of translation, the dubbing swayed from being very literal to very free. This inconsistency diminished the effectiveness of the cross-cultural communication in the dubbing because it was, at times, incorrect or biased. However, despite the aforementioned major discrepancy and different translation approaches, the cross-cultural communication that took place via the subtitling and dubbing was satisfactory. North-American anglophone audiences should have had little or no difficulty understanding the specific references to religion, American pop culture and lifestyle, the English language and current events, as they related to Quebec.

The reason for this is most likely due to the relationship between the target and source cultures. In this particular movie about a small group of individuals who historically and linguistically belong to the source culture, but who mentally and physically take part in the target culture, it was very difficult for the translators to make many major mistakes, especially since the target culture is so widespread and well-known. In addition, since the themes presented in this movie have been discussed and disseminated through so many other media, there was no new material with which "to struggle" in the translations.

In conclusion, it is possible to compare the subtitled and dubbed versions of a film, and to determine that effective cross-cultural communication has taken place. Deciding which of the two versions is the better medium for this type of communication may prove extremely difficult, but the fact that both English versions of *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* were acclaimed by North-American audiences may make a decision in this case completely unnecessary.

ENDNOTES

¹ Lawrence Venuti, "Introduction," in Lawrence Venuti, ed, *Rethinking Translation. Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 5.

² Janine Moutsatsos. *Cross-Cultural Communication in Film Translation. A Study of the English Subtitled and Dubbed Versions of Le Déclin de l'empire américain*. MA Thesis. Toronto: York University, pp. 20 - 21.

³ Dirk Delabastita, "Translation and mass-communication: film and T.V. translation as evidence of cultural dynamics," in *Babel* 35:4 (1989), p. 196.

⁴ Denys Arcand, *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*, Montreal: Les Éditions du Boréal, 1986, pp. 33-34.

⁵ Moutsatsos, p. 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

⁷ J. A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, *The Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition*, Vol. XIX, Unemancipated-Wau-wau, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 412.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 412.

⁹ Arcand, p. 125.

¹⁰ Adrian Van Den Hoven, "The Decline of the American Empire in a North-American Perspective," in Joseph I. Donohue, Jr., ed: *Essays in Quebec Cinema*, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1991, p. 147.

¹¹ Michael Dorland, "Renaissance Man," in *Cinema Canada*, No. 134, October, 1986, Montreal: Cinema Canada Magazine Foundation, 1986, pp. 16-17.

¹² Arcand, p. 92.

¹³ Simpson and Weiner, Vol. I, A-Bazouki, p. 248.

¹⁴ Moutsatsos, p. 154.

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