

## Translating register, style and tone in dubbing and subtitling

Zoë Pettit

University of Greenwich

### ABSTRACT

This article considers the manner in which the translators of a selection of subtitled and dubbed versions (English-French) approach the style and tone of the source text in relation to language register. Stylistic effects inform the viewer about the speaker. Emotions can be expressed and social relationships portrayed through the use of particular forms of language. The audiovisual translator has to sift through the multiple layers of meaning within the context of the verbal, non-verbal, aural and visual signs of the audiovisual text. Lexical, grammatical and stylistic changes in the subtitled and dubbed versions of three films (*Smoke*, *Blue in the Face* and *The Piano*) will be studied to establish the extent to which coherence is secured in relation to these features.

### KEYWORDS

audiovisual translation, dubbing, subtitling, language register, style, tone

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we shall examine how the translators of a selection of subtitled and dubbed versions (English-French) deal with the tone and style of the original, raising the following questions. Up to what point have they respected characterisation, visual signs or the overall atmosphere of a scene? Is the language of the original colloquial, standard or formal and do the translations differ? Are idiomatic expressions more prevalent in the original than in the subtitled and dubbed versions? We shall attempt to establish whether the use of a particular language register in the original version is a determining factor in the translations.

## 2. Definitions of language register

Attempts to define language register have led to a certain amount of confusion and lack of consensus.<sup>1</sup> In French, two terms are used: *niveau de langue* ('level of language') and *registre* ('register'). The first is used to describe what Sanders (1996) refers to as "sociosituational variation", also the sense in which Dubois et al. (1994: 324) understand the term. They maintain that *registre* refers to the use of specific language according to the *niveau de langue* (p. 406)<sup>2</sup>. Gadet (1996:20) confirms the difficulty in pinning down the terminology, linking "register", "style" and "genre". She explains that the French tradition tends to use "style" and "genre" in relation to written, literary language but these terms take on a more general meaning in the American tradition. Conversely, British scholars prefer "register". Cheshire and Bell (2003: 455) explain that "register" and "style" might be used to refer to "all kinds of situational variation" but the former can take on a general sense whereas the latter is used to describe specialised language by speakers with "shared background

knowledge and shared assumptions". Savova decides on the following definition:

Broadly defined, 'register' refers to the way people use language in different situations. The term is often used as a full or partial synonym for style, speech variety or variation, field of discourse, and text type [...].

Most often, register is used to mean style. In that sense, it refers to the 'stylistic variety', or 'stylistic variation' that occurs in a person's speech or writing in different social contexts. Typically, different registers vary according to their degree of formality.

(Savova 2005: 898)

Savova goes on to explain that formality is not the only factor which influences register but also a "speaker's awareness of a broader network of differences in situation, topic, addressee(s) or location" (Ibid.). Register is affected both by the language user and language use (Fawcett 1997: 74-80). Fawcett (1997: 75) observes that language users may be defined in relation to time (age/era they live in), space (the region they are from) and society (the social class they belong to). Language use is described according to "field", "tenor" and "mode". This is explained by Hatim<sup>3</sup> and Munday who summarise register as:

The set of features which distinguishes one stretch of language from another in terms of 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).

(Hatim and Munday 2004: 347)

Dubois et. al (p. 406) state that at least two levels of language can be described: *une langue soutenue* ('formal language') and *une langue courante ou commune* ('standard or common language'). Sanders (1996: 43) proposes a "register spectrum", from colloquial, neutral through to formal language. Mailhac (2000a: 34) identifies informal, unmarked and formal levels of speech. It is dangerous to presume that each of these categories are separate, distinct entities. Indeed in Mailhac's (2000a: 36) analysis of differences between levels of speech in French and English, the "stylistically marked" vocabulary in the text which is the subject of his study is described as either "colloquial" or "very colloquial". This confirms the notion of a continuum as proposed by Sanders and illustrates the difficulty of imposing fixed, definitive categories. As Hatim and Mason point out:

In the absence of any stringent formal criteria for distinguishing one register from another, it has always proved difficult to discern the precise boundaries of any given register.

(Hatim and Mason 1990: 51).

Indeed, boundaries are often blurred, and overlapping does occur.

### 3. Area of study

For the purposes of this article, reference will be made to three broad categories 1) colloquial language (informal, familiar, slang...), 2) standard language (everyday, neutral, unmarked) and 3) formal language (literary, academic, sophisticated...). Lexical, grammatical and stylistic changes in the subtitled and dubbed versions will be considered to establish the extent to which coherence is secured in relation to verbal, non-verbal, audio and visual signs of the audiovisual text. Specific registers are used for stylistic effect and form an integral part of characterisation and the atmosphere created in the audiovisual text. Do the translators<sup>4</sup> of the subtitled and dubbed versions find expressions which belong to the same register in the original or do they prefer neutral renderings which adhere to the denotative meaning of the source text? Fawcett (2003: 157) states:

A constant headache in all forms of translation is posed by phraseology marked as familiar or slang. Representing this aspect of another culture is always problematic, and the ideological stance of many translators is that it should be suppressed because, as with dialect, the connotations rarely match. It can be a problem getting the right level.

(Fawcett 2003: 157)

With reference to dubbed films in Germany, Herbst proposes that the dubbed text is unnatural due to the "extensive use of the standard language" which changes "the way the text is perceived stylistically" (Herbst 1997: 294-295). He also proposes that features which are specific to written language are used (Ibid. 296) and the vocabulary is too formal and unlikely to appear in informal conversation (Ibid. 297). In his discussion of several dubbed American and Flemish versions into French, Goris (1993: 173-177) suggests that a process of linguistic standardisation occurs in relation to oral language. However, although dialects and idiolects are also standardised (p. 175), the stylistic effects created through the lexis are retained in the dubbed versions:

In contradistinction to the characteristics of spoken language, the social differentiation represented on the lexical level has normally been maintained in the translation [...]. It seems that the translators make serious efforts to reproduce the social differentiation of the vocabulary. In order to give the dubbed version the same popular tone they do not hesitate to introduce some new French popular terms in the translation.

(Goris 1993: 174)

Vanderschelden (2001) explores some of the challenges faced by the subtitler and looks at the relationship between orality, levels of language and subtitling in a French film in which two families from very different socio-economic backgrounds come into contact with one another. She observes that neutral, almost informal registers characterise the subtitles which lessens the formality present in the original version (p. 365). Although she maintains that the subtitler does take account of lexical

terms which belong to a specific register, it is more difficult to render the specifically French cultural allusions which appear in the film.

Can we observe the same tendencies in the films which form part of this study? Examples are taken from the English-French subtitled and dubbed versions of three films (*Smoke*, *Blue in the Face* and *The Piano*) in an attempt to answer this question. These films are interesting as regards language register due to their different geographical, socio-historical and temporal settings.<sup>5</sup> The first two films were written by the American novelist Paul Auster and produced by Wayne Wang. They are set in downtown Brooklyn in the 1990s. *Smoke* is based on a short story written by Auster. Fact and fiction intermingles as the lives of the characters unfold with the Brooklyn Cigar Company at the centre of the community. Some of the characters reappear in *Blue in the Face*, although this film moves in an entirely different direction, and is more experimental in design: "Its spirit is comic; its engine is words; its guiding principle is spontaneity" (Auster 1995: 159). However, both attempt to present a slice of Brooklyn reality, the good and the bad. *The Piano* is set in nineteenth-century New Zealand. British colonialists and Maoris meet but it is the division between the two worlds which is portrayed. Ada, around whom the story revolves, is a young mother who is mute. She is sent to New Zealand by her father to marry a man she has never met (Alisdair Stewart). She leaves with her daughter (Flora), some belongings and her beloved piano.

Extracts from the three films will be studied in an attempt to determine whether the language register of the original is reflected in the subtitled and dubbed translations.

#### 4. Framework of analysis

The appearance and behaviour of the speaker/actor create expectations in the viewer. Discordant tensions would emerge if the translator were to use colloquial forms of current day usage for a nineteenth-century character in a Dickens adaptation. In his analysis of the subtitled and dubbed versions of *Gazon Maudit* (French *Twist*), Mailhac (2000b: 137) discusses the loss which occurs in each version in relation to "colloquial, slangy or strong language". Indeed, for most of the film "the language used by all main characters is usually colloquial, frequently vulgar and quite strong" (Ibid. 138). Mailhac explores differences between the translations and the original, showing where the subtitles and dubbed dialogues are equivalent to, weaker (the colloquial or vulgar element is toned down or removed) or stronger (the translations are more colloquial or vulgar than the original French version). Out of the eight possible combinations, only six are to be found in *French Twist*: 1) Both versions are weaker than the original, 2) Subtitles are weaker, dubbing is roughly equivalent, 3) Subtitling is weaker, dubbing stronger, 4) Subtitling is stronger, dubbing weaker, 5) Subtitling is stronger, dubbing roughly equivalent, 6) Subtitling is roughly

equivalent, dubbing stronger (Mailhac 2000b: 138-144). The combinations which do not appear in the film are 7) both versions are stronger than the original 8) the subtitled version is roughly equivalent but the dubbed version is weaker. Mailhac concludes that his results confirm the comment made by Fawcett (1997:119) that there is a tendency for film translations to "tone down and neutralise" (Mailhac 2000b: 144). In other words, there were considerably more instances where the translations were weaker than the original. He shows that this is especially evident in the subtitled version of *Gazon Maudit* (Ibid.).

In our analysis of stylistic effects in the subtitled and dubbed versions of the three films which form part of our corpus, the extent to which language register and stylistic effects are retained or removed in the translations will be examined. Unlike Mailhac, the translations will not be classified as weaker or stronger, but simply in relation to whether the language registers and stylistic effects are maintained (+) or deleted (-). As such, the following seven combinations are possible:

Strategy	Original	Subtitles	Dubbed dialogues
1	+	+	+
2	+	+	-
3	+	-	+
4	+	-	-
5	-	-	+
6	-	+	+
7	-	+	-

## 5. Analyses

In *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face*, two films set in 1990 Brooklyn, the language can be described as standard or familiar. Colloquialisms are common throughout both films. However, in *The Piano*, set in the mid-nineteenth century in the former British colony of New Zealand, the mode of expression tends to be more formal, in keeping with Victorian conventions of the era. The following examples, show how the same register is chosen in both versions (Strategy 1: + + +):

## Smoke

English version	Subtitled version	Dubbed version
1) AUGGIE: It was ditsy enough doing my little jig as Granny Ethel's grandson...	Fallait déjà être ballot pour jouer au petit-fils d'Ethel,	Il fallait déjà être un peu ballot pour jouer au petit-fils de Mémé Ethel, mais...
2) TOMMY: ...and I mean they're going to hit him with all they've got. You mark my words.	Ils vont lui en foutre plein la gueule!	Et vous verrez, ils vont lui en foutre sur la gueule! C'est pas des paroles en l'air!
3) AUGGIE: That's a feather in your cap, man.	Tu devrais être fier comme un pou!	Tu devrais être fier comme un pou!
4) AUGGIE: Hey! What are you doing there kid! Hey, cut, that out!	Tu fous quoi, là?	Heh, qu'est-ce que tu fabriques toi? Tu vas voir!

In the first example, 'ditsy' (familiar) is translated in both versions by ballot (also familiar and translated by 'nitwit', 'blockhead' or 'fool' in the Larousse dictionary). Removing *il* in the subtitled version (fallait and not *il* fallait) is characteristic of informal, spoken French and contributes further to the familiar tone of the original.

In the second example, the character is involved in a discussion about Kuwait, the Pentagon and Saddam Hussein ('they're gonna hit him with all they've got'). A colloquial expression appears in both subtitled and dubbed versions, *foutre plein la gueule/foutre sur la gueule* (the Larousse offers 'to bash or smash someone's face in'). In terms of language register, the French translations remain close to the original and also fit 1) the character, Tommy, one of the local black residents who likes to "shoot the breeze with Auggie" (Auster 1995: 20), and 2) the context, a friendly, busy cigar shop run by Auggie, on a nondescript street corner of Brooklyn. Various local residents go there to buy cigarettes, newspapers and more importantly pass the time of day. The shop is a meeting point for the community.

In example 3, Auggie states that it is an honour for Paul to have been chosen to write an article for The New York Times: 'That's a feather in your cap' could have been translated by an equivalent expression *c'est un fleuron à ta couronne*. However, the subtitler and dubber prefer a more colloquial turn of phrase, *Tu devrais être fier comme un pou!* ('you must be as proud as a peacock'). Auggie is "somewhere between forty and fifty years old" and has "a scruffy presence" (Auster 1995: 19). Paul is a regular customer. He is in his early forties, a writer and "dressed in rumpled casual clothes" (p. 24). The relationship between the two is informal. The expression offered in the translations corresponds once again to the character and overall ambiance of the sequence. A dual coherence is therefore attained between the original dialogue and the

translations on the one hand, and between the translations and visual characterisation of the actors on the other. In the final example, Auggie notices a youth trying to steal magazines. The subtitler reinforces his anger using a familiar register: Tu fous quoi, là? ('What the hell are you doing over there?'). Similarly, the dubbed dialogue maintains the style of the original with Qu'est-ce que tu fabriques, toi? ('What are you up to').

The examples below taken from *Blue in the Face*, also illustrate equivalence in relation to the tone of the original (emphasis added):

#### Blue in the Face

English version	Subtitled version	Dubbed version
5) AUGGIE: Last summer there was a stretch of a couple of weeks	L'été dernier, il y a 2 ou 3 semaines	L'été dernier il y a eu deux ou trois semaines
when everywhere I turned everyone seemed to be going nuts.	où tout le monde semblait disjoncter autour de moi.	pendant lequel tout le monde semblait disjoncter autour de moi.
I mean, it's crazy enough living in Brooklyn in the first place	C'est déjà assez dingue de vivre à Brooklyn,	C'est vrai, c'est déjà assez dingue de vivre à Brooklyn,
but... so many weird little things kept popping up at once...	mais tant de trucs bizarres se sont passés en même temps...	mais il s'est passé tant de trucs bizarres en même temps...
6) IAN FRAZIER: And it really drives me nuts. It's like a flag...	Ça me met hors de moi. Pour moi, c'est le drapeau...	et ça me met hors de moi. Pour moi, c'est l'étandard...
of chaos. A bag in a tree. It's a symbol.	du chaos. Un sac dans un arbre, c'est un symbole	du euh, chaos. Plastique dans un arbre, c'est un symbole, et je...
It's just... and I used to see them, and just, they would bug me.	Avant, quand je voyais ça, ça me tapait sur les nerfs.	Oui et avant, quand j'en voyais, à chaque fois ça me crispait. C'était...
7) VINNIE: Hey, Auggie, it's a lot of money. I'd be crazy to turn it down.	Ça fait beaucoup d'argent. Je serais dingue de refuser.	Hé Auggie, ça fait un sacré paquet de fric. Je serais dingue de refuser.

The dialogue in example 5 occurs at the beginning of the film and serves as an introduction for the events which follow. The informal register of the original is retained in both versions. 'To be going nuts' is transposed in each case by disjoncter (which literally means 'to short-circuit', and as an expression 'to go off the rails'). 'Crazy' becomes dingue and 'things', trucs. The film moves to the realms of documentary in example 6 where Ian Frazier, an actual resident of Brooklyn, is filmed in Prospect Park carrying out his hobby of removing plastic bags from trees. The expression 'to drive me nuts' is subtitled and dubbed by ça me met hors de moi ('I was

beside myself'). Once again the style of the original is maintained through this figurative expression. Frazier continues with 'they would bug me'. The subtitler opts for *ça me tapait sur les nerfs* ('it got on my nerves') and the dubber, *ça me crispait* ('it used to irritate me'). Both translations are familiar and transmit the sense of the English version. However, the slightly more familiar expression in the subtitle emphasises Frazier's frustration and so reveals more about the individual. Finally, in example 7, Vinnie, the owner of The Brooklyn Cigar Company, is talking to Auggie about selling the store. Both the translators transpose 'crazy' as *dingue*, but the dubbed version becomes even more colloquial as 'it's a lot of money' becomes *ça fait un sacré paquet de fric* ('that's a hell of a lot of dough'). Although the dubbed version is stronger, it does fit the speaker and context. The same could be said for the following example from *The Piano* where the literal translations also fit the eloquent style of the character. Ada is mute and we hear her thoughts in the example below as she imagines the man (Stewart) she is being sent to marry in New Zealand:

#### The Piano

English version	Subtitled version	Dubbed version
8) ADA: Were it good he had God's patience.	Il serait bon qu'il ait une patience divine.	Il serait bon qu'il ait une patience divine.

Up until this point then, similarities in relation to language register and style have been observed between the original and the translated versions. Let us now explore examples from the second strategy (+ + -) where, unlike the dubbed version, the subtitled version conveys the stylistic effects in the original:

#### Smoke

English version	Subtitled version	Dubbed version
9) AUGGIE: You'll never get it if you don't slow down my friend.	Tu ne pigeras pas, si tu ne ralentis pas.	Tu ne verras pas, si tu ne ralentis pas un peu.
10) AUGGIE: Why don't you come clean and tell the man who you are?	Vide ton sac et dis-lui qui tu es.	Vas-y carrément et dis à ce Monsieur qui tu es.
11) CYRUS: You mockin' me?	Tu te fiches de moi?	Tu te moques de moi?
12) AUGGIE: The poor lug, he's never been the same since.	Ça l'a déglingué, le pauvre.	Le pauvre type, il n'a jamais pu s'en remettre.

#### Blue in the Face

English version	Subtitled version	Dubbed version
13) SASALINA GAMBINO: I don't get no cake... to eat it, I have to get it smashed in my face...	Mon gâteau, je le mangerai pas : je l'aurai dans la tronche...	Des gâteaux je vais pas les déguster tranquille... huh, je suis sûre qu'on me les écrasera en pleine figure...



Each day at eight o'clock in the morning, Auggie takes a picture of the corner of Third Street and Seventh Avenue. In example 9, Auggie advises Paul to slow down as he looks through the 4000 photographs in the album. 'You'll never get it' is translated literally by *tu ne pigeras pas* (in the subtitled version) and *tu ne verras pas* ('you won't see [the point]') in the dubbed version. It is likely that during synchronisation the translation has been altered to achieve partial synchronisation between 'you'll never' and *tu ne verras*. This change has also led to a shift in register in which the familiar tone of the original is lost from the dubbed version. It is maintained in the subtitled version and is in keeping with Auggie's easygoing character and the informal setting of the sequence. Examples 10 and 11 occur when Rashid is forced to reveal that he is Cyrus's son. Rashid is a black adolescent who, hiding his true identity, establishes contact with his father (Cyrus) who abandoned him when he was a child, after a car accident in which Rashid's mother was killed. During the course of the film Rashid runs away from the home he shares with his aunt and uncle, befriends Paul and Auggie, and still concealing his identity, takes on a part-time job working for Cyrus at a petrol station. Examples 10 and 11 occur when Auggie and Paul appear at the service station, having discovered Rashid's deception in the meantime. They force him to confess the truth to Cyrus. This scene is therefore dramatic and emotionally charged. In example 10) Auggie expresses his frustration as Rashid continues the charade. An equivalent idiomatic turn of phrase for 'to come clean' is subtitled by *vide ton sac* (literally, 'empty your bag' or figuratively, 'get things off your chest'). This is lost in the dubbed version: *Vas-y carrément et dis à ce Monsieur qui tu es* ('Go ahead and tell this man straight out who you are'). Once again it is likely the original translation has been altered during the synchronisation process to synchronise the letters 'come clean' and *carrément*. Accordingly, 'You mockin' me?' is subtitled as *Tu te fiches de moi?* ('Are you kidding me' or 'do you take me for a sucker' according to the Larousse dictionary) but dubbed as *Tu te moques de moi?* ('Are you making fun of me?'). The standard register in the dubbed dialogue tones down the emotion and anger of the character. In example 12 Auggie refers to Paul whose pregnant wife was shot dead during a holdup. Familiar language is also introduced in the subtitled version with *déglingué* (*Ça l'a déglingué*, 'That wrecked him'). However, a standard rendering appears in the dubbed version: *Le pauvre type, il n'a jamais pu s'en remettre* ('the poor chap, he never recovered/got over it'). In the last example, a young, black, local resident explains how her birthday will be celebrated in Brooklyn. In order to transmit the tone of the original and respect characterisation, the subtitler changes the register and translates 'face' with a more familiar term, *la tronche*. This is not the case in the dubbed version with the translation *en pleine figure* ('right in your face'), where *figure* is standard usage. The subtitler uses register as a way for compensating for other omissions ('get it smashed' is translated by the more standard *je l'aurai* or 'I'll have/get it').<sup>6</sup>

Strategy 3 (+ - +) occurs when a more standard, neutral register is used in the subtitled version. Few examples of this were found in the films.

#### Smoke

English version	Subtitled version	Dubbed version
14) RASHID: If the guy from the check-cashing place hadn't run off screaming bloody murder, he would have shot me.	L'employé est sorti en hurlant, sinon il m'aurait abattu.	Si le gars de la banque n'était pas sorti, en courant et en hurlant comme un malade, La Belette aurait tiré sur moi.

In the example from *Smoke*, the expression 'to scream bloody murder' does not have an equivalent in French. However, unlike the subtitler, the dubber retains the expressive nature of the original by adding *hurlant comme un malade* ('yelling like a madman'). *Le gars* ('the bloke') is also inserted to translate 'the guy' whereas the more neutral *employé* ('employee') appears in the subtitle. The subtitler has removed the expression in the original. It is interesting to note that the dubber also ensures that the public understands how Rashid's story fits in with the narrative by mentioning exactly who would have shot him (*La Belette* or 'The Creeper' in the English version).

On some occasions neither translator finds a way to retain the tone of the original (Strategy 4 + - -):

#### Smoke

English version	Subtitled version	Dubbed version
15) CYRUS: Yeah, but he's my son. He's my own flesh and blood.	Mais c'est mon fils. On est du même sang.	Eh oui, mais c'est mon fils. Mon sang coule dans ses veines.

#### The Piano

English version	Subtitled version	Dubbed version
16) BAINES: Those 80 acres across the stream, what do you think of them?	Ces 35 hectares près du ruisseau, qu'en penses-tu ?	Les quarante hectares qui sont près du ruisseau, qu'est-ce que tu en penses?
STEWART: I don't have any money,	J'ai pas d'argent.	Je n'ai pas les moyens.
What are you on about?	Pourquoi en parles-tu ?	Où veux-tu en venir?
17) MORAG: Careful, the lace is most fragile.	La dentelle est fragile!	Attention, la dentelle est très fragile!

'He's my own flesh and blood' (example 15) could have been translated by the equivalent expression in French *c'est la chair de ma chair*. However, both versions offer an explicit rendering *On est du même sang* ('we have the same blood') and *Mon sang coule dans ses veines* ('my blood flows in his veins'). Stylistically, the translations differ from the original although they do convey the denotative meaning. In the extracts from *The Piano*, the expressive nature of the original is attenuated somewhat in the

subtitled and dubbed versions. Example 16 takes place as Baines bargains with Stewart. He offers land in exchange for Ada's piano: 'What are you on about' becomes Pourquoi en parles-tu ('Why are you talking about it') in the subtitled version. The subtitler thereby links the translation to the previous subtitle and the rest of the conversation. Although the dubbed translation fits in perfectly within the context and meaning of this exchange, the colloquial element disappears Où veux-tu en venir? ('What are you getting at'). In example 17, we see Morag helping to arrange Ada's wedding dress. Morag is a middle-aged Englishwoman who has emigrated to New Zealand. She looks down on the Maoris and upholds British traditions and etiquette at every occasion. The use of 'most', meaning 'very' in this context, corresponds to a formal register and is also indicative of social class and temporal setting. The subtitler omits this completely and adds an exclamation mark to portray the pedantic nature of the speaker in this scene. The dubber adds très and so the denotative meaning is transmitted although the connotations of 'most' in the original are not.

Let us now move on to a discussion of instances where the dubbed dialogues differ in terms of language register (Strategy 5: - - +):

#### Smoke

English version	Subtitled version	Dubbed version
18) PAUL: ...and little by little he smoked his book.	si bien qu'à la fin, il fuma son livre.	...si bien qu'à la fin, il fuma tout son bouquin.

#### Blue in the Face

English version	Subtitled version	Dubbed version
19) AUGGIE: No problem, Vin. Everything's under control. I could run this store in my sleep.	Pas de problème, Vinnie. Je gèrerais ce magasin les yeux fermés.	Pas de problème. Je contrôle la situation. Je peux bosser les yeux fermés.
20) MAN WITH UNUSUAL GLASSES: And if there was probably a childhood trauma that I had...	Dans mon enfance, j'ai dû souffrir d'un autre traumatisme.	J'ai dû probablement... souffrir d'un traumatisme étant gosse.
21) VINNIE: No more free cigars, eh, Auggie?	Plus de cigares gratuits, hein ?	Terminé les cigares à l'oeil, hein?

#### The Piano

English version	Subtitled version	Dubbed version
22) STEWART: What are you doing, we don't have time for this...	Que faites-vous ? Nous n'avons pas le temps !	Que faites-vous? Bon sang! Nous n'avons pas le temps.
23) STEWART: So, Baines is packing up?	Baines fait ses bagages ?	Baines plie bagages?

In examples 18-21, colloquial vocabulary emerges in the dubbed dialogues. Bouquin (familiar) translates 'book' instead of *livre*, and 'I could run this store in my sleep' becomes *Je peux bosser les yeux fermés* ('I can work with my eyes closed', where *bosser* is a familiar term for 'to work'). Again the original translation was probably altered during synchronisation to provide the best fit between lip movements and the new soundtrack. In examples 20 and 21, the more familiar use of language (*gosse* 'kid', *à l'oeil* 'on the house') in the dubbed version fits the global context and characterisation. The "Man with Unusual Glasses" (example 20) is Lou Reed. Auster writes:

We [Auster and Wayne Wang, the producer] decided to use Lou as himself, not as an actor: just sit him behind the counter of the cigar store and get him to talk on various subjects. He was to be the resident philosopher of the Brooklyn Cigar Company, a man who just happened to be there, for no particular reason, expounding on this and that.  
(Auster 1995: 183)

Auster tries to explain why they chose Lou Reed and suggests it might have been due to his "caustic sensibility" or perhaps "his appreciation of the ironies of life" or "simply because of his marvellous New York-accented voice" (Ibid. 183). All of this comes across through the character labelled only as "The Man with Unusual Glasses". He talks about various events in a relaxed, informal manner. The last extract from *Blue in the Face*, takes place as Auggie tries to convince Vinnie not to sell the cigar store. The relationship is one of good friends rather than employer/employee. Therefore, in both these extracts, the informal register in the dubbed version fits both the context and characterisation.

In example 22 from *The Piano*, the dubbed version reinforces Stewart's anger by adding an expletive, *Bon sang* ('damn and blast it'). Although the character is irritated, he remains formal in the original. The translation<sup>7</sup> serves to emphasise Stewart's frustration in this scene. This is compromised slightly in the final sentence where a more colloquial turn of phrase is used *Baines plie bagages*<sup>8</sup> ('Baines is packing up and going'). This does not quite fit with the stiff, conventional manner of the character. Once again, it is likely that the original translation was altered due to the need for lip synchronisation.

In the above extracts, the dubber changes the style and language register of the original. At times, the subtitler also chooses this strategy (Strategy 6: - + +):

## Smoke

English version	Subtitled version	Dubbed version
24) PAUL: I mean, if you think you're going to die, what's more important, a good book, or a good smoke?	Tu crois que tu vas mourir, tu préfères un livre ou une clope?	C'est vrai. Si tu crois que ce qu'on a de plus important c'est un bon livre ou une bonne clope...

## Blue in the Face

English version	Subtitled version	Dubbed version
25) RAPPER: I'm trying to get some equipment, man. You want to buy a watch?	Je veux m'acheter du matos. Vous m'en prenez une?	J'aimerais bien m'acheter du matos... alors, vous m'en prenez une?
26) SASALINA GAMBINA: Is, is a Brooklyn girl a good fighter? Of course. Because we don't scratch and pull hair.	Oui, les filles de Brooklyn savent se battre. On se crêpe pas la chignon.	Si les filles de Brooklyn savent se battre? Ah oui, bien. On n'est pas du genre à se crêper le chignon.

'Smoke' (example 24) is translated by the familiar term for cigarette in French, clope. Although the register changes, this translation matches Paul's relaxed manner and the informal context. The same could be said for matos ('gear'), in example 25, which replaces 'equipment'. Sasalina Gambina (example 26), a local Brooklyn resident studied in an earlier extract (example 13), often uses colloquialisms, slang, and grammatically incorrect language. The extract quoted here is an exception. However, the subtitled and dubbed versions take account of the way she comes across throughout the film, and provide a colloquial expression se crêper le chignon ('to have a go at each other'). The translations are therefore consistent with the overall portrayal of the individual.

In the final strategy, a change in register occurs in the subtitles but not the dubbed dialogues (Strategy 7: - + -):

## Smoke

English version	Subtitled version	Dubbed version
27) AUGGIE: He ran out of luck.	Il manque plutôt de pot.	Il manque de chance.

## The Piano

English version	Subtitled version	Dubbed version
28) MORAG: Septimus, now stop it.	Assieds-toi.	Asseyez-vous, ça suffit.

The expression 'to run out of luck' is subtitled by il manque plutôt de pot ('he's out of luck') as opposed to a more standard rendering in the dubbed

version il manque de chance ('he is short of luck'). Auggie often uses slang and informal expressions, an essential part of his characterisation, and the subtitle takes account of this. In *The Piano*, an element of familiarity is added to the subtitled version through the use of the informal *tu* as opposed to the more formal *vous*. The context itself is not formal at this point, however as the characters conform to the rigours of politeness and formality of the nineteenth century it would have been more likely that they would address each other with *vous*.

## 6. Summary

We have seen that marked forms of language are removed from or added to the subtitled and dubbed versions through a change in register. Lip synchronisation often leads to a shift in the dubbed dialogues, in which standard language emerges (+ + -). This also reduces coherence between the new soundtrack and characters. Standard language is chosen by the subtitler rather than more colloquial forms when this constitutes a way of shortening the translation (+ - +). Sometimes the denotative meaning is conveyed at the expense of the speaker's idiosyncrasies. In those examples where there is no equivalent expression in French, both the subtitled and the dubbed versions adhere to the denotative meaning (+ - -). The translations become neutral and less expressive. The dubbed version becomes stronger when this allows a better fit between the lip movements of the actors and the translation (- - +). At times, a shift in register occurs in both versions whilst respecting the overall portrayal of a particular character (- + +).

A change in register tends to occur when constraints specific to subtitling and dubbing arise or an equivalent expression in French does not exist. However, the subtitler might use colloquialisms to translate standard language as a means to compensate for the suppression of familiarity elsewhere and thereby attain coherence on a general, global level. In the dubbed version, a change in register often corresponds to a need for synchronisation. Different registers provide a palette from which various solutions can be sought. It should be noted that, through intonation, stress and volume, the voice of the dubbing actor can compensate, to a certain extent, for meaning which has been changed or lost.

It is not possible to convey the multiple meanings of each and every utterance but the spirit of the entire audiovisual text, composed not only of language but also other visual and auditory effects, needs to serve as a guide for the translator in his choices.<sup>9</sup>

**REFERENCES**

- Armstrong, Nigel (2004). "Voicing 'The Simpsons' from English to French: a story of variable success." *The Journal of Specialised Translation* [online], 2. Available from: [www.jostrans.org/issue02/articles/n\\_armstrong.htm](http://www.jostrans.org/issue02/articles/n_armstrong.htm) (accessed 5 February 2004).
- Auster, Paul (1995). 'Smoke' and 'Blue in the Face': two films. London/Boston: Faber and Faber.
- Cheshire, Jenny & Bell, Allan (2003). "Register and style." *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics* volume 3, (second edition). William Frawley (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 454-459.
- Dubois, Jean et al. (1994). *Dictionnaire de linguistique et des sciences du langage*. Paris: Larousse.
- Fawcett, Peter (1997). *Translation and Language. Linguistic Theories Explained. Translation Theories Explained*. Manchester: St Jerome Publishing.
- Fawcett, Peter (2003). "The Manipulation of Language and Culture in Film Translation." María Calzada Pérez (ed) *Apropos of Ideology*. Manchester: St Jerome Publishing, 145-163.
- Gadet, Françoise (1996). "Niveaux de langue et variation intrinsèque." *Palimpsestes* 10, 17-40.
- Goris, Olivier (1993). "The Question of French Dubbing: Towards a Frame for Systematic Investigation." *Target* 5(2), 169-190.
- Hatim, Basil & Mason, Ian (1990). *Discourse and the Translator*. New York: Longman Inc.
- Hatim, Basil & Mason, Ian (1997). *The Translator as Communicator*. London: Routledge.
- Hatim, Basil & Munday, Jeremy (2004). *Translation: an advanced resource book*. London: Routledge.
- Herbst, Thomas (1997). "Dubbing and the Dubbed Text - Style and Cohesion: Textual Characteristics of a Special Form of Translation." Anna Trosborg (ed.) (1997). *Text Typology and Translation*. Benjamins Translation Library 26. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Hewson, Lance (1996). "Le Niveau de langue repère." *Palimpsestes* 10, 77-92.
- Larousse French-English, English-French Dictionary. Unabridged Edition. Larousse 1994.
- Mailhac, Jean-Pierre (2000a). "Levels of Speech and Grammar When Translating Between English and French." Christina Schäffner & Beverly Adab (eds) (2000). *Developing Translation Competence*. Benjamins Translation Library 38. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 33-50.
- Mailhac, Jean-Pierre (2000b). "Subtitling and Dubbing, for Better or Worse? The English Video Versions of Gazon Maudit." Salama-Carr, Myriam (ed.) (2000) *On Translating French Literature and Film II*. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 129-154.
- Martinez, Xènia (2004) "Film dubbing, its process and translation." Pilar Orero (ed.), *Topics in Audiovisual Translation*. Benjamins Translation Library 56. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 3-7.

Pettit, Zoë (2000). Subtitling and dubbing: Interaction between language and image in a selection of audiovisual genres. PhD thesis. University Paul Valéry at Montpellier, France.

Pettit, Zoë (2004). "The Audio-visual Text: Subtitling and Dubbing Different Genres." Yves Gambier, (ed.) (2004) Audiovisual Translation. Montréal : Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal. Special issue of *Meta* 49 (1), 25-38.

Sanders, Carol (1996). "Pourquoi qu'on dit des choses et pas d'autres? Translating Queneau's français parlé in 'Zazie dans le métro' and 'Le Chiendent'." *Palimpsestes* 10, 41-48.

Savova, Lilia (2005). "Register." *New Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, volume 2. Philipp Strazny (ed.) (2005). New York: Taylor & Francis, 898-899.

Trosborg, Anna (ed) (1997). "Text typology: Register, Genre and Text Type." *Text Typology and Translation*. Benjamins Translation Library 26. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 3-24.

Vanderschelden, Isabelle (2001). "Le sous-titrage des classes sociales dans *La vie est un long fleuve tranquille*." Michel Ballard (ed.) (2001) *Oralité et Traduction*. Arras: Artois Presses Université, 361-379.

### Audiovisual sources

Campion, Jane (Director) (1992). *The Piano* [Motion picture]. Australia: Miramax.

Wang, Wayne (Director) (1995). *Blue in the Face* [Motion picture]. USA: Miramax.

Wang, Wayne (Director) (1995). *Smoke* [Motion picture]. USA: Miramax.

---

Zoë Pettit is currently Lecturer in French at the University of Greenwich in London. She obtained a doctorate in audiovisual translation (2000) from Paul Valéry University, Montpellier III, France. Her research interests include interlingual subtitling and dubbing, semiotics, verbal and non-verbal communication. She can be contacted at [pz02@gre.ac.uk](mailto:pz02@gre.ac.uk)

---

<sup>1</sup> See Trosborg (1997) who relates register to genre and text type. Other pertinent contributions include Sanders (1996), Gadet (1996) and Hewson (1996) in a special issue of *Palimpsestes* dedicated to translation, registre and niveau de langue.

<sup>2</sup> The fine line which separates the two is illustrated by the entries in the unabridged edition of the Larousse French/English dictionary in which niveau de langue is translated as "register" and somewhat perversely, registre as both "register" and "level of language".

<sup>3</sup> Hatim and Mason (1990: 40-42, 1997:97-110) discuss the notion of register at length explaining how these different factors affect the use of one register over another.

<sup>4</sup> Martinez (2004: 5-6) describes the dubbing process and shows that the original translation may be modified at various stages. Proof-reading, synchronisation, and even improvisation on the part of the actors, may affect the final dubbed version: "[...] the product of the translator's work is often not the final product but a sort of draft version which is polished and adjusted to the needs and demands of the medium" (p. 7).

<sup>5</sup> Although these are the reasons why the films were chosen in relation to language register, they have a number of other interesting features which lead to their selection in a more extensive analysis of the subtitled and dubbed versions (cf. Pettit: 2000).



<sup>6</sup> In Armstrong's (2004) study of the dubbed version of *The Simpsons*, a popular American animated cartoon show, he reveals how the translator uses slang as a way to compensate for marked social-regional language in the original English which has no equivalent in French. Sanders (1996: 42) also discusses how a "different linguistic level" can be used as a means of compensation.

<sup>7</sup> It is highly probable that the expletive was added by the person responsible for lip synchronisation.

<sup>8</sup> This collocation is also used in the expression *forcer quelqu'un à plier bagage* 'to send someone packing' (Larousse).

<sup>9</sup> Other factors might include regulations imposed by the company sponsoring the translation, the channel which will broadcast the programme, the time it will be shown etc