

Translating popular film, Carol O'Sullivan, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 243 pp., £64.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-230-57391-8, £64.00 (ebk), ISBN 9780230317543

The mutually constraining pressure that language and cinema exert on one another has long been a theme of research in translation studies. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, most scholarly efforts to gain a better understanding of film translation uncritically subscribed to the key assumption on which the economic logic of the entertainment industry was premised. That is, to facilitate the international circulation of films and maximize the return on investment, translators had to comply with a set of language transfer conventions that prioritized maximum synchrony between speaker and voice over translational creativity. Under this mechanistic view of the language transfer process, questions of translation could be safely confined to the post-production stage, effectively excluding translators from the various creative processes that lie at the heart of film-making. The excision of mainstream language transfer considerations from the industrial and aesthetic contexts in which cinematic texts are embedded continues to significantly constrain translators' capacity to exert their professional discretion as linguistic and cultural mediators, turning them into 'subservient scribes' who do 'nothing to improve standards in the film translation industry' (Ulrych 2000: 140) and are 'virtually ignored in film studies' (Nornes 2007: 3).

The consequences of this unquestioning adherence to conventional subtitling practices have not gone unnoticed. Various film scholars have noted that such conventions, with their emphasis on readability and synchronized sound, 'naturalize a dominant, hierarchically unified worldview' (Minh-ha 1992: 207) that, in turn, imposes the hegemonic structure of the Hollywood narrative and provides 'corrupt' representations of otherness (Nornes 1999). Seemingly oblivious or indifferent to such critiques, film translation scholars have largely opted to survey the mediation practices imposed by the displacement of translation from other narrative and creative aspects of film-making, rather than challenge the very rationale for that excision. Preoccupied with the elaboration of systematic taxonomies of equivalence between stretches of film dialogue and their target language versions, their work has been criticized for failing 'to engage other disciplines and lay the foundation for interdisciplinary research and critical theorizing' (Baker 2014a: xiv) – an indication that the balance of reciprocal influence between the classical cinematic apparatus and linguistic representation is slanted towards the former.

Leaving aside recent work by scholars exploring the contribution of non-verbal semiotics to the film translation process (see Pérez-González 2014 for an overview), Carol O'Sullivan's *Translating Popular Film* is, to date, the most original and insightful intervention in the debate over the place of language in cinema to have been published by a translation studies scholar. Crucially, O'Sullivan's monograph shifts the focus of enquiry away from the practicalities of interlingual mediation during film post-production, consigning the classification of translation techniques associated with dubbing, subtitling or voice-over to terrain that is outside its remit. Instead, O'Sullivan chooses to foreground the extent to which foreign languages have been and remain deeply enmeshed in the construction of filmic narratives. In this respect, her contention that the narrative 'ways and devices by which film

represents and makes manageable foreign languages to the viewer *are a form of translation*' (2011: 5, my emphasis) is consistent, for example, with other specialists' call to extend the definition of translation 'to encompass a wide range of activities and products that do not necessarily involve an identifiable relationship with a discreet source text' (Baker 2014b: 15). As O'Sullivan herself puts it in the introductory chapter, 'the translational transactions looked at in this book involve specific languages, though they do not always involve specific source and target texts' (2011: 5).

In the first of six chapters, 'Mimesis and Film Languages', the author articulates her understanding of film translation in its extended sense against an overview of the language transfer methods that the industry uses to translate completed films for international distribution. As O'Sullivan thoroughly illustrates, the language(s) spoken by certain characters or communities represented in film narratives can differ from the 'narrating' language that directors use to portray events and experiences to their audience. The process whereby filmmakers stage the interplay between languages acting as represented objects and those used as means of representation is conceptualized in this chapter as a 'translational stage which precedes audiovisual translation' (p. 15). Following this logic, the fabric that filmmakers weave by combining two or more languages has a narratological significance of its own that audiovisual translators should try to comprehend before they set out to subtitle or revoice the film dialogue. In the second half of the chapter, O'Sullivan explores a range of strategies to represent foreign languages on screen. Drawing on Sternberg's (1981) classification, she presents and illustrates a number of options located along a representational spectrum that stretches between 'vehicular matching' and 'homogenisation'. The former obtains in those cases where filmmakers choose to prioritize linguistic verisimilitude, thus allowing for polyglot conversations where these are required by the story world staged in the film; by contrast, the latter strategy subordinates verisimilitude to the needs of the primary audience and therefore uses the viewers' language to replace what should have been a different narrated language(s) in the diegetic domain. A number of strategies bundled together under the heading of 'mimetic compromise' exhibit different degrees of alignment with the matching and homogenising poles of the spectrum. These include 'selective reproduction', involving the occasional reliance on the foreign diegetic language(s); 'verbal transposition', defined as the use of verbal structures that evoke foreignness in a number of ways; and 'explicit attribution', whereby viewers are overtly told that characters are speaking another language. Representations of foreign languages can, however, be avoided altogether through 'referential restriction' if creators opt to stage the narrative within a monolingual community that speaks the same language as the primary audience. O'Sullivan's adaption of Sternberg's model possesses significant epistemological value, as her discussion of different examples demonstrates. Significantly, however, it also provides a sound critical framework to explore the implications of the choices that filmmakers make when representing the foreign in film narratives.

The difference between translation for international distribution and translation at the production stage is approached from a different angle in the second chapter, 'The Dream of Instant Translation'. O'Sullivan concentrates here on a number of filmic devices that help to realize the semiotic potential of cinema as a universal language, as articulated by pioneering filmmakers a century ago. Through the use of visual resources with significant contextualizing capacity, the meaning of words in other languages can 'already be read on the speaker's face before the word has been fully articulated' (Pudovkin 1947, quoted in p. 44). 'Translating dissolves', the first of such devices, involve the replacement (via a dissolve)

of a foreign language text with another written in the primary viewers' language. In many cases, the translated text, e.g. a letter fragment, will attempt to mimetically resemble the original in terms of layout or the choice of fonts. Unlike subtitles, O'Sullivan argues, translating dissolves are subjectively perceived as non-translations 'because the viewer 'understands' the insert from the point of view of a character' (p. 50), rather than as a snippet of text superimposed on the screen by an extradiegetic agency. Other elements of the filmic apparatus – such as 'close-up shots', 'camera movements/cuts' or 'sound mixing tricks' – can also play a translational role in films whose initial scenes are shot in a foreign language to enhance the verisimilitude of the staged narrative. O'Sullivan's examples illustrate how these film editing techniques are mobilized to articulate 'homogenising shifts' from the narrated to the narrating languages. With the strategic deployment of such shots or cuts, for example, English-speaking viewers are persuaded to accept that the English dialogue they are listening to from that point onwards is actually being delivered in Russian, for example. Through immersive shifts from the represented to the representing language, 'the cinematographic apparatus can transcend national languages' while, at the same time, realizing the dream of instant translation. In other words, the syntactical dimension of film semiotics can facilitate comprehension without adding subtitles, voice-over tracks or stating interpreter-mediated conversations.

The third chapter, 'Before and Beyond Subtitles', further explores the narrative management of heterolingualism in films that feature a 'vehicular matching' approach to the representation of foreign languages. O'Sullivan draws upon Chion's (1994) typology of forms of listening in the cinema to contend that, should foreign speech be present in the story world, it will prompt different listening experiences from viewers. Listening may be 'reduced' in some cases as viewers, unable to understand one or more of the represented languages, will focus on its material and phonic features. It may be 'causal', insofar as the prosodic features of the characters' unintelligible speech may be sufficient to convey their emotional state to the audience. Finally, the listening experience could also have a 'semantic' dimension, as 'it is anticipated that viewers will decode and pick up words and phrases and draw on this accumulated vocabulary as the film or television show proceeds' (p. 73). As was also the case with the models that O'Sullivan presents in the first two chapters, Chion's categorization is adopted as a structuring device for the discussion, where the author examines three different ways in which creators can expose viewers to foreign dialogue, while keeping the presence of subtitles to a minimum. *Mise en scène*, for example, can be designed in such a way that the non-verbal components of film semiotics, both visual and acoustic, significantly contextualize and complement foreign speech. By enhancing visual/verbal redundancy and staging scenes and events in compliance with conventional narrative schemas, *mise en scène* can help viewers make the intermodal connections and inferences required to follow the action represented in a foreign language. The other two strategies available to filmmakers involve supplementing the affordances of *mise en scène* with the incorporation of either diegetic characters acting as interpreters, or passages of 'translational narrating voiceover'. This type of extradiegetic voiceover 'stands in a representational relationship to the heterolingual diegetic situation it overspeaks' (p. 95), and normally delivers a description, rather than a word-for-word translation, of the foreign speech. Significantly, however, translational narrating voiceover is often used to juxtapose the represented and representing languages, so that the latter can then establish themselves as the dominant language of the narration.

Chapters 4 and 6 – ‘Subtitling and the Ethics of Representation’ and ‘Translating Multilingualism on Screen’, respectively – deal with different aspects of a growingly popular trend: multilingual films. Using subtitles to mediate foreign languages in heterolingual films, chapter 4 argues, represents an ethical choice that involves various important considerations – e.g. how much of the foreign talk should be conveyed to the primary audience, how the shift from narrated to narrating language should be constructed and negotiated, and so on. This ethical dimension, which O’Sullivan rigorously conceptualizes by drawing on different scholars in the fields of film and cultural studies, is all the more significant in heterolingual films distributed within mainstream circuits. In these cases, the deployment of ‘pre-subtitling, where subtitling is envisaged from early in production’ (p. 116) and incorporated prior to the film release could be interpreted as an attempt to resist the economic logic of the film industry or to challenge the impact that external socio-political factors have traditionally had on the diegetic representation of certain linguacultures. Two case studies based on ‘pseudosubtitled’ productions (where the scripts were written in English, translated into and acted in another language, and presented to viewers with English subtitles) and films representing Native American languages provide abundant opportunities to explore the ethical underpinning of heterolingualism on screen. The main concern of Chapter 6, on the other hand, is with how diegetic otherness, as manifested in multilingual films, is negotiated at the point of distribution. Building on the conceptual framework developed throughout the book, O’Sullivan examines the multilingual film phenomenon against a number of cultural, industrial and aesthetic developments. Multilingual films, her discussion shows, need not necessarily become monolingual in post-production, as other hybrid translation methods combining subtitles and revoiced passages are beginning to gain artistic and critical currency.

To some extent, Chapter 5, ‘Where Are the Subtitles?’, stands in a contrapuntal relationship to the rest of the book. The focus here is not on how the cinematic apparatus can be best exploited to do without or minimize the need for post-production translation – a form of ‘paratext’ in the Genettian sense (1997 [1987]). Instead, this chapter delivers a highly sophisticated critique of how, through formal innovation, subtitles can claim a place for themselves in the production process and hence come to play a fully ratified textual function within the filmic semiotic *gestalt* – to the extent that, in some cases, they are perceived as non-translations. Some of the processes through which, according to O’Sullivan, subtitles can achieve textual status are already gaining increasing visibility in the literature. These include the spectacularization of subtitling through creative experimentation (McClarty 2014, Sasamoto 2014); the generalization of ‘integrated’ subtitles (Fox 2013); or the deployment of snippets of text as metaleptic instruments through which filmmakers cross the boundaries between the fictional and extra-diegetic realities (Pérez-González 2013), to name but a few examples.

Some readers will find small issues to quibble with. To a large extent, the narrative devices that drive the translational transactions under scrutiny in this volume are drawn from mainstream Anglophone and European film traditions. In this respect, it would be interesting to see whether future studies examining the interface between translation and non-Western film narrative conventions bear out the argument that O’Sullivan develops in this monograph. Similarly, while the author uses ‘exotic’ languages – ranging from Aramaic to Native American languages, among others –for the purposes of illustration, the cultures they give voice to remain confined, for the time being, to the diegetic world that other languages and cultures narrate.

Overall, *Translating Popular Film* is a fascinating read for its ambitious and erudite treatment of wide-ranging theoretical sources from translation studies, film studies, literary theory and cultural studies. It also presents the reader with an impressive array of examples that O'Sullivan, drawing on her extensive knowledge and passionate appreciation of film, analyses in a rigorous and yet engaging manner. Most importantly, the book's argument that film translation can take place as early as in the pre-production stage – and hence constitutes an integral part of the film-making process – inaugurates an innovative and intellectually invigorating strand of audiovisual translation studies. In a recent interview (O'Sullivan 2014), the author notes that the focus of this book is on aspects of film translation that other scholars have tended not to look at, as part of her wider tendency to set her sights on the 'eccentric fringes' of her chosen research topics. On this occasion, the peripheral location of *Translating Popular Film* on the edges between translation and film studies is bound to consolidate and expand the common ground existing between these two disciplinary areas, ultimately setting a new standard and research agenda for film translation scholarship.

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