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## “I knew he’d say that!” A consideration of the predictability of language use in film

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### Abstract

This paper is based on three essential premises, Firstly the language of film must be regarded as an entity in itself that can be shown to differ, often appreciably, from the spontaneous, authentic discourse of everyday talk. Secondly, language can be categorized in terms of genres, subgenres and ‘genrelets’, each of these subdivisions containing a sufficiently recognisable number of compulsory and optional linguistic features (see Halliday & Hasan 1989) as to be identifiable as distinct entities. Thirdly, following logically on the first two premises, it is possible in some circumstances to predict film language use with a reasonable degree of accuracy, even to the extent of being able to propose strategies and techniques based on the work carried out in the field of translation memory. All of this is to be seen in the light of research activity aimed at refining the strategies involved in screen translation.

The methodology proposed is based on the predictability of textual occurrences and frequencies in particular scenarios. Research in Trieste has recently concentrated on the language associated with particular scene types, especially in relation to the multimodal nature of such text. This has firstly involved work on identifying scene types in a range of films by dividing each film into discrete units as they unfold on the screen, for example (1) restaurant scene 04.19 - 04.45 > (2) public row 04.46 - 05.10 > (3) marriage proposal 05.10-06.15 > return to restaurant (Moonstruck, 1987: Reiner). Secondly specific scene types have been isolated and extrapolated from all the films in the sample and studied together. This methodology has enabled us to confirm predictions about language use in particular situations, a concept supported by the theoretical considerations of such linguists as Sinclair (1991) in terms of corpus linguistics and Hoey (2004) in terms of his ‘priming’ hypothesis (see below). Serendipitously, this work has also led us to distinguish the truly original film, that ‘declares its distance’ like any work of art, from the more mundane variety. Indeed, predictability values differ greatly between the extremes of the artistic and the popular. This has important implications for the translator, particularly the subtitler whose need for precision may compete with stylistic, semantic or aesthetic considerations. On the other hand, more ‘run of the mill’ productions could even be candidates for a sophisticated kind of translation memory tool. The paper will report on findings thus far.

# 1 Film Language

The thesis that film language differs appreciably from ordinary, everyday spontaneous language has been recognized, and little criticized, since the earliest days of the cinema. So what is cinema and what makes it different in this respect? Cinema is “telling stories through the projection of moving images” according to Paul and Wells’ cinema patent of 1895, a concept restated almost a century later by Lotman (1979: 56) - “Cinema is, by its very nature, narrative”. And while every narrative act is based on an act of communication between a sender and a receiver, in the case of the cinema there are two channels of communication, the verbal and the figurative. Both these channels have their lexicogrammar: the verbal has its words and syntax, the figurative has its lexical units in the images of characters and objects and its grammar in the organisation of these images. The innovation that cinema provided is to be seen in this ‘visual grammar’ (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), For the first time, pictures succeeded one another, creating patterns of occurrence and repetition that resembled the linear flow of speech. But the flow of images was (and is) created by film directors, cameramen, set designers and the like in the construction of an artificial situation. Similarly the language (and grammar) of film was a scripted construct created by writers, and altered by directors and actors, in the creation of an “artificially produced situation” (APS).

Going back to the early silent films, it must be pointed out that these were not actually wordless. Intertitles of various types (written on placards or inserted in the film) were used, and were so unspontaneous as to seem amusing to the modern reader. The following examples are from ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ (1927):

*Phineas outwits the slave traders*

*Eliza escapes across the river on floating ice*

*Moonlight bathing the old Kentucky home in radiance – romance in the winged and perfumed breezes of the night.*

*Rocky Pass. Reunion of Eliza and Geo. Harris*  
(from Pellegrini, 2003)

They basically reinforce what the viewer can already see and are essentially redundant, though the names and places require some indication, and the third adds a pseudo-poetic ring. The last one is actually in note form, but all these titles are produced completely in the written mode. An interesting exception is the phoneticized utterance on the part of one of the black slave characters:

*Dunno whar dey is, ‘Missy Liza’.*

This presages later developments, but for a long time the first examples above represented the norm.

Even with the advent of talking films, the level of artificiality did not drop and film language remained theatrically influenced. For example, in the case of ‘The Big Trail’ (1930), described as a silent film slowly being adapted to sound, although the actors were allowed to leave the stilted, theater-like acting to some extent, and although Marguerite Churchill slowly emerged from seeming the early silent screen heroine, John Wayne still came out with such hackneyed lines as:

*No great trail was ever blazed without hardship ... and you gotta fight! That's life ... and when you stop fightin, that's death.*

Even later, in 'Robin Hood' (1938) we hear an impeccably accented Errol Flynn chide Friar Tuck with a highly improbable "Not so close, my thunderous one!". Moving to contemporary times, Kevin Williamson, the creator of the successful American television series 'Dawson's Creek', makes it clear that he does not strive for authentic dialog in his 'fiction'. Indeed, his fifteen-year-old protagonists talk like thirty-somethings, and vice-versa.

But the first question to be tackled is who actually writes a film. The simple answer is that it is a team effort, making it difficult to identify a single author. The 'authors' include screenplay writers, producers, directors, cameramen, editors, actors and, in the translated versions, translator/adaptors, dubbing directors, dubbing actors, subtitlers, etc. A film script is an open text, written to be acted and synchronized with the visual. It is difficult to pin down a definitive version, as the script undergoes many transformations in passing through the various stages of production (deciding the subject, provisional script, dialog list, continuity script, transcription, translation, dubbing, subtitling, etc.). There is of course a mixture of spoken discourse and written language features which means there is hesitation and lack of repetition, repetition and lack of repetition, overlapping conversations and sharply distinct dialog and in the former case, recourse to paralinguistic and extralinguistic elements. Table 1 shows how film dialog differs from purely written and purely spoken discourse in terms of the listed parameters referring to the various characteristics of language use.

LANGUAGE	WRITTEN	ORAL	FILM DIALOG
Uniformity of turns, clauses, utterances	-	-	+
Tendency to monologism	+	-	+/-
Extension of turns, clauses, utterances	+	-	-
Overlapping, fuzziness and other dialogical accidents	-	+	-
Planning, coherence and cohesion	+	-	+
Para and extralinguistic elements	-	+	+
Morphosyntactic complexity	+	-	+/-
Lexical density	+	-	+/-
Presence of dialect	-	+	+/-

Tab. 1: Film Dialog Parameters (from Rossi, 2003)

To add further weight to the argument that 'filmese' is a real phenomenon, experiments carried out in Trieste (cf. Taylor, 2004, 2006) designed to compare the use of certain discourse markers typical of the spoken language (well, so, yes, right, OK, now) between film texts and spontaneous oral language taken from the Cobuild 'Bank of English' spoken corpus, showed considerable differences. Comparing corpora of approximately 1,000,000 words each the Figure 1 shows this clearly.

Similar experiments involving the use of tag questions and other features typical of spoken language use revealed less dramatic but still significant differences.

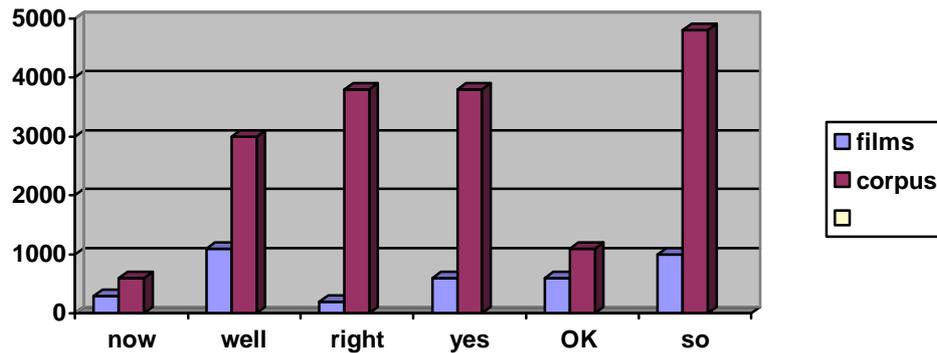


Fig.1: Differences in the use of certain discourse markers typical in spoken language between text and corpus

## 2 Genre

Genre analysis (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993; Ventola & Mauranen, 1996) has resulted in some interesting insights into the classification of language use. At a macro level we can talk of literary language, the language of journalism, scientific discourse, etc. Such macrogenres generate sub-genres (novels, poetry, detective stories; tabloids, qualities, magazines; nuclear physics, medicine, biochemistry), which in turn lead to sub-sub-genres and on to ‘genrelets’ which are particular instantiations of a higher genre (e.g. a department meeting in the cardiology department of a hospital), described by Hatim as ‘social occasions enshrined in language’.

Of course the expression ‘film genre’ brings to mind such ‘text types’ as western, spy story, comedy, etc. but films too have their sub-genres and genrelets. And it is these genrelets that are of particular interest in the search for predictability. Emergency telephone calls, third form geography lessons or American football pep talks are examples of genres fairly advanced down the cline that leads from macrogenre to genrelet. In terms of predictability Fox imagines a genrelet which might be termed ‘people communicating on a station platform during a rail transport breakdown’. She explains that: “on these occasions (English) passengers suddenly seem to become aware of each other. Our actions are always the same and minutely predictable, almost as though they had been choreographed.” (Fox 2004: 142).

This manifests itself in the muttering of expressions such as “Huh, typical!”, “What is it this time?” or “Wrong kind of leaves, I suppose”, the latter with reference to a rather weak justification, much derided at the time, on the part of the railway authorities after a series of delays caused by falling leaves on the tracks..

## 3 Predictability

Any form of genre consists of a number of obligatory features, which distinguish that genre, plus any number of optional features (Halliday & Hasan 1989). Sub-genres such as the emergency phone call or an Indian food recipe (hyponyms of the macrogenres ‘phone-calls’ and ‘recipes’) display such obligatory features - “Emergency, which service please?” in the first case and lists of spices in the second. In genrelets such as different kinds of love scenes, phone calls, presentations, service encounters, etc. there is little room for creative language use. The intertextual nature of such speech events is illustrated by the same formulae being used over and over again, with the same cues and the same response mechanisms. In this

regard, Michael Hoey’s recent work (2004) on ‘priming’ offers interesting insights into language use. The main aspect of Hoey’s theory suggests that words and expressions are PRIMED to appear in particular environments. To give an extreme example, the expression “I love you too” might only really be expected in the environment of “I love you”. He also gives the example of the expression “In the winter months” which is primed to appear almost exclusively in a gardening context, particularly during the many television programs dedicated to this activity in Britain. Basically synonymous expressions such as “In winter” or “During the cold season” or even “When frost’s tentacles do wrap us...” are primed to appear elsewhere.

The language of film tends to accentuate such obligatoriness and transparency. Especially in stylized genres (traditional westerns, medieval dramas, quickly produced cop and sci-fi series, etc.) but even in more realistic genres, language use is that much more cued and crafted and thus more PREDICTABLE. Furthermore, in translation, all this becomes ever more apparent. From the early days of disastrous experiments in film translation such as the production of multiple versions of films with different teams of foreign actors, and the attempt to get American actors to play their parts in foreign languages, the strategies of dubbing and subtitling gradually became established. But the often stylized language of the original was frequently rendered all the more unspontaneous in its translated versions. Even today, taking as an example the very popular American series ‘Dawson’s Creek’, given the director’s stated intention of not aiming at authentic dialog, the dubbed version on Italian television follows suit ... only more so. According to Zandegù (2005), who researched this series, the language can be given the label ‘zero orality’ referring to the reduction in variation at a stylistic, sociocultural and dialectal level.

The artificiality of the translated film version leads to higher levels of predictability, including the repeated use in Italian of terms that do not (or did not) appear in the ordinary spoken language, such as “Buon pomeriggio”, “Calmati figliolo” on the blueprint of “Take it easy son” or “Fottiti” as a way of bringing lip synchronization to the notorious English ‘four-letter word’. At times the predictability is so pronounced that an element of translation memory technique, technologically aided or otherwise, could prove useful. At least the predictability factor should be taken into account in order to save time and particularly to ensure consistency.

SCENE	BEGIN	END	DURATION
Restaurant (ordering)	0.04.19	0.04.45	0.00.26
Public row (man -woman)	0.04.47	0.05.10	0.00.23
Restaurant (ordering)	0.06.00	0.06.15	0.00.15
Marriage proposal	0.06.25	0.08.40	0.02.15
At the airport	0.09.04	0.09.55	0.00.51
At the airport	0.10.00	0.11.05	0.01.05
Public row (husband -wife)	0.12.30	0.13.15	0.00.45
Father and son	0.15.10	0.16.55	0.01.45
Mother and daughter	0.17.10	0.18.07	0.00.57

*Tab. 2: scene types in American comedy movies (excerpt)*

By way of investigating the extent of the predictability factor, various films were analyzed in terms of their genre structure in order to identify sub-genres and genrelets.

Table 2 shows the beginning of the long list of scenes comprising the film ‘Moonstruck’. As can already be seen, this type of American comedy movie consists of recognizable scene types which are repeated throughout the film. Films of a similar genre show similar characteristics.

The reverse procedure consists of choosing a scene type and checking how often these appear in similar or different genres. Table 3 shows occurrences of the scene type ‘on the phone’.

Title	Languages	Ch.	Begin	End
Almost famous	Eng/Ita	8	0.33.50	0.34.50
Almost famous	Eng/Ita	8	0.34.50	0.36.00
Almost famous	Eng/Ita	9	0.39.30	0.40.40
Almost famous	Eng/Ita	13	1.00.36	1.01.15
Almost famous	Eng/Ita	14	1.04.10	1.05.31
Almost famous	Eng/Ita	15	1.07.54	1.09.52
Almost famous	Eng/Ita	18	1.21.27	1.22.00
Almost famous	Eng/Ita	21	1.39.04	1.40.37
Almost famous	Eng/Ita	22	1.46.35	1.47.48
Kramer vs. Kramer	Eng/Fra/Ger/Ita/Spa	2	0.05.15	0.05.28
Kramer vs. Kramer	Eng/Fra/Ger/Ita/Spa	2	0.07.52	0.08.17

Tab. 3: Occurrences of the scene type ‘on the phone’

The phone conversations emerging from these investigations followed a pattern very similar to those resulting from the spoken language corpus, even though such material was fairly limited. For example in ‘Kramer versus Kramer, 1979: Benton’ we find the following exchanges with the typical utterances underlined:

(1)

*Yeah, hi, Ted Kramer*

*Listen ... OK?*

*Yeah, OK, you too, thanks a lot.*

(2)

*Hi Margaret, this is Ted. Is my wife there?*

*Yeah, yeah ...*

*If she comes, tell her to come over or just give me a ring ...yeah*

*If she comes, tell her to give me a ring*

*Thanks a lot*

(3)

*Yeah? Oh, wait a minute.*

*It's for you, pick up 461*

*Who is it?*

*Ah, hi Billy. What's up?*

No ...  
Look I can't tell you now, I'm busy.  
We'll talk about it later when I get home, right?

(4)  
Hello.  
Mr. Kramer'  
Yes.  
Hold on please, Mr. Shaunessy.  
Ted?  
Yeah, hi John. How are you? What's happening?  
Oh look, I've gotta tell you something.  
Hello  
Yeah, I'm still here

Predictably, the translation procedures adopted for these phone conversations produce typical exchanges in Italian. For example, in the cases of (1) and (3) above, the translations were as follows:

(1)  
Yeah, hi, Ted Kramer  
Listen ... OK?  
Yeah, OK, you too, thanks a lot.

Sì, pronto, Ted Kramer  
Senti ... OK?  
Ah, OK, anche tu, grazie tante.

(3)  
Yeah? Oh, wait a minute.  
It's for you, pick up 461  
Who is it?  
Ah, hi Billy. What's up?  
No ...  
Look I can't tell you now, I'm busy.  
We'll talk about it later when I get home, right?

Sì, un attimo  
E' per te, prendi la 461  
Chi è?  
Sì, ah, ciao Billy, che c'è?  
No ...  
Senti, ora non posso parlare, ho da fare.  
Ne parliamo stasera

Other genres/sub-genres present in the films studied, and that were analyzed in their original and translated versions, included presentations; girl-boy rows (cf. When Harry met Sally, 1989: Reiner); marriage proposals; scenes at the airport, railway station, hairdressers, etc.; father and son, mother and daughter relationships; sackings, 'chat up' routines, and trailer monologues of the 'Only one man can save the world' type. Again it was possible to trace predictability patterns in both languages, even in those genres where the language

transfer involves some kind of semantic or pragmatic shift (e.g., bar protocols in English and Italian). Clearly the scope for original language use is constantly present but some basic blueprints can be recognized, especially in the more mainstream productions.

### 3.1 Less predictable genres

In contrast to the examples posited above, some genres, particularly where cultural mores are involved, prove much less easy to pin down. A case in point when discussing English-Italian film-making and translation is that concerning food. A comparison of attitudes to, and consequently frequency of mention of, and language connected to food was summed up in Mikes's 1949 assertion that "On the Continent people have good food. In England they have good table manners" (Mikes 1949).

While English habits regarding food have changed considerably in the past fifty years, Fox still finds in her popular anthropology volume of 2004, that "the English disdain for matters concerning food is a reflection of the innate reluctance on the part of English people to take themselves (or anything else) seriously" (Fox 2004: 295).

On the new, but relatively restricted, phenomenon of 'foodiness', she reflects ironically that "One minute it's sun-dried tomatoes with everything, the next minute these are passé, and it's raspberry vinegar, or garlic mash, or 'delicate layers of potato rosti with goat-cheese filo parcels and horseradish sabayon'." (Fox 2004: 300).

Even more so than the previously impoverished culinary vocabulary of the English, such concepts are difficult to translate into cultures that don't regard these ingredients as in any way exotic. To take a typical scenario as an example, at Italian dinner parties the following comments, or variations thereupon, are very common.

*Buonissimo!*  
*Ma come riesci a fare questi fagiolini?*  
*Da noi si usa solo aglio e olio.*  
*Sono la fine del mondo!!*

These expressions (not the words) are difficult to translate for the simple reason that English people don't say them. The following exchange from 'Intolerable Cruelty' is another, albeit humorous, case in point:

- Miles:*            *Just bring him an iceberg lettuce and mealy tomato wedge smothered in French dressing*
- Waitress:*        *And for you?*
- Miles:*            *Ham sandwich on stale rye bread, lots of mayo, easy on the ham.*
- *Miles:*            *A lui portiamo una lattuga con pochissimi pomodori, sale e olio di semi.*
  - *Waitress:*        *E per Lei?*
  - *Miles:*            *Un velo di prosciutto su pane ben raffermo soffocato dalla maionese.*

In these cases, the Italian translation is often semantically inaccurate and at times an invention, for the same reason that foods are not described this way in Italian.

A tension therefore exists, when translating from English to Italian, between the temptation to translate literally and maintain the foreign flavor, and to tone everything down in a localization exercise. Thus, the pitfalls for the translator lie between the extremes of total disdain and novelty obsession, as neither position is taken up in Italian contexts. This is not a question of culture-bound terms – polenta, mushy peas – but of cultural mind sets.

A popular Italian television series ‘Il Commissario Montalbano’, based on the best-selling books by Andrea Camilleri, demonstrates the importance given to food in Italy. In the following scene, Montalbano’s colleague disturbs him while he is eating:

*Mimì: Ma che stavi mangiando.*

*CM: No, no. Non ti preoccupare.*

*Mimì: E allora t’ho disturbato...*

*CM: E ti dico non ti preoccupare...*

Although he claims otherwise, the Commissario is clearly annoyed. In this next instance he does not try to hide his annoyance and gives vent to a vulgar expression.

*CM: Sto mangiando la pasta con broccoli, chi è che rompe...*

It is difficult to imagine American cops with their doughnuts and polystyrene cups of coffee being so sensitive. The ‘pasta con broccoli’ figures in many episodes of this series, almost forming a leitmotif, while other typically Sicilian dishes are also frequently featured:

*M- Calogero carissimo, senti io mi prendo un piatto di spaghetti col sugo di ricci, mi raccomando, come piace a me eh?*

*C- Ci penso io dottò.*

*C- Dunque oggi c’ho pe’ vossia un risotto a nevuro di siccia ch’è megghio’ e na cassata.*

*M- Per me va bene, per lei?*

*B- Anche per me va bene.*

*M- Aggiudicato.*

*C- Ah, per secondo carissimo dottore Montalbano ci sono delle spigole freschissime pescate stanotte oppure...*

The frequency with which Italians drink coffee is also reflected in the far from usual frequency with which the term appears in the series.

No attempt has yet been made to dub ‘Il Commissario Montalbano’ but it has been exported to English-speaking countries in a subtitled version. But any translator is faced, when dealing with a text of this type, with a fundamental decision, whether to foreignize, localize or standardize. Here the predictability quotient is at its lowest – serious choices have to be made and adhered to. If foreignization is opted for, then the following decisions might be made.

- *Caffè* remains *café* – its meaning is known but is not always clear (what kind of coffee?)
- *Pasta con broccoli* is a leitmotif of the series and can be left as it is.
- The disturbance and seriousness factors are part of that mind set that some of the audience will associate with Sicily and others will not be aware of.
- *Spaghetti con sugo di ricci, risotto a nevuro di siccia, na cassata, spigole freschissime pescate stanotte*, can be left and simply understood as Italian dishes.

On the other hand, if the translator feels it necessary to localize his version for the target audience, he may opt for the following solutions:

- *Caffè* must be rendered more English, ironically through the use of explicit markers – cappuccino, espresso, latte, etc. – depending on which of these is considered the most universal.
- Elements of disturbance and seriousness may be changed or tempered.
- *Pasta con broccoli* may be changed to something more recognisably Italian such as ‘spaghetti bolognese’ or ‘lasagne’. It depends on whether it can be seen.
- *Spaghetti con sugo di ricci, risotto a nevuro di siccia, na cassata, spigole freschissime pescate stanotte*, can be changed to recognizable English/American dishes – ‘spaghetti with meatballs’, ‘sausages’, ‘ice cream’, ‘snapper’.

Finally, the no risk solution lies in standardization:

- *Caffè* = coffee
- Disturbance and seriousness elements translated literally, regardless of audience perplexity.
- *Pasta con broccoli* = pasta with broccoli
- *Spaghetti con sugo di ricci, risotto a nevuro di siccia, na cassata, spigole freschissime pescate stanotte* become simply ‘spaghetti’, ‘rice’, ‘cake’, ‘fish’.

## 4 Concluding remarks

Having examined a range of film texts of different genres and scenes representing different sub-genres and genrelets, the search for predictability has shown itself to be genre based. Certain scenarios and culturally neutral stock situations can be seen to display elements of textual predictability, whereas at the other extreme of culturally sensitive or original scenarios, predictability is no longer a statistically significant factor. There are no absolute values except in extreme cases such as the ‘emergency telephone call’, but rather the predictability phenomena can be seen as operating on a cline running from the easily predictable to the totally unpredictable. Along the first section of the cline it is suggested that the predictability factor can be an aid to film translators, even to the extent of bringing in translation memory technology, or at least the adoption of strategies allied to the concept of translation memory.

Briefly, where the text is highly predictable, there is a place in film translation (in the broadest sense), in subtitling but also in dubbing, for the judicious use of some kind of translation memory tool (e.g. Atril’s *Dejà vu*) which pick up frequently used expressions and suggest them to the translator as he or she works. Although this would require very careful editing it could save a lot of time and provide much needed consistency. Where texts are not very predictable, translation choices may lie between foreignization, localization and standardization. The choice will depend on such factors as the ‘prestige’ of the film or given audience tastes. Where texts are governed by cultural mores, predictability can be largely discounted, firstly in the patterns of the source language, and particularly in translation. Here the translator is on his/her own in gauging to what extent the audience is attuned to the mind set of the source text culture. However, the final consideration must be that practically all films (or TV series, or documentaries, or advertisements, or cartoons etc.) will contain stretches covered by the three basic conclusions outlined above. The special skill of the translator lies also in identifying these stretches and treating them accordingly.

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