

Lena Hamaida (Sheffield)

Subtitling Slang and Dialect

Content

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Spoken Language
- 3 Interaction between spoken and written English
 - 3.1 Neglect of syntax of spoken English
 - 3.2 Standard English
 - 3.3 Dialect
 - 3.4 Slang
- 4 Use of language and characterization in film
- 5 Case study of *La Haine*
 - 5.1 Synopsis of *La Haine*
 - 5.2 Case Study of *La Haine*
 - 5.3 Verlan
 - 5.4 Subtitling *La Haine*
- 6 Conclusion
- 7 References

1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the feasibility of translating spoken slang or dialect into subtitles. As the use of slang and/or dialect is associated with spoken rather than written language the challenge of subtitling dialog spoken in slang and dialect highlights intriguing issues related to the distinction between spoken and written language and to the subtitler's perception of the function of the subtitle.

Every individual has their own unique way of using spoken language or their "idiolect" (Trudgill 2001:20), which is a way of expressing their personality. The use of dialect can provide specific clues to the identity and personality of a person, for example the use of a regional dialect indicates the geographical origins of a person and may also suggest a sense of identification with the area in which the dialect is spoken. This study will examine the use of spoken slang and dialect as a method of establishing character and identity. It will go on to explore possible strategies for conveying this connotational meaning in the Target Language (TL) subtitles.

In order to understand the nature of the task involved when contemplating how or whether to translate the linguistic features of spoken Source Language (SL) dialect into written Target Language subtitles this study will begin with a brief examination of spoken language and then move on to a consideration of Standard English and dialect in relation to both spoken and written language. This study will conclude with a detailed analysis of the way in which slang in the spoken dialog of the film *La Haine* has been subtitled. Alternative translations will be suggested.

2 Spoken Language

Trudgill observes that spoken language fulfils two basic aims: to communicate information about the speaker and to establish social relationships with other people (Trudgill 2000:1). Indeed, Trudgill argues that when two people meet for the first time and engage in conversation more is learnt about the identity of a person from how that person speaks than from what is actually said. A person's accent and use of language can give clues to both their social background and their geographical origins (categorized by Trudgill as social dialect and geographical dialect respectively) (Trudgill 2000:2).

Similarly, when a character speaks in a film this type of information is automatically conveyed to the audience which understands the spoken Source Language dialog but it is not necessarily conveyed to the audience, which is dependent on the Target Language subtitle.

The distinction between what is said and how it is said appears to be particularly relevant to the subtitling of spoken dialog in films. It could be argued that an important element in the skill of the subtitler lies in their ability to detect the added clues to the identity of a character, which are encoded in the way they speak. It is then necessary to decide whether and how elements of this information can be conveyed in the written form in the Target Language subtitle. If no attempt is made to include this information in the Target Language subtitle then important elements of characterization, which may also be essential to the plot development in the film, may be lost.

For example, when the unemployed main characters in *The Full Monty* are discussing the possibility of becoming male strippers as a desperate measure to resolve their financial problems, Dave declares:

“I’m taking **nowt** off **final**.”

Literal meaning: I’m taking nothing off and that is final.

Dave’s words are spoken in a strong Sheffield dialect, which also reveals his working class origins. The word **nowt** (nothing) for example is a slang word characteristic of both the Sheffield dialect and also of the working class and the subtitler needs to consider whether it is feasible to convey the connotations of the use of a non-standard word such as **nowt** in a subtitle.

3 Interaction between spoken and written English

3.1 Neglect of syntax of spoken English

However the transfer from the spoken to the written mode is not straightforward and indeed as Cheshire observes relatively little is known about the syntactic structure of spoken English (Cheshire 1999:129). Moreover, Cheshire argues that the grammatical structure of spoken English is not well understood, particularly the use of English in informal conversations.

As Cheshire observes, conventional descriptions of English syntax tend to refer to written rather than spoken English and also perhaps to the speech patterns of educated speakers in formal situations rather than to the types of speech produced in informal conversations (ibid.)

The lack of a framework of analysis for the syntax of spoken English can be in part attributed to the tendency to analyse language from the perspective of linguistic theories acquired during education rather than from the perspective of language exchanged in informal conversation (ibid.)

As informal conversations tend to constitute a substantial element in the dialog of films there is a corresponding gap in the framework for the analysis of the spoken dialog in screen plays.

3.2 Standard English

The notion of dialect and variety in the way language is used suggests the existence of a standardized form of the language with which non-standard forms can be compared. The concept of standard and non-standard forms of a language can also be applied to other languages and the following discussion is also relevant to French, the language spoken in the Source Language dialog in *La Haine*.

It is acknowledged by scholars including Cheshire (1999) and Trudgill (1999) that Standard English has been strongly influenced by written English and is derived in particular from public official documents, a genre which is quite distinct from the “spontaneous interaction of informal speech”.

Since the eighteenth century when the features of Standard English were codified by the grammarians, written English has remained the reference point for analysing the features of Standard English. Whilst literacy continues to be a major factor in promoting awareness of Standard English today.

Scholars including Quirk and Trudgill accept that there is a link between written English and the spoken English of the educated, Quirk for example defines standard English as educated English (Quirk et al. 1985:18) whilst Trudgill describes Standard English as: “the set of grammatical and lexical forms which is typically used in speech and writing by educated native speakers.” (Trudgill 1984:32)

Brown and Yule observe the tendency to draw on the speech of academics which is thought as too restrictive as a basis for determining the rules of spoken language and suggest that the frame of reference needs to be widened although for the moment the “accessible descriptions of English syntax rely heavily on the speech and writing of academics.” (cited in Cheshire 1999)

Of particular relevance to subtitling is the drive to simplify and to reduce variation in Standard English, which can in part be attributed to the attempt to reduce morphological and syntactic variation in line with prescriptive grammatical rules. In practice this means that the drive to develop a standardized form of the language has led to a search for a “one form, one meaning relationship” in linguistic forms (Cheshire 1999). This means in turn that the more diverse features of spoken language whose meaning is pragmatically determined may be overlooked (ibid.)

Although Standard English is described as a dialect by Trudgill (1999) who finds it difficult to clearly identify examples of Standard English as most examples of English sentences can be related to a regional dialect, the notion of Standard English can also be used as a norm with which other dialectal varieties can be compared. For the purposes of this discussion Standard English will be defined as a form of English which does not include evident non-standard usage of the language. This can be illustrated in the following extract from *The Full Monty*:

1. Gaz’s words in Sheffield dialect:

“I’m trying to get some **brass** together...**so as you and me can** keep seeing each other”

2. Standard English version of Gaz’s words:

“I’m trying to earn some **money so that we can continue** to see each other.”

Whilst the meaning of the sentence in Standard English may be more easily understood by people unfamiliar with the Sheffield dialect, it could be argued that there is a significant loss of emotional warmth, individuality and characterization in the standardized version of the words. The expression “I’m trying to earn some money” sounds bland and impersonal in comparison with the more concrete, emotive and personal plea of the words spoken in the Sheffield dialect “I’m trying to get some brass together...” By implication, the failure to convey some of the impact and emotional intensity inherent in the use of the Sheffield dialect in the Target Language subtitles could lead to the loss of an integral element of the meaning of the film for the viewer.

When Standard English is used in subtitles it therefore can be expected to lead to a similar loss of the diverse features of spoken language, which are present in the Source Language spoken dialog. In this sense, the “levelling effect” of subtitling on spoken language, suggested by Hatim and Mason (1997:79) can be largely attributed to the tendency to use predominantly standard written language in Target Language subtitles.

Two important reasons for the use of Standard English in subtitles can be identified; firstly the simplification and clarification of dialog, particularly that spoken in non-standard language, for the Target Audience and secondly the impulse to maintain conformity with the usage of Standard English as the norm in written texts.

“features of speech which are in any way non-standard tend to be eliminated.”
(Hatim and Mason 1997:79)

3.3 Dialect

Two basic features, which characterize a speaker’s use of language are their accent and dialect. As Trudgill observes; the term dialect is not easy to define and varieties in dialect may develop in response to various factors including geographical location, social class and ethnic origins. The use of regional dialects is not confined to distinct geographical boundaries, for example in England it is not possible to locate exactly where people stop speaking in a Norfolk dialect and begin to use the Suffolk dialect.(Trudgill 2000:3). However, in linguistic terms the ‘dialect’ refers to differences in the speaker’s use of vocabulary and grammar and also pronunciation. (Trudgill 2000:5)

However, value judgments concerning the use of a particular dialect are determined by social rather than linguistic considerations and in Trudgill’s work *On Dialect* he relates regional dialects to social class and observes that there is more regional differentiation in the language used by the lower working classes.

Trudgill explains that non-standard varieties of language are often associated with groups lower on the socio-economic scale and that working class accents may have connotations of masculinity. Moreover, Trudgill also suggests that the educated classes are more likely to speak a more standard variety of the language and that women are more inclined to use standard language than men. This can be seen, for example, in the films *The Full Monty* where the main characters are redundant steel workers from Sheffield and *La Haine* where they are unemployed young men from an inner city housing estate in Paris.

Although accent and pronunciation form important elements in spoken dialect they are particularly difficult to represent in the written form whilst variations in grammar and vocabulary can arguably be conveyed more easily in a subtitle.

The difficulty of representing non standard pronunciation in the written form can be seen in the following extract from the screen play of *The Life of Brian* where the inability of Pontius

Pilate to pronounce the letter “r” is exploited to hilarious comic effect but is almost impossible to read:

Pilate:

Stwike him, centuwion, vewwy woughly.

Strike him centurion, very roughly.

3.4 Slang

Like dialect, slang often refers to the non-standard use of words in a language and it is associated with informal and colloquial spoken language. Slang often originates in the subcultures in a society, in Britain in the sixties for example a gay slang language (polari) was invented at a time when gay people needed a private form of communication. Slang is characterized by lexical innovation through the creation of new words. Particular forms of slang, like for example the slang used by teenagers, are often used as a means of expressing identity between members of a group. Indeed, slang and dialect often overlap as in the case of the Sheffield dialect where words such as “nowt” (nothing) are both dialect and slang words.

4 Use of language and characterization in film

As Trask explains, an individual both expresses and maintains their identity through their use of language (Trask 1995:83). It is therefore logical to suggest that characterization is one of the main functions of spoken dialog in novels, plays and films and that a character’s use of language or idiolect, which may include slang and/or dialect, can be of fundamental importance in helping to establish the identity of a character.

The use of slang and/or dialect by the main characters plays a significant role in both the characterization and the plot development in many films including *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Full Monty*, *Trainspotting*, *La Haine* and *Brokeback Mountain*. In these films the main characters use a specific type of slang and dialect, which asserts their identity as members of a particular socio-economic group from a particular geographical region. In *The Full Monty* and *La Haine* the characters’ use of local dialect also expresses their solidarity in the face of unemployment and their alienation from the social establishment.

In this type of film where the use of non-standard language is integrally related to both the characterization and the theme of the film the use of slang and dialect has certain connotations, which are not necessarily conveyed by the visual images on the screen.

If all the dialog in this type of film were to be subtitled into Standard Language this could lead to the loss of nuances of meaning, which could affect the audience’s comprehension of the film. It is therefore important to consider whether it is possible to transfer the flavor of this spoken language into a subtitle.

5 Case study of La Haine

5.1 Synopsis of La Haine

La Haine examines the theme of alienation among France’s young immigrant population. The events in the film span twenty-four hours and the film is focused on in the lives of three young

friends from the banlieu (a Parisian concrete sink estate largely inhabited by immigrants and the socially excluded). Vinz, a Jew, Hubert, a boxer from Africa, and Saïd, a North African, wander aimlessly through a Paris suburb after a riot has taken place on their estate. Their friend Abdel, also North African, has been assaulted in police custody and is lying in hospital in a coma.

5.2 Case Study of La Haine

This study will focus on the use of *verlan* (French back slang) in *La Haine* as the linguistic complexity of the spoken dialog in this film encapsulates some of the difficulties involved in the translation of slang and dialect. (subtitler's nightmare). The use of *verlan* is integrally related to the characterization and the themes of the film and therefore needs to be addressed by the translator.

The use of *verlan* in *La Haine* is integrally related to the social theme and characterization in the film and the different layers of connotational meaning encoded in the use of *verlan* complicate the translation dilemma for the subtitler. As the dialog in *La Haine* is spoken predominantly in *verlan*, it evokes complex problems for the subtitler. Indeed *verlan* has been described as “the subtitler's nightmare” by a British journalist. (Independent 1995 cited in Jäckel 2001:227)

When subtitling *La Haine* it is also necessary to consider whether the need to understand the dialog is more important than preserving the unique flavor and connotations of the Source Text dialog. The Source Language dialog of *La Haine* would also be difficult for a native speaker to understand and the use of impenetrable spoken language is also a means of communicating the distance between the main characters and mainstream society.

Moreover, as the use of *verlan* constitutes a reaction against the standard modern French dialog, which is predominantly spoken by the middle classes. Would a standardisation of the dialog constitute a denial of the social message of the film? As Jäckel observes, the subversion of the French language in the film can be seen as a challenge to the French establishment (ibid.).

5.3 Verlan

Verlan is a type of French back slang which is formed by a complex process; words are deconstructed, syllables reversed and then the word is reassembled as in for example:

Flic...fli keu...keu fli...keufli...keuf (cop)

Arabe...a ra beu...beu ra a...keur (arab)

Verlan tends to be used by the speaker either to emphasize or to hide the meaning of the main words in a sentence and thus the *verlan* words in the spoken dialog of *La Haine* could be expected to have added significance for the speakers and for the viewer.

Verlan originated amongst the immigrant, predominantly North African groups in France who were living in the concrete inner city housing estates known as the banlieu. *Verlan* was originally a secret language, which enabled speakers to communicate freely in front of authority figures, in particular the police. In this sense speaking backwards in *verlan* could be described as a “metaphor of opposition, of talking back” (Lefkowitz 1989: 320)

5.4 Subtitling La Haine

Understanding the linguistically complex Source language dialog is a major difficulty for the subtitler of *La Haine*. The subtitler faces the dilemma that misunderstanding the dialog could lead

to mistakes in the translation whilst attempting to clarify the meaning of the vibrant dialog by subtitling it into Standard Language could lead to loss of depth in the characterization and ultimately to the loss of meaning in the film.

An examination of the subtitling of the *verlan* and other slang used in *La Haine* reveals a number of incorrect and inappropriate translations, which could confuse and mislead the audience. The conflict between the main characters and the police are seen within the framework of the injury of a young Algerian immigrant Abdel in police custody after a riot. As a result of his injuries Abdel is in a coma in hospital and this incident frames the events of the film. It could therefore be argued that it is essential that the slang words for Arabs and police are recognized and correctly translated as they provide clues to characterization and the development of the theme and the plot in the film.

An Arab policeman rescues Vinz, Saïd and Hubert from a heated argument with the police in the hospital where they have gone to visit their friend Abdel who is in a coma. As he drives them away from the hospital in his car the policeman remonstrates with them for provoking an argument and during the course of the conversation the following exchange takes place:

Arab policeman:

La majorité des **flics** dans la rue ne sont pas là pour vous taper ils sont là pour vous protéger.

Subtitle:

Most **pigs** don't beat you up. They protect you.

Arab police officer:

Les **flics** qui sont là haut sont là pour protéger Abdel et sa famille, c'est tout.

Subtitle:

Those **pigs** are only protecting Abdel and his family

Whilst the word **flics** is a slang word for policeman and the word **pigs** is a well known English slang expression for the police, this translation is inappropriate in the context. In English the word **pigs** tends to be used as an expression of contempt for the police as authority figures, it is unlikely that a police officer would refer to his fellow police officers as **pigs**.

In this context therefore the translation **pigs** is too pejorative and has more negative connotations than the original word **flics** in the Source Language dialog. Moreover in a heated and rapid exchange of words this translation is also confusing as it blurs the boundaries between the police and the hostile protagonists. In my view **Cops** would be a more appropriate translation in this context, as it is informal but does not imply contempt:

Most **cops** don't beat you up. They protect you.

Those **cops** are only protecting Abdel and his family. (my translation)

It is therefore evidently not sufficient to simply replace a slang expression in the Source Language with a slang expression in the Target Language and the subtitler should be sensitive to the context and connotations of the slang in both Source and Target languages.

In another scene Vinz finds a gun in the riots and Saïd questions him about his threat to kill a policeman if their friend Abdel dies. In this scene the translation of the *verlan* word **keuf** (policeman) as **pig** appears to be appropriate to both the context and the connotations in both Source and Target Languages.

Saïd:

Tu veux vraiment tuer un **keuf** si Abdel meurt?

Subtitle:

You'd truly kill a **pig**?

In another conversation Saïd warns Vinz that his open hostility to the police could lead to him being beaten up at the police station:

Saïd To Vinz:

Tu ne veux pas être le prochain **rebeu** à te faire fumer dans un commissariat.
(**rebeu** reverlaned spelling of the *verlan* word **beur** meaning Arab)

Literal translation:

You don't want to be the next **Arab** to be beaten up in a police cell.

Subtitle:

Do you fancy being the next **victim**?

In the subtitle the *verlan* word **rebeu** meaning Arab has been translated into the generalized word **victim** and the racial reference to Arab has been lost. In this context Saïd's use of the *verlan* word **rebeu** is deliberate and has added layers of connotational meaning. By addressing his Jewish friend Vinz as an Arab Saïd is also suggesting that Vinz is an honorary inner city Arab as it is the Arabs who are normally beaten up by the police. There is therefore a suggestion of brotherhood in the notion that they are all linked together in this bitter conflict with the police and the state symbolized by Abdel's plight. In the Source Language spoken dialog therefore the *verlan* word **rebeu** subtly expresses and reinforces solidarity between the main characters and this is lost in the generalized translation of the word **rebeu** as **victim**.

If there is no corresponding slang expression in the Target Language the translator needs to decide whether it is still possible to preserve connotational meaning in the translation through a different strategy. As the use of a slang word for Arab for example, camel jockey, could

introduce inappropriate racist connotations into the dialog, the use of the literal translation Arab would avoid this problem. This literal translation preserves some of the connotational meanings contained in the *verlan* word **rebeu** in the Source Language dialog although it does lose the oral flavour of the *verlan* as a form of communication between members of a group.

Earlier in the same scene, Vinz is cutting Saïd's hair and Saïd expresses concern at Vinz's haphazard handling of the hair trimmer:

Saïd:

Ne me **rates** pas

Literal translation:

Don't **fail me**.

Subtitle:

Don't **grass on** me

The verb *rater* is here used in a slang expression but the slang is mistranslated in the subtitle into an inappropriate slang expression, which makes no sense in the context of the scene. Whereas Saïd is actually asking Vinz not to mess up his haircut so the request "Don't grass on me" appears to be a gratuitous use of slang, which has no connection with the scene or the conversation. It incidentally also misses the humorous of the incongruity between Saïd's request and the implications. In this subtitle Saïd's words appear to be irrelevant and they could confuse the viewer. A possible alternative expression, which would convey the meaning and also retain the use of slang could be:

Don't **screw up**. (my translation)

In scene...where Saïd and Vinz are walking aimlessly through the concrete housing estate and loud music can be heard through an open window (a mix of French gangster rap group with Edith Piaf's song "Je ne regrette rien"), Vinz comments on the music:

Vinz:

Il tue... Il tue trop sa mère

Literal translation:

He kills...He kills his mother too much

Subtitle:

He's a killer, a real mother killer

The subtitle gives the literal meaning of Vinz’s words but it does not convey the slang meaning that the music is brilliant. A possible alternative translation, which would convey the meaning in a corresponding slang expression is:

“He’s bad...he’s wicked.” (my translation)

In the same scene, Vinz is convinced that he can see a cow wandering through the estate and he exclaims to Saïd:

Vinz:

Té-ma la vache, **té-ma** la vache

(**té-ma** *verlan* for slang verb **mater** to look at)

Literal translation:

Look at the cow, **look at** the cow

Subtitle:

Look at the cow

Here the subtitle provides a literal translation of Vinz’s words but omits the use of slang. This means that the vibrancy of the language and the implications of comradeship in the face of a hostile world, which is implicit in the use of *verlan* in the Source Language dialog, is lost. A possible alternative translation, which would convey the meaning and also the notion of slang used by a group of friends would be:

Check out the cow.

6 Conclusion

From this detailed analysis of examples from *La Haine* it can be seen that the use of *verlan* in the Source Language dialog helps to establish rapport and solidarity between the main characters. Certain recurring words in *verlan*, including **rebeu** (Arab) and **keuf** (policeman) are of particular relevance to the themes and characterization in the film and the effects of misunderstanding and mistranslating these words can lead to loss of connotational meaning and of the complexity of the characterization. This in turn can affect the audience’s understanding of the relationships between the main characters. and of their sense of alienation from the police and society.

Similarly Vinz, Saïd and Hubert’s sense of alienation from society is largely expressed through their use of vibrant non-standard language and by attempting to replace any attempt to

standardize their colorful spoken language in the subtitles reduces the impact of the underlying theme and removes the impact, immediacy and flavor of the spoken language.

There is no suggestion that the subtitler should attempt to subtitle the complex use of back slang in *La Haine* with an equivalent form of back slang in the Target Language, as this would be a futile task leading to the production of incomprehensible subtitles. However, it appears that it is feasible to translate spoken slang and dialect into subtitles and this study has aimed to demonstrate that it is possible to find strategies for the translation of slang in the spoken dialog. These strategies include the use of slang expressions used by similar groups of people in the Target Language or the use of a literal translation to retain the meaning rather than the form where appropriate. Both these strategies help to retain some of the impact and oral flavor of the spoken language and fit within the spatial constraints of the subtitle.

7 References

- About.com: *French Language verlan*, visited on 18 January 2008.
- Chambers, J. K. and Trudgill, P. (1980): *Dialectology*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chapman, Graham et al. (2001): *Monty Python's The life of Brian. Screenplay* London Methuen
- Cheshire, Jenny (1999): "Spoken Standard English". In Bex, Tony and Watts, Richard J. Watts (eds): *Standard English the Widening Debate*. London: Routledge. 129-148.
- Cheshire, Jenny (2003): Syntactic Variation and Spoken English, <http://alpha.qmul.ac.uk/~uglvoo3/che.pdf>, visited on 18 January 2008.
- Hatim, Basil and Mason, Ian (1997): "Politeness in Screen Translating". In Venuti, Lawrence (ed): *The Translation Studies Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Jäckel, Anne (2001): "The Subtitling of *La Haine*: A Case Study". In Gambier, Yves and Gottlieb, Henrik (eds.): *(Multi)Media Translation*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Lefkowitz, Natalie (1989): "Talking Backwards in French". In *The French Review* Volume 63 no. 2 USA. 312-323.
- Quirk, Randolph et al. (1985): *A Comprehensive grammar of the English Language*. London and New York: Longman.
- Trask, R. L. (1995): *Language: The Basics*. London: Routledge.
- Trudgill, Peter (1999): "Standard English what it isn't". In Bex, Tony and Watts, Richard J. (eds): *Standard English: The Widening Debate*. London: Routledge. 117-128.
- Trudgill, Peter (2000): *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. London: Penguin.