

The Translation of Identity: Subtitling the Vernacular of the French *cit *

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Abstract

This paper looks at how the process of translation impacts on the relocation of identity in the field of audiovisual translation, more specifically in that of subtitling. The language used by the three protagonists in the French film La Haine¹ is remarkable both linguistically and culturally, and is clearly a means for them to assert their identity. In using such a variety of French, the three young people in the film not only assert their belonging to a very specific community of practice, but also exclude whoever does not belong to their group. This paper looks at the particular case of La Haine, and comments on what is achieved – as well as what is not achieved – by the English subtitles written by Alexander Whitelaw and Stephen O’Shea in the Tartan Video version (1996). The paper will analyse the implications of using a variety of English such as African American Vernacular English to translate a variety of French such as the one spoken in the cit s (projects). The use of a dialect-for-dialect approach means that all cultural references in the original are transposed to the target culture. The implication of this is that the original undergoes a displacement of identity in the process of translation. I question whether the identity thus fabricated by the translators matches the images shown on screen, and subsequently if this approach is, in this particular context, successful or not. This paper draws on my MA dissertation, the wider purpose of which is to analyse the various reasons why a dialect-for-dialect approach may not necessarily work when it comes to audiovisual translation, through the study of the two sets of subtitles available for La Haine.

By studying the dialogue of the French film *La Haine* and its translation into English through subtitling, this paper will examine how the process of translation impacts on the relocation of identity. The paper will first focus on the analysis of the linguistic and social mechanisms of the language used by the three protagonists in the film so as to have a better understanding of the way in which the language works and of the ways in which its speakers are stigmatized. French street culture appears to be connected to its American counterpart at various different

¹ *La Haine*. Dir. Mathieu Kassovitz. Lazennec. 1995.

levels, which may justify the translator's strategy of translating *banlieue* French into African American Vernacular English (henceforth AAVE). Finally, bearing in mind the constraints related to subtitling, this paper will also explain the reasons for which the film *La Haine* did not enjoy great commercial success in the United States, and why the subtitles were often deemed responsible for the film's relative commercial failure, despite the interesting – if ambitious – subtitling strategy used by the translator.

La Haine revolves around three young people: Hubert, the calmest of the three, seeks to support his single black mother with the money he earns as a drug dealer; Saïd is a lively youth, who somehow always manages to get the other two in trouble; and finally Vinz is an edgy and nervous character from a Jewish family, who has just found a gun lost by a police officer during the riots in the housing estate. Kassovitz attempts to convey the situation of the marginalized suburban immigrant population that is left at the outskirts of both the city and society itself, and as such, the film carries an important political message. The film was very successful when it was shown at the Cannes film festival in 1996, when English subtitles were provided to cater for Anglophone journalists.

It should be noted that the most important features of the language used by the main characters in the film are not only linguistic, but also social. Whilst sociolinguists have disputed which term should be used to denote the type of language spoken by the protagonists, experts such as Jean-Pierre Goudaillier agree that it is a distinguishable variety of French. Goudaillier refers to this language as '*banlieue* French', a term which I have adopted here for the sake of simplicity.² The term '*banlieue*' is difficult to translate. Geographically speaking, it is the space that surrounds the city, but by '*banlieue* French', Goudaillier refers to a variety of French spoken specifically in the economically deprived areas that are usually located at the periphery of major cities. This terminology has social as well as geographical connotations. Social networks appear to be a key to speaking and understanding *banlieue* French, which arises in close-knit, dense networks such as those found within the *banlieue*'s adolescent population. According to Mikaël Jamin, who draws on Goudaillier's work, *banlieue* French is distinguished by its threefold function.³ First, *banlieue* French has a cryptic function. The extended use of slang and of features such as *verlan* makes the language difficult to understand for outsiders.⁴ When *La Haine* was shown in Cannes,

² ~~Jean-Pierre Goudaillier, *Comment tu tchatches! Dictionnaire du français contemporain des cités* (Paris : Maisonneuve et Larose, 1997).~~

³ Mikaël Jamin, forthcoming (Presses Universitaires de Pau).

⁴ *Le verlan* basically consists of inverting two syllables of a word (*le verlan*, for instance, comes from *l'envers* which means backwards). *Verlan* is fairly widespread, and is used mostly by teenagers so as not to be

French people in the audience said they needed the English subtitles, as it helped them understand the dialogue. Some of the scenes in the film even had to be post-synchronized due to the extensive use of *verlan* in the original dialogue, and because they were too difficult to understand. Second, counter to standard linguistic forms, *banlieue* French constitutes a rejection of the dominant social model. It can even be argued that such a use of language constitutes a political message in itself. Third, *banlieue* French is an alternative linguistic variety that allows French young people to play with the dominant language, be it at the morphological level (like *le verlan*) or at the interactional level, through language games, for instance, of which David Lepoutre gives a fairly exhaustive account in his book *Coeur de Banlieue*.⁵ Sociolinguists such as Suzanne Romaine⁶ and Dennis Ager have shown that young people like those depicted in *La Haine* are the most likely to develop vernacular forms: ‘Adolescents are hence likely to have a wide active vocabulary, relating to the terms of their interests, to develop new terms and expressions and thus be open to linguistic innovation.’⁷

Banlieue French is used as a means of asserting one’s membership in a community or peer group at the expense of whoever does not belong in the group. A consequence of these collective practices, involving mostly young people in poor areas, is that their language is clearly recognizable. In *La Haine*, the protagonists employ a number of non-standard features that linguists such as Bernard Conein and Françoise Gadet have shown to be characteristic of *banlieue* French, the most prominent of which is probably *verlan*.⁸ When they are talking amongst themselves, the protagonists make extensive use of it:

‘J’étais à *téco* [côté], ils m’ont même pas *méfil* [filmé]!’ (subtitled as ‘I was over there, they missed me!’)

‘C’est de la *demer* [merde] ton truc là!’ (subtitled as ‘This TV sucks.’)

understood by outsiders, and also as a means of strengthening in-group bonds. Countless examples of *verlan* can be heard in *La Haine*, and, needless to say, *verlan* represents a major challenge for translators, since no such morphological process exists in English.

⁵ David Lepoutre, *Cœur de banlieue: Codes, rites et langages* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1997), pp. 173-99. In the second section of his book, Lepoutre describes not only the violence, but also the inventiveness of the verbal prowess of a class of teenagers in La Courneuve, in the suburbs of Paris. He shows that *l’argot* (slang), *le verlan*, insults and obscene language are used in a codified way, mostly to determine who belongs in the group and who is a *bouffon* (lame).

⁶ Suzanne Romaine, *Language in Society: An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (Oxford: OUP, 1994), p. 80.

⁷ Dennis Ager, *Sociolinguistics and Contemporary French* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 117.

⁸ Bernard Conein and Françoise Gadet, ‘Français populaire? Français des banlieues?’, *Black, blanc, beur: youth language and identity in France*, ed. by Farid Aitsiselmi (Bradford: University of Bradford Department of Modern Languages, 2000), pp. 39-49.

‘T’es *relou* [lourd] avec ces conneries!’ (subtitled as ‘You’re a fuckin’ pain!’)

The protagonists also use a lot of slang and insults, and rather imaginative combinations of all of the above:

‘Pauvre petit reubeu en carton.’ (subtitled as ‘You bogus Arab’ – ‘*reubeu*’ is a further example of *verlan*, standing for ‘Arabe’).

‘Ça t’arracherait les poils du cul de dire bonjour?’ (subtitled as ‘Can’t fuckin’ say hello?’)

The above examples demonstrate some of the distinctive linguistic expression of *banlieue* French speakers. The vulgarity of the language they use, along with *verlan* itself, stigmatizes them in the eyes of the viewer because they speak a variety of French that is so clearly non-standard and so easily recognizable that they find themselves socially marginalized by their unconventional use of the French language. Due to the very high proportion of French people of African descent, a public perception of a multi-ethnic French youth – more particularly in the *cités* – has developed, often referred to in the media as *black-blanc-beur*.⁹ It is important to note that the language and culture of the French youth in the *cités* are greatly influenced by African-American street culture, and this is true both in the film and in reality.¹⁰

Examples of the influence of Anglo-American culture can be found throughout *La Haine*. The film opens with Bob Marley’s song ‘Burning and A-Looting Tonight’, with background images of riots, most likely in a French *cité* , in the background. Vinz replays a classic scene from American director Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver*, and the walls of Hubert’s room are covered with posters of Muhammad Ali. There is a clip of break-dancing about halfway through the film, improvised in a basement, and the dress code of the young people living in French *cités* – and therefore in *La Haine* – is clearly influenced by the African-American young people who live in ghettos, and who are represented on screen in films such as those directed by Spike Lee. The parallel between French *cités* and American

⁹ The term *black-blanc-beur* was used particularly often during the Football World Cup in 1998 to refer to the French team who included people from a variety of origins. It put the emphasis on the diversity of backgrounds in the French population, and also on the possibility of a successful melting-pot.

¹⁰ Hervé Vieillard-Baron, *Les Banlieues* (Évreux: Flammarion, 1996), p. 46.

projects – or housing estates as they are known in the UK – has often been drawn, particularly with respect to Chicago. Indeed, some specialists of French *banlieue* history such as Hervé Vieillard-Baron have shown that Chicago plays a particular, almost mythical role in the imagination of French young people in the *cités*. Chicago embodies the American dream, a paradoxical form of exoticism and ghettoisation, but also of crime and violence.¹¹ In other words, the identity of French youths living in the *cités* is defined partly in relation to their African-American counterparts, the parallel culture in the US.

This connection has been clearly acknowledged and exploited by the translator-subtitlers in *La Haine*, as illustrated by their decision to translate *banlieue* French into a form of AAVE in the Tartan Video version of the film. The translators also chose to transpose cultural references in the script in order to give the text an American feel. For instance, ‘kro’ (for Kronenbourg, a brand of beer) in the original dialogue is turned into ‘bud’ – note that the morphological process, the truncation, is kept – ‘les schtroumpfs’ (although known in the Anglophone world as the smurfs) become ‘Donald Duck’, ‘Darty’ becomes ‘Walmart’, and even Malik Oussekine, a young male victim of police violence in France, is translated as Rodney King. The overall strategy of the translators thus consisted in transforming French references into American ones. This translation strategy can be seen to displace the identity of the characters, since the language used for the subtitles is evocative of American street culture, and puts the viewer under the impression that the action has been relocated.

This transposition confronts the American viewer with notions and cultural references that he/she is familiar with, and as a result, the strategy of the translators can be called domesticating. They domesticate the original by bringing it closer to the culture of the language into which they translate. Friedrich Schleiermacher, a German theologian and philosopher, argued in 1813 that there are only two methods of translation. In André Lefevere’s words, ‘Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him.’¹² In the case of *La Haine*, it is clearly the author, or the film itself, that is moved towards the American viewer (although one may argue that as far as these two strategies are concerned, it is not so much a matter of ‘either/or’, as a question of ‘more or less’), and in the case of *La Haine*, the American viewer is confronted with a language that he/she is familiar with, one that carries the same social stigma as *banlieue* French. The translators have been very consistent in the use of a domesticating strategy for *La Haine*, and

¹¹ Vieillard-Baron, p. 46.

¹² Cited in Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 19-20.

have, in fact, taken domestication to the extreme, opting for what is known as a dialect-for-dialect approach. This approach consists of replacing a vernacular in the original with another vernacular, and all cultural references in the original are subsequently transposed to the target culture.

As a general rule, translators tend to reject the option of dialect-for-dialect translation, given the relative impossibility of finding a vernacular form in the target language with features identical to or even approximating those present in another, vernacular forms being, by nature, geographically and socially idiosyncratic. In some respects, because of the stress placed on the vernacular character of the language – both in the French film and in real life in the French *cités* – and also because of the parallel that can be drawn between French and American street cultures, we might reasonably argue that the translator's decision to translate *banlieue* French with AAVE was justified. However, the visual dissonance between the subtitles and the pictures was not foreseen by the translators. In a very informative article about the reception of *La Haine* by Anglophone audiences, Anne Jäckel suggests that 'critics usually attribute the French failure to penetrate the American market to the resistance of American audiences to subtitling (and dubbing) and/or to the poor quality of language transfer'.¹³ She finds some support for blaming the subtitles in the words of a critic who complained that 'a sloppy pastiche of black American slang hinders rather than helps an understanding [...] of the film'.¹⁴ However, the subtitles' failure has less to do with the quality of the translation than with the limits of the dialect-for-dialect approach. The translators have used many features of AAVE in the subtitles, such as the phonetic corruption of words ending in *-er* ('gangsta', 'motherfucka') as well as that of pronouns ('Whadda ya mean?'), or the omission of the verb *to be* ('You a movie star'). Rather than call it a 'sloppy pastiche', one might find that they have been very consistent in the use of a dialect-for-dialect strategy. However, the understanding of the film is definitely hindered by the use of AAVE, and by the transposition of cultural references. In fact, the result of this transposition/translation of the film to fit American culture is that the American viewer is confronted with a language that belongs to his/her national culture, and yet is not given the means to apprehend the specificity of the French situation. The American audience is confronted with a recognizable language that is traditionally associated with African American people, but which is superimposed onto pictures of the French *black-blanc-beur*

¹³ Anne Jäckel, 'The subtitling of *La Haine*: A Case Study', in *(Multi) Media Translation: Concepts, Practices and Research*, ed. by Yves Gambier and Henrik Gottlieb (Philadelphia, PA: Benjamins, 2001), pp.223-35 (p. 233).

¹⁴ Cited in Jäckel, p. 227.

trio of characters. This conceptual synthesis is rather incongruous. As a result, the American audience failed to relate to the protagonists: as one critic has said, ‘The media hysteria about a stray revolver in a housing project might appear touching to a society in which prepubescents tote Uzis, but not to American youths for whom the young men’s inability to drive would be “quaint”.’¹⁵ The clash between the pictures and the subtitles is explained by the fact that the connotations of the variety of language used in the subtitles, namely AAVE, are not compatible with what the viewer sees on screen. Hence, in this particular case, the relocation of identity that was attempted by the translators was rather unsuccessful; whilst they endeavoured to move the film towards the viewer – to recycle Schleiermacher’s metaphor – by using the subtitles the viewer finds him/herself somewhat brutally moved back towards the original by the images.

However interesting, bold, and even – to a certain extent – appropriate the dialect-for-dialect approach used for subtitling *La Haine* may be, it does not work because of the stark discrepancy that exists between what the viewer reads and the pictures he/she sees. For example, during a scene in which some young people from the *cités* (mostly from North Africa) have improvised a picnic on the roof of a building, Saïd steals a sausage from the barbecue and the victim then tells Saïd’s brother: ‘Ton frère il vient de piquer une merguez!’. This sentence is subtitled ‘Your bro stole a dog!’, which may seem incongruous to the American viewer who would naturally picture an African-American person making such an utterance. Although the translation is denotatively accurate, the Anglophone viewer is put under the impression that the action is taking place in a Harlem project, because the language used in the subtitles almost systematically bears a different connotation than the original dialogue. There are a countless number of such examples in the subtitles: ‘une racaille’ becomes a ‘gangsta’ in the subtitles, ‘un enculé’ is turned into a ‘mothafucka’, and Vinz’s ‘amis’ become his ‘homeys’. Because of this process of relocation, the translation fails to convey the film director’s symbolic resistance to the traditional notion of Frenchness, and the film is not so much about French youngsters in their *cit * as it is about ‘bros in the hood’. The specificity of the situation of the French *cités* does not survive the process of translation, and Kassovitz’s political message about the exclusion of an entire strata of the population left both at the periphery of the city and of French society, is definitely weakened if not altogether lost.

To conclude, although the parallels between *banlieue* French and AAVE mean that they are potentially viable equivalents for translation projects, in the case of *La Haine*, the

¹⁵ Cited in Jäckel, p. 233.

match between the subtitles and the pictures should probably have been considered more closely. Through the subtitles, the translators have created a new identity, one that does not exist in the original. *La Haine*'s director Mathieu Kassovitz himself asked for new subtitles to be written for the tenth anniversary DVD that came out in 2006. The dialect-for-dialect approach was abandoned, and the new subtitles were written in a much less marked form of English. By opting for a more neutral form of English, the translators for the tenth anniversary edition avoided the visual dissonance of the original subtitles. As far as audiovisual translation is concerned, a dialect-for-dialect approach appears rather ambitious, because it presupposes not only linguistic, but also cultural, and certainly functional, equivalences. Whether the dialect-for-dialect approach fails or succeeds, however, what remains true is that translation – and particularly the translation of a specific vernacular – is but one way of trying to apprehend the Other. This is particularly apparent when using a dialect-for-dialect approach, in the attempt to make this 'Otherness' – that which is foreign or merely different – resemble something known.