

Culture, Ideology, Subtitling – A Challenging Mix

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Abstract: *The requirements of subtitling filmic texts are primarily technical in nature. Nonetheless, the choices a translator makes are rooted deep into the cultural cores supporting both the source language and the target language. To manage an adequate cultural representation and to decode its ideological substratum for the benefit of the outsider viewer, the translator is faced with a challenging task, which the paper aims at focusing on by resorting to the case of the 2002 Romanian film “Occident” directed by Cristian Mungiu.*

Key-words: *culture, ideology, subtitling*

1. Translation at the contemporary crossroads

As an interdiscipline (McCarty, 1999: 182) – combining linguistic, literary and cultural theory – translation studies today reflect the increasingly globalized, information-rich society which uses and abuses translation in ways which would have been inconceivable not more than decades ago (with the technological and electronic component creeping in to complicate things even further).

At an uncomfortable crossroads for theoreticians and practitioners alike, translation studies are slowly but surely developing in the direction of:

- new models – like Toury’s DST (Descriptive Translation Studies), with a considerable impact on the discipline in terms of “the abandonment of one-to-one notions of correspondence and of the possibility for linguistic/literary equivalence (unless by accident), the involvement of literary tendencies within the target cultural system in the production of any translated text, the destabilization of the notion of an original message with a fixed identity, the integration of both the original text and the translated text in the semiotic web of intersecting cultural systems” (Genzler, 1993: 133-134);
- new integrating strategies – like the one proposed by Mary Snell-Hornby in *Translation Studies: An Integrated Approach* (1995: 32), which speaks of integrating literary, general and special translations into a single continuum (rather than seeing them as distinct translation areas) and of incorporating cultural history, literary studies, socio-cultural and area studies, and the study of the relevant specialized subject (for legal, economic, medical and scientific texts) in the translation effort;
- a new methodology – one that “neither prioritizes broad concerns with power, ideology and patronage to the detriment of the need to examine representative examples of text, nor contends itself with detailed text-linguistic analysis while making do with sketchy and generalised notions of context” (Harvey, in Venuti, 2000: 466).

Naturally, there have been made other notable attempts at finding stable ground for considering translation studies while simultaneously inscribing it within the frame of interdisciplinarity (in Tirkkonen-Condit, 1991) and thus operating across disciplines, but it has proved as difficult as rewarding, since few may boast of specialising in various fields at once. Nevertheless, what has come out of all these enterprises has been a general tendency to approach the phenomenon, process and product of translation from the perspective of multiple subjects of interest in today’s world of research, such as history, transnational cultures, postmodernism, hermeneutics, intertextuality, philosophy, politics, specialised discourse, linguistics to name only some. The cultural component remains dominant, with postcolonialism being considered from a poststructuralist standpoint (T. Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism and the Colonial Context* – 1992); with historiography, literary theory and criticism coming together with French

discourse analysis (L. Venuti, *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology* – 1992); with society and ideology contaminating linguistic manifestations and literary norms (K. Harvey, 'Translating camp talk: Gay identities and cultural transfer' – 1998).

2. Subtitling today

A symptomatic case of translation at the cultural crossroads today is film subtitling, illustrative of each and all of the above mentioned points of reference. Ideologically, subtitling aims at: resuming the culturally determined common ground shared by the original and translated text; observing the political, historical, social and artistic substratum holding the film together; bringing to the fore power structures operative both at the level of content and at the level of form – all to be processed into the choices made for the linguistic equivalent offered. Technically, the language of subtitling is non-sophisticated, built on simple sentence structures. It involves condensation, omission and paraphrase, on the one hand due to the fact that the audio and visual components of film support the forwarding of the message and, on the other hand, due to the time and space limits imposed by the rapid succession of scenes/frames on the actual screen. As a consequence, the translator's task is thus made doubly challenging, with a complexity of nuances asking to be preserved and transmitted appropriately within a constrictive, quintessential space.

On today's market, there are numerous attempts at mediating cultures and providing the best possible translations for the benefit of the consumer of the filmic product. Various companies specialising in film subtitling (and dubbing) have emerged, the only problem remaining from the point of view of the producer being that of operating the appropriate choice. In as far as the viewer is concerned, there is still, unfortunately, a limited range of options when it comes to purchasing an original, copy-right version of a film and obtaining the best value for money with respect to its subtitling. Not to mention the horrendous subtitles freely available on the internet, compiled by non-professionals and threatening to contaminate our everyday encounter with the foreign language/culture via film (which has become part of our lives and whose influences on us, though unnoticeable, leave deep traces both in our development as individuals and in our collective unconscious).

Other problems face the translator himself. In the case of video subtitling (as compared to television and cinema subtitling), approached here for the purpose of our analysis, the following need special mention (in Ivarsson, 1992: 130-131): video film companies encounter difficulties in obtaining scripts (and without one, the translator faces the painstaking task of taking down actual utterances); translators are usually provided with video cassettes, rather than CDs or DVDs (explainable if economy and copyright reasons are taken into account, but asking for further processing to be actually worked on); the adaptation of film subtitles to a higher reading speed (dependent on a different class of viewers and a different viewing context than is the case of television or the cinema) presupposes an increased effort to translate details which otherwise would have been omitted; commonly, video companies use teletext character generators, which involve a series of limitations, bringing about a smaller number of characters per line (28-36) and the non-availability of italics, underlining, special characters in general.

All these aspects, and more, have been taken into account in our approaching Cristian Mungiu's internationally acclaimed *Occident*. The DVD used is distributed in Romania by VOODOO FILMS (Bucharest) and carries the copyright indicative of W327787A. It includes the 100 minute long film in Romanian (COLOR/PAL, DOLBY DIGITAL), its English and French subtitling, plus making of, video clip and promo sections.

3. On *Occident* and its subtitling

Occident, produced in 2002 and directed by Cristian Mungiu, tells three intertwined stories which merge and separate continuously, creating the inner dynamism of an otherwise static world, caught in the inertia of powerlessness as a result of societal problems in post-totalitarian Romania.

- Story one is that of a couple in their thirties, who are finding it increasingly difficult to live and work decently and who break apart as the woman decides it is no longer immoral to marry a foreigner and go abroad in search of a better life, leaving her fiancé heartbroken and in constant pursuit of his lost love. As the film starts, Sorina and Luci are evicted from their modest flat in a squalid district of Bucharest and forced to move in with Luci's elderly aunt Leana, whose son Nicu has emigrated to Germany leaving her alone and unhappy, and who finally dies on news of her son's death far away from home. The following cemetery scene in which, while seeking guidance at the grave of Sorina's father, Luci is hit on the head by a bottle thrown by someone accidentally and taken to hospital by Jerome (the Frenchman Sorina later leaves with), makes the connection with the second tale.
- Story two is that of Mihaela, a young woman who was abandoned by her groom on their wedding day. Drunk and hesitant, he sat on a bench and, on finishing its content, threw the empty bottle in the park/cemetery nearby. Mihaela now works as a mascot for an advertising company, where she meets and befriends Luci – another victim of unrequited love, also having found a job as a mascot there. In the meantime, however, Mihaela's mother, desperate to see her daughter happily married, goes to different matrimonial agencies and eventually manages to find her a suitor from abroad. The perfect Italian Luigi who comes to Romania to visit is black, surprisingly, but Mihaela intends to leave with him anyway.
- Story three centres on Mihaela's father, an old-school police officer or, better still, a surviving member of the communist militia. On his daughter's wedding day, he convinces his almost son-in-law to give up marrying her and to disappear. The guilt he feels due to this interference in her life is later on exploited by his wife and by his mistress (Sorina's headmistress at the kinder garden where she works) to persuade him to accept Mihaela's marriage to a foreigner. At work, he meets Nae, who has come from Germany with news of his friend Nicu's death. He agrees to help Nae find Nicu's mother (Luci's aunt Leana), but asks for a favour in return: that Nae should take Mihaela to Germany with him lest she should marry Luigi.

The realities of the post 1989 Romania are woven into the filmic narrative, with emphasis on the slim work opportunities, on housing issues with the young, on poverty and stray dogs, on police corruption, on child adoption businesses, on the mirage of the West and migration as alternative to difficulties at home.

The opening scenes chosen for exemplification (min. 1.19-3.51) anticipate the neuralgic points of the film's debate on contemporary Romanianness and raises awareness as to the lethal mix of domestic inertia and foreign intrusive patterns. The linguistic component of the filmic text contributes to the forwarding of its message, but only partly so, on the one hand due to the predominance and signifying weight of the visual stimuli and, on the other hand, due to the translation and cultural mediation presupposed by its subtitling into another language.

The dialogue between Luci and Sorina, together with Luci's brief quarrel with the administrator, is centred on existential matters that suffocate and entrap the two metonymic young protagonists. The financial and housing difficulties are caused by unemployment,

and unemployment is in turn due to the broader problematic context of the transitional, post-totalitarian Romanian society. Their clashing responses ultimately suggest the absence of the freedom of choice and the reversal or effacing of gender stereotypes. Luci's is passive, inert; his solution is to wait: to wait for his aunt to die so that they might move into her modest flat, to wait for better times and, in the meantime, take on menial jobs in the hope that one day he might find a position according to his training and education. Sorina's is dynamic, daring; seeing no way out, she thinks of emigrating and taking her chances elsewhere in the world. Both, however, are common with the average contemporary Romanian, shedding light on the metamorphosis of Romanian national identity and denouncing the factors that have contributed to its present day manifestations.

Looking into the Romanian and the English expressions of the film's ideological and cultural core addressing outside viewers in particular (with emphasis, naturally, on the 2 min 33 second excerpt selected), a number of pluses and minuses may be underlined, all of which will hopefully result from the subtitle analysis carried out in this respect.

The table below includes, in the left hand column, the transcript of the actors' utterances (which was not available, but taken down scene by scene) and, in the right hand column, the authorised translation provided by VOODOO FILMS on the DVD mentioned above. In approaching the end product, we have focused on the aspects inherent to the translation into English of the Romanian script (discourse specificities, culture specific elements, linguistic appropriacy and equivalence etc) and on the technical requirements of the practice of subtitling (time and space constraints, number of characters per line and lines per frame, succession of subtitles on the screen, marking, punctuation etc).

Romanian script	Authorised translation
01.18 (Luci) Vezi, ai grijă.	01.18 (Luci) Take care!
01.20 (Sorina) Și zi, ți-au dat ăia banii?	1.20 (Sorina) So, have they given you the money?
01.23 (Luci) Nu, da' în două-trei săptămâni se rezolvă sigur, ai să vezi.	01.23 (Luci) Not yet. In two or three weeks they will.
01.26 (Sorina) Două-trei săptămâni... dureaza deja de 2 luni chestia asta. Nu înțeleg ce te costă.	01.26 (Sorina) 3 weeks! It's been 2 months already! What do you have to loose, anyway?
01.32 (Sorina) Te duci frumos și dai interviu.	01.32 (Sorina) You go there for an interview.
01.33 (Sorina) A vorbit asta... directoarea de la noi cu omul de acolo și o să se rezolve, o să fie înțelegător, ai să vezi.	01.33 (Sorina) Our lady director has spoken with the guy, and it's going to be just fine.
01.38 (Luci) Ce înțelegător, mă.... Mă întreabă ăla... vrei sa fii agent publicitar?...	01.38 (Luci) Fine my ass! He'll ask me: "Why do you want to be an ad agent?"
01.40 (Luci) ...zic da; da' știi ce e aia?, păi și eu ce-o să zic?... păi, nu știu, dar m-ar interesa...	01.40 (Luci) And what do I say: "I don't even know what an ad agent does."
01.44 (Sorina) O să zică el, da' măcar o să-ți dea bani...	01.44 (Sorina) They'll tell you! But at least you'll be paid.
01.47 (Sorina) Tu nu vrei să ne mutăm naibii odată de-aici?	01.47 (Sorina) Don't you want to get away from this place?
01.51 (Luci) Ce-au făcut ăștia, mă?	01.51 (Luci) What the fuck have they done?
01.56 (Luci) Ia stai un pic aicea.	01.56 (Luci) Wait here!
02.08 (Luci) Morții...	02.08 (Luci) God damn you!
02.14 (Luci) Auzi, mă? Cum îți permiți, mă, să-mi scoți lucrurile afară din casă fără ca măcar să m-anunți?	02.14 (Luci) Hey, how dare you move out my stuff without even letting me know?
02.18 (Luci) Zi, mă, ți-a dat ăsta șpagă să-l bagi în locul meu?	02.18 (Luci) Is he the guy that bribed you to let him move into my place?

02.22 (Administrator) Auzi, mă... Cum vorbești tu cu frate-miu, mă...	02.22 (Administrator) Hey, how do you think you're talking to my bro?
02.23 (Administrator) Bre, nea Emile... ia vino-n coa'!	02.23 (Administrator) Uncle Emil, come here!
02.28 (Luci) Tu-vă-n... de hoți!	02.28 (Luci) Stinking thieves!
02.30 (Administrator) Ce faci, mă... mă-njuri... Gura mătii de nenorocit... că dacă vin după tine acuma...	02.30 (Administrator) You fucking son of a bitch, don't you curse or I'll come after you!
02.34 (Administrator) Lasă-l bre, nea Emile... lasă-l...	02.34 (Administrator) Leave him be, Uncle Emil.
02.46 (Luci) Acuma, ce, îți pare rău după locu' ăsta?	02.46 (Luci) What, know? You'll miss this place or what?
02.47 (Luci) O să rezolvăm noi.. (Sorina) O să rezolvăm...	02.47 (Luci) - We'll manage, somehow... (Sorina) - We'll manage.
02.52 (Sorina) Mereu zici așa... M-am săturat până peste cap... Numa' mizerie și...	02.52 (Sorina) That's what you say every time! I'm fed up!
02.56 (Luci) Lasă, mă, că facem noi cumva... ducem astea la tanti și... nu știu... om sta acolo până...	02.56 (Luci) We'll move the stuff to Aunt Leana And we'll sleep there till...
03.00 (Sorina) Până ce? Până și chestia asta e pentru mine...	03.00 (Sorina) Till what? Don't you see how pathetic this is?
03.03 (Sorina) Să aștepti să moară tanti... să te muți în locul ei...	03.03 (Sorina) To wait for the old woman to die so that we can move in to her place?
03.08 (Sorina) Băi, să mor, mai bine ne-am căra cu totul de aici.	03.08 (Sorina) I'll be damned! We'd better get the hell out of here!
03.10 (Luci) Unde naiba să ne cărăm?	03.10 (Luci) Where the hell to?
03.12 (Sorina) Oriunde, oriunde numai să plecăm din locul ăsta de căcat.	03.12 (Sorina) Anywhere! Just leave this shitty place.
03.15 (Luci) Unde naiba, punem capu' în pământ și o tăiem așa aiurea? Lasă că o să...	03.15 (Luci) - We can not just leave. We'll... (Sorina) - We'll what?

<p>(<i>Sorina</i>) O să ce?</p> <p>(<i>Luci</i>) O să nu știu...</p> <p>03.21</p> <p>(<i>Sorina</i>) Nu vezi că ne dau ăștia în stradă, aici n-ai ce să faci...</p> <p>03.24</p> <p>(<i>Sorina</i>) ...decat să te plângi... O să ce?</p> <p>03.26</p> <p>(<i>Luci</i>) Și în altă parte ce crezi că e?</p> <p>(<i>Sorina</i>) Nu știu...</p> <p>03.29</p> <p>(<i>Luci</i>) Peste tot e la fel.</p> <p>03.31</p> <p>(<i>Sorina</i>) Oricum, mai rău de-atât nu poa' să fie.</p> <p>03.44</p> <p>(<i>Luci</i>) Ce faci, mă?</p> <p>(<i>Sorina</i>) Mă duc până la tata meu.</p> <p>03.48</p> <p>(<i>Sorina</i>) Înțelege-mă, ceva trebuie să se schimbe.</p> <p>03.51</p> <p>(<i>Luci</i>) Stai mă, noi trebuie să rezolvăm. Tata tău ce să...</p>	<p>03.21</p> <p>(<i>Sorina</i>) We're thrown out in the street, there's nothing you can do,</p> <p>03.24</p> <p>(<i>Sorina</i>) there's no one to complain to and you tell me it's not so bad!</p> <p>03.26</p> <p>(<i>Luci</i>) Why do you think somewhere else is better?</p> <p>03.29</p> <p>(<i>Luci</i>) Everywhere is pretty much the same think you're nobody.</p> <p>03.31</p> <p>(<i>Sorina</i>) Can't be worse, that's for sure.</p> <p>03.44</p> <p>(<i>Luci</i>) - What are you doing?</p> <p>(<i>Sorina</i>) - I'm going to daddy.</p> <p>03.48</p> <p>(<i>Sorina</i>) I tell you, something's got to change.</p> <p>03.51</p> <p>(<i>Luci</i>) But we must solve it ourselves! What's your dad going to do?</p>
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Generally, the technical rules of subtitling (in Ivarsson, 1992: 83-126) have been observed by the translator:

- the total time of the subtitles is roughly the same with that of the actual utterances (although omissions were operated to this end);
- subtitles fit the standard temporal boundaries, although the 5-8 seconds limit is decreased (specific to video subtitling);
- 2 (3 at the most) lines per frame are used;
- questions and answers do not occur in separate subtitle frames;
- a maximum of 36 characters (including blanks) is inserted;
- the subtitles represent coherent logical or syntactical units;
- the sentence structure is simple (no excessive use of subordinate clauses, digressions kept to a minimum, broken into readily digestible chunks...);
- tautologies and repetitions are left out;
- muddled speech is overlooked and short dialogues are merged for conciseness (when what one speaker says is not essential to the overall meaning);
- free translations are made when the speech lacks complete phrases, has confused syntax, slips of the tongue etc;
- dialogues are condensed using dashes to point to alternative speakers;
- strong language is rendered through idiomatic equivalents and the flood of obscenities is toned down, not censored;
- juxtaposed shouts, cries, threats, curses are omitted;
- grunts, false starts, repetitions do not appear in consecutive subtitles;
- inarticulate speech is not represented by deliberate mistakes;
- no covering up occurs (translating an unimportant part so as to avoid something one does not understand).

The exceptions from the norms of good subtitling might be summed up as:

- misspelt words and phrases: *loose*, instead of *lose* – 01.26; *know*, instead of *now* – 02.46; *can not*, instead of *cannot* – 03.15; *think*, instead of *thing* – 03.29;
- wrong equivalents provided: *lady director* instead of *headmistress* – 01.33; *how do you think you're talking to...* instead of *how dare you talk to... like that* – 2.22;
- inappropriate word order to highlight modality: *In two or three weeks they will.* – 1.23, *What, know?* – 2.46; suggested modifications: *They will in two or three weeks*; *Now what?*;
- misused American slang, incapable of capturing the Romanian subcultural gist: *guy* – 1.33, 2.18, *bro* – 2.22; suggested modifications: *one*, *brother* (neutral, but more culturally appropriate);
- more than 36 characters per line from time to time: 43 in *Our lady director has spoken with the guy* – 01.33; 42 in *"I don't even know what an ad agent does."* – 01.40; 37 in *You fucking son of a bitch, don't you* – 02.30; suggested modifications: *Our headmistress has talked to someone* (33), *"I know nothing about ad agents."* (33), *You son of a bitch, don't you* (29);
- subtitles lack original text interpretation: *I'm going to daddy.* – 03.44, for example, does not capture the need to connect to traditional Romanian values like family or the past; it simply points to a destination, which misleads the viewer, since Sorina's intention is to pay a visit to her dead father's grave; suggested modification: *I'm going to ask my dad.*
- syntax and vocabulary may be simplified if the difference in terms of meaning is negligible, yet - *We can not just leave. We'll...* – 03.15 does not carry across the intended bravery that Luci (otherwise quite cowardly as a character) means to boast and accuse Sorina of lacking; suggested modification: - *We can't be driven out, we'll...*

- if more people participate in the dialogue subtitled on the same frame, dialogue dashes are used; however, there are cases of possible mix ups with sentences continued from one subtitle to another, where the possibility of using suspension dots was not had in view: (Luci) - *What are you doing?* / (Sorina) - *I'm going to daddy.*; (Sorina) *I tell you, / something's got to change.* – 03.44-03.48.

In short, the ratio is 16 to 8 in favour of good practice instances. Nevertheless, downfalls are still present, which not only signals the ever perfectible nature of any translated text, but invites at careful consideration of the status of translators and translations today. If the few wrong choices made in terms of context-based information or of subtitling prerequisites render the viewer's interaction with the filmic text cumbersome (a problem overcome by the more culturally aware audiences), the language problems are downright unpardonable.

4. Final remarks

In comparison with the years immediately following the revolution of 1989, when almost all translations/subtitlings of foreign texts/films were accepted due to the simple fact that Romania had been cut off from intercultural dialogues and was now enthusiastic about allowing the West, in particular, inside its cultural frontiers, today things have changed immensely, and the change is observable in the increased quality and professionalism of translation/subtitling enterprises also. There is, of course, room for improvement (as the study shows), but the industry is developing constantly, aided by specialist contributions to the theory and practice of cultural mediation. Pending is the annihilation of the outrageously incorrect, to say the least, versions that have suffused the internet and our lives with it.

Looking into individual film subtitles with focus on ideology, culture and language might help unravel the intricacies of their scaffolding and invite at the reconsideration of the role and function of translation as cultural mediation through film – the most popular, therefore the most powerful, text globally accessed in the twenty first century.

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