

THE LANGUAGE OF FILM: CORPORA AND STATISTICS IN THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY. *NOTTING HILL* (1998) —A CASE STUDY

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1. Introduction

Recent research projects conducted jointly by a number of Italian universities (Trieste, Padua, Pavia, Pisa) have borne such names as CITATAL, LINGUATEL, DIDACTAS, etc. Dissecting the acronyms, the terms ‘corpus’, ‘text’, ‘text analysis’, ‘translation’, ‘dubbing’ and ‘subtitling’ regularly emerge, and it is the purpose of this paper to focus on just these aspects of a much wider range of research interests represented in the various projects. In short, the texts for analysis are film scripts, subsequently to be translated and adapted for dubbing or subtitling. The corpora of spoken language provide a means of comparing the film ‘texts’ —both scripts and transcriptions— with genuine oral language. The data emerging from the comparisons provides information about speech characteristics that the translator and dubber or subtitler need to be aware of in adapting a film text and transferring it to another language and culture.



It is now well known, especially in screen translation circles, that film scripts generally fall short of capturing the varied and subtle characteristics of spontaneous dialogue, though it is less clear exactly how and to what extent such language fails in this respect. The Trieste branch of the research group thus set out to analyse the components of both spontaneous talk and screen discourse over a wide range of film and television material including feature films, TV soap operas, cartoons,

documentaries, etc. Comparisons of British and American film and TV scripts with spoken language corpora such as the Cobuild Bank of English and the San Diego corpus of spoken English, provided the necessary data to enable initial confirmation of hypotheses about the lack of authenticity in film material to be made. Furthermore, the original findings of our corpus linguistics studies, backed by the assistance of statistics experts from other university departments, led to the uncovering of some very interesting phenomena relating directly and indirectly to the original aims of the research.

2. Multimodal Texts

It is important to remember firstly that a film text is a multimodal text and does not create meaning through language alone. A number of ‘semiotic modalities’ (written and spoken words, visual images, music, sounds, gestures, colour, light, etc.) operate together to provide a single meaning specific for that ‘text’. In order to analyse such texts, it is necessary to have a clear picture of all the components and ascertain how they create a meaningful whole. Thibault (see Baldry ed. 2000) devised what he called the ‘multimodal transcription’ to do this very job. Fig. 1 shows a slightly modified version of Thibault’s original model.

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T	VISUAL FRAME	VISUAL IMAGE	KINESIC ACTION	SOUNDTRACK
1		CP stationary HP frontal VP median D medium VS Tony VC window, blinds, upturned chairs, street CO natural C dark green/light grey	Sitting motionless, slightly moving hands Gaze vector down Tempo S	William speaking off: “standing in front of a boy”
2		CP stationary HP frontal VP median D medium close VS Max VC window, upturned chairs, street CO natural C blue, black	Sitting motionless, slight head movement GV down	William speaking off: “asking him... to love her”

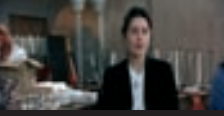
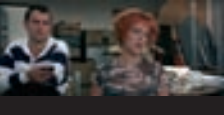



T	VISUAL FRAME	VISUAL IMAGE	KINESIC ACTION	SOUNDTRACK
3		CP stationary HP frontal VP median D medium VS Bella VC furnishings, upturned chairs, shoulders of others CO natural C black and white	Sitting motionless GV towards William	silence
4		CP stationary HP frontal VP median D medium VS Honey and Bernie VC assorted objects CO natural C blue and white, ginger	Sitting motionless, girl moving head to left GV at William/closed	silence
5		CP stationary HP frontal VP median D medium close VS William VC window, blinds, upturned chair, CO natural C white, dark hues	Sitting motionless, head bowed, desperation GV at floor	"Oh, sod a dog, I've made the wrong decision, haven't I?"

FIGURE 1

It is a multimodal transcription of a five-frame clip from the film *Notting Hill*, chosen to act as the vehicle throughout the paper to illustrate the analytical methodology. As can be seen, the clip is portrayed as a series of chronological frames accompanied by a detailed and codified description of what is happening in terms of all the semiotic modalities in operation. The first column on the left marks time (in this case at intervals of a few seconds between one frame and another), the second column is the visual image itself, the third column describes that image, the fourth describes the kinesic action that can be observed and the fifth reports the dialogue and any other element of soundtrack such as the musical background or other sounds. The coding (CP, HP, VS, etc.) is a kind of shorthand referring, respectively, to Camera Position, Horizontal Perspective, Visual Salience, etc. While a detailed explanation of this methodology is not necessary for the purposes of this paper, it is important to remember the following words of Thibault (2000: 311): "Multimodal texts are texts which combine and integrate the meaning-making resources of more than one semiotic modality [...] in order to produce a text-specific meaning".

Having said this, the particular emphasis here will be on the spoken language, but never in the absence of the other meaning-making resources employed in the text. For the particular purposes of this study, the present author further adapted the Thibault-Baldry model to incorporate translation for dubbing and/or subtitling. As can be seen in Fig. 2, two of the columns seen in Fig. 1 have been collapsed into one and an additional column added for the translation of the dialogue. In this way the verbal element can be viewed in terms of its interaction with the other semiotic elements. This is particularly important in the case of subtitling, but also on occasion for dubbing, as the major strategy adopted in this kind of translation is one of condensation of some kind, be it the elimination of seemingly superfluous material, the simple reduction of the text without any semantic loss, or the wholesale deletion of entire chunks of verbal discourse.

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T	VISUAL FRAME	VISUAL IMAGE + KINESICS	SOUNDTRACK	TRANSLATION (DUBBING)
1		CP stationary HP frontal VP median D medium VS Tony VC window, blinds, upturned chairs, street CO natural C dark green/light grey Sitting motionless, slightly moving hands Gaze vector down	William speaking off: "standing in front of a boy"... "che stava di fronte a un ragazzo"...	
2		CP stationary HP frontal VP median D medium close VS Max VC window, upturned chairs, street CO natural C blue, black Sitting motionless, slight head movement GV down	William speaking off: "asking him...to love her"	"e gli chiedeva di amarla"...

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5		CP stationary HP frontal VP median D medium close VS William VC window, blinds, upturned chair, CO natural C white, dark hues Sitting motionless, head bowed, desperation GV at floor	"Oh, sod a dog, I've made the wrong decision, haven't I?"	"Sono tutto suonato, ho preso la decisione sbagliata."

FIGURE 2

The point at issue is on what basis are such condensation decisions made. The multimodal transcription allows us to see how the verbal element is integrated with the other semiotic resources and thus how those other resources can at times compensate for the verbal, and allow the translator to do some judicious trimming.

3. Film Language

76 Before analysing the integration of film discourse with the other semiotic modalities, we must determine the nature of film language itself, and thus return to the analysis of the written texts, and investigate their level of authenticity. If we equate authenticity to some extent with realism and heed Barthes' 1973 view of realism in literature, which he described as a form that tries to efface its own production, then a film's authenticity can be judged by how successfully it convinces the audience that it is real. But this takes no account of the suspension of disbelief factor that film-goers take with them to the cinema. If Lacey (2000: 72) is right in affirming that "realism must be derived from the interaction between the text's own logic and its reference to other texts, its intertextuality", then the interaction of film texts and other texts must also be seen as a yardstick for measuring levels of authenticity. But returning to the suspension of disbelief and societal expectations regarding film dialogue, the question of authenticity is problematical. Given that film texts are inevitably false to some degree (scripts are invented, written usually by one person putting discourse into the mouths of many diverse characters), the question to ask is how authentic can a film text be expected to be, and how desirable is it that it be realistic. Following from this, the translator of such texts must decide whether to translate an inauthentic text in language/culture 'A' into an inauthentic text in language/culture 'B', or to attempt to render it more authentic. Alternatively, if the scriptwriter has achieved a high degree of authenticity (cf. social-realism dramas), should the text be translated with the same degree of authenticity or rendered less realistic, that is more conventionally filmic, for the target culture.

Linguistically, from a systemic-functional perspective, and this is the principal theoretical model underpinning the analysis, a conversation takes place in a social context which shapes the structure and features of that conversation. Speakers create spontaneous discourse from restricted paradigms depending on that context. This is what we shall consider to be realistic, authentic language, though Eagleton (1983: 135-6) warns that the idea of realism "helps to confirm the prejudice that there is a form of ordinary language which is somehow natural. This natural language gives us reality *as it is*". His use of the word 'prejudice' suggests that he does not entirely believe in this 'natural' language, but for the purposes of this article, the genuine spoken discourse taken from the above-mentioned corpora will be held to be 'authentic'.

However, spoken language is not a homogeneous whole and not devoid of rules and observable patterns; many spoken genres have been identified in terms of structure, style, function, etc. From such broad categories as narrative, descriptive,

informative to more circumscribed sub-genres such as ‘classroom conversation’, ‘telephone talk’, even ‘gossip’, it can be seen that oral discourse is subject to context and paradigm constraints. In ‘less spontaneous’ genres, such as classroom talk (cf. Sinclair and Coulthard 1975), participants know their roles and the structure forms itself relatively effortlessly. In the case of film or drama conversations, we are dealing with a deliberately non-spontaneous and non-authentic form of spoken discourse, and its lack of genuineness is immediately observable except when in the hands of consummate professionals. Suffice it to think of children in the school play or footballers on television commercials.

Thus, in order to investigate further the phenomenon of (un)authenticity, a series of experiments was carried out at Trieste University to test the hypothesis that the ‘artificially produced situations’ in films would inevitably produce discourse that was to some extent unrealistic. Firstly, the language of film was compared to the language contained in the spoken corpus of the Cobuild ‘Bank of English’. Firstly, a number of typical features of spoken language were identified by delving into the copious literature on the subject. In the first experiment, heeding Brown and Yule’s 1983 reference to spoken language containing large numbers of prefabricated fillers such as ‘so’ and ‘well’, McCarthy’s point that “immediacy of context [...] is reflected in a high number of discourse markers e.g., well, right” (1998: 39), and more recently Stenstrom who speaks of the “use of pragmatic markers” (2004: 260), it was decided to concentrate on the use of discourse markers as a key to identifying spontaneous oral language use. The discourse markers chosen (NOW, WELL, RIGHT, SO, OK, YES) have been shown to be particularly significant in analysing conversation in that they transcend the barriers of clauses and sentences which are the province of written language.

The corpus of films used for the experiment consisted of fifty contemporary movies chosen because they portrayed ‘real people’ in ‘real situations’ (i.e. not cartoons, science-fiction movies or medieval dramas). A typical example was *As Good as it Gets* (Brooks 1997), a film script containing a total of 21,161 words (one of the first serendipitous findings of the research was that most of the films included in the corpus contained approximately 20,000 words). The frequency of occurrence of the afore-mentioned discourse markers in the film was as follows:

NOW	4
WELL	31
RIGHT	3
YES	4
OK	32
SO	39

Taking all the fifty films together, the total number of words uttered is 995,746. The breakdown per discourse marker is as follows:

NOW	377
WELL	1,179
RIGHT	260
YES	238
OK	670
SO	1,032

Although these overall figures seem high, when compared to the frequency of occurrence of the same features in the Cobuild spoken corpus (taking a random sample of approximately one million words), the difference is immediately apparent.

NOW	620
WELL	2,990
RIGHT	3,650
YES	3,830
OK	1,150
SO	4,800

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These statistics are represented in graphic form in fig. 3.

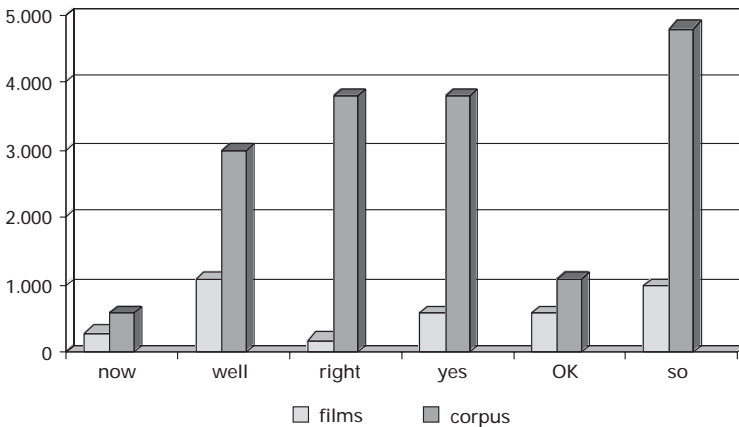


FIGURE 3

The figures seem to prove the hypothesis, at least in part (similar experiments involving spoken language features such as hedges, vague language and the use of parataxis have not shown the same disparity) that film language is distant from real language. But an extremely important proviso must be introduced immediately.

When a film script is compared to an actual transcription of the words that the actors utter, a rather different picture emerges. In order to compare these two versions, a further experiment was conducted using the film *Notting Hill* as vehicle. In this case we tested the frequency of occurrence of ten discourse markers, six hedges and eleven tag questions. Figs. 4 shows the results pertaining to the discourse markers. As can be seen, more of these features, in some cases considerably more, appeared in the transcription of what was actually said in the film. Similar findings were obtained for the other variables. The respective uses of 'right', for example, were 67 and 93, the uses of 'isn't it?' were 3 and 8, and even in the case of hedges, the total figures show a discrepancy of 43 to 58. A similar experiment carried out on American TV crime series produced similar findings.

DISCOURSE MARKERS

	SCRIPT	FILM TRANSCRIPTION
NOW	24	28
OK	21	24
RIGHT	67	93
SO	47	67
UM	0	99
WELL	59	82
YEAH	5	64
YES	63	48
YOU KNOW	23	33
YOU SEE	3	6
Total	312	502

FIGURE 4

All this would seem to suggest that it is the actors who are doing something to the original script as they enter into what Minsky (1975) describes as "frames" (cf. Schank and Abelson's (1977) "scripts", Sanford and Garrod's (1981) "scenarios", etc.), that is when they create for themselves an (artificial) context of situation and

attempt to ‘live it’. Gregory (2002: 319) refers to the ‘communicating community context’ which in a novel or a film is usually invented but purporting to be real. It is the gift of the accomplished actor to occupy this context and to act it and speak it. As the probabilistic grammar of the spoken language is motivated by interpersonal as well as by ideational factors, in the Hallidayan sense of these terms (see Halliday 1994), the stance the speakers take is important. In enacting film scenes, modern method actors interact in a realistic way adapting the language given them in the script to the context in which they are supposed to find themselves. This language becomes, in Gregory and Carroll’s (1978) words, “written to be spoken as if not written” as the actors simulate reality and actually add, remove and bend the original, behaving as they would if they were actually in that context. The intertextuality mentioned earlier, as a sign of realism, is rooted in the repetitious nature of human activity. Words and expressions co-occur and re-occur with extreme regularity in spontaneous exchange. Biber et al (2004: 31) refer to clusters and bundles of items that are attracted to one another in particular contexts. Such words and expressions that co-occur and re-occur in particular contexts are said by Hoey (2004: 385) to be ‘primed’ to appear (or not appear) only in specific parts of a text or specific circumstances of discourse production. By way of a rather obvious example, it would be difficult to think of an environment for the words “... I love you too” outside of the context that produces an initial “I love you”. In a more general sense, certain words and expressions and grammatical configurations can be seen to be primed for use in spoken language, and negatively primed for use in written language. It is therefore legitimate to expect that certain forms are primed for use in film scripts, to the extent that scholars claim to have identified the language of film and its components (cf. Lacey 1998, for English; Di Giusti 1990, for Italian), and screen responses can often be predicted. And thus a tension exists between the (subconscious) conventions of film scripting and the priming mechanisms inherent to spontaneous talk adopted by actors.

If all the oft identified features of spoken language (hesitation, repetition, ellipsis of subject pronouns, auxiliaries, articles and initial parts of set expressions, pre- and post-placed items, etc.) are ‘primed out’ in scripts, it seems that they are to some extent primed in again by the actors when they interact. The evidence from *Notting Hill* bears this out. The film script begins:

Of course I’ve seen her films and always thought she was, well, fabulous... but, you know, million miles from the world I live in. Which is here, Notting Hill, not a bad place to be... ... There’s the market on weekdays selling every fruit and vegetable known to man. The tattoo parlour...

Although the scriptwriter has made an effort to include genuine spoken language features (discourse markers, ellipsis, hesitation, etc.), in the actual acting out of the

scene, the actor Hugh Grant adds some repetition and changes an expression to one he presumably found more spontaneous.

(transcription of film text)

Of course I've seen her films and always thought she was, well, fabulous... but, you know, **a million** million miles from the world I live in. Which is here, Notting Hill, **my favourite bit of London...** There's the market on weekdays selling every fruit and vegetable known to man. The tattoo parlour...

The following sequence from the script also seems to have taken account of the spontaneous nature of spoken language but the actor intervenes again:

Would you like something to nibble —apricots soaked in honey— quite why, no one knows —because it stops them tasting of apricots, and makes them taste like honey, and if you wanted honey, you'd just buy honey, instead of apricots, but nevertheless—there we go.

Would you like something to **eat?** **Uh, something to nibble** -Um, apricots soaked in honey? —quite why, no one knows— because it stops them tasting of apricots... and makes them taste like honey, and if you wanted honey, you'd just buy honey, instead of... apricots, but nevertheless -there we go **there**.

Fig. 5 shows a breakdown of the script and transcription of the 'birthday party' scene in the film, in which the actors' contributions can be observed. The addition of exclamations and fillers, the use of repetition and changes to the text can all be observed.

NOTTING HILL "BIRTHDAY PARTY" SCENE

SCRIPT	FILM DIALOGUES
<p>MAX: Right —I think we're ready.</p> <p><i>They all move towards the kitchen.</i></p> <p>ANNA (to Bella): I wonder if you could tell me where the...?</p> <p>BELLA: Oh, it's just down the corridor on the right.</p> <p>HONEY: I'll show you.</p> <p><i>A moment's silence as they leave —then in a split second the others all turn to William.</i></p> <p>BELLA: Quickly, quickly —talk very quickly, what are you doing here with Anna Scott?</p> <p>BERNIE: Anna Scott?</p> <p>BELLA: Yes.</p> <p>BERNIE: The movie star?</p> <p>BELLA: Yup.</p> <p>BERNIE: Oh God. Oh God. Oh Goddy God.</p> <p><i>The horror of his remembered conversation slowly unfolds. Honey re-enters.</i></p> <p>HONEY: I don't believe it. I walked into the loo with her. I was still talking when she started unbuttoning her jeans... She had to ask me to leave.</p> <p>INT. MAX AND BELLA'S CONSERVATORY —NIGHT</p> <p><i>A little later. They are sat at dinner.</i></p>	<p>MAX: Right, I think we're ready.</p> <p>HONEY: Oooh!</p> <p>BELLA: Okay!</p> <p>ANNA: Bella, can you tell me where I can find—</p> <p>BELLA: Oh, sorry. Yeah, yeah. It's down the corridor on the right.</p> <p>HONEY: I'll show you. I'll show you.</p> <p>BELLA: Quickly, quickly, quickly, talk very, very quickly. What are you doing here with Anna Scott?</p> <p>BERNIE: Anna Scott?</p> <p>BELLA: Yes!</p> <p>MAX: Shh!</p> <p>BELLA: Shut up!</p> <p>BERNIE: What, the film star?</p> <p>BELLA: Shh!</p> <p>BERNIE: Oh God.</p> <p>WILLIAM: What?</p> <p>BERNIE: Oh, oh God. Oh, Goddy God.</p> <p>WILLIAM: What did you say to her?</p> <p>HONEY: I don't believe it. I don't believe it. I actually walked into the loo with her. I was still chatting when she started unbuttoning her jeans. She had to ask me to leave.</p> <p>BERNIE: Oh God. So you knew who she was?</p> <p>HONEY: Of course I did, but he didn't, he didn't!</p> <p>BERNIE: Well, I did, but not instantly, but I-I-I got away with it.</p> <p><i>(laughs, overlapping utterances)</i></p>

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FIGURE 5

At this point, having gone some way to proving the hypothesis that film language lacks some of the spontaneity of genuine spoken dialogue, but having also observed that film actors are responsible for making written scripts more realistic, what lessons can be learned by the screen translator, and by the dubber or subtitler?

Returning to the question posed earlier, should subtitles, for example, which are written, follow the canons of written script or go with the transcript and add interpersonal elements? Should the translation merely provide ideational input to keep the viewer informed of the plot, or should it try to emulate real talk, perhaps unsettling the audience in the process by interfering with expectations regarding written text? At the risk of seeming to search for the easy compromise, it will be suggested here that the translator should heed the actors' attempts to create realistic dialogue, but clearly within the time and space constraints imposed by the subtitling process. Fig. 6 shows a suggested succession of subtitles in Italian for the 'birthday party' scene which include attempts to recreate the hesitation, repetition and invention (Oh Goddy God!) of the original transcript.

- Bene, è pronto.
- Bella, mi diresti dov'è...
- Oh, sì, scusa... è in fondo a destra
- Ti ci porto io, ti ci porto io
- Su, su, dai... racconta, svelto
- Che ci fai qui con Anna Scott?
- Anna Scott!
- Zitto!
- Ma chi, l'attrice?
- Oddio
- Che c'è?
- Oddio. Oddio. Oddiddio!
- Cosa le hai detto?
- Niente
- Non ci credo
- Sono entrata in bagno anch'io
- Ero lì che chiacchieravo
- Quando si è sbottonata i jeans
- Mi ha dovuto chiedere di uscire
- Oddio
- Allora tu, tu sapevi chi era?
- Certo che lo sapevo, ma lui no, lui no
- Beh sì, magari non da subito
- Co-comunque. Mi è andata liscio.

FIGURE 6

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be claimed that the use of corpora, both already existing major databanks such as the Bank of English and custom-built corpora such as the fifty

contemporary film scripts, can be instrumental in proving intuitive hypotheses about the use of language. For the purposes of this paper, the statistics derived from a comparison of film texts with genuine spoken language were eloquent in pointing out the specificity of screen discourse. However, statistics relating to one film, *Notting Hill*, were also instructive in tempering the original findings. It was discovered that a substantial change can be observed in the use of language between the writing of the original script and the acting out of that script. The second version almost invariably contains more 'spoken language' elements. This in turn has important repercussions for the film translator, especially the translator for written subtitles. While the dubber is constrained by considerations such as lip synchronisation and his/her text is then probably modified by choices made by the dubbing actors, who probably behave in much the same way as the original actors and make their own adjustments, the subtitler has to produce a new written text to add to the original. There is therefore pressure to be as brief as possible while still conveying the meaning. This would seem to favour a purely ideational approach in that interpersonal elements may add nothing to the essential storyline of the film. However the clear, even if subconscious, importance given to the interpersonal by the actors (and to a certain extent by the scriptwriters themselves, as has been shown above) would suggest that even the subtitler should pay some attention to this aspect. And thus it is hoped that the experiments conducted and the results so far obtained have made some small contribution to the aim of producing reliable guidelines for subtitlers in their attempts to create clear, well-balanced translations.

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Additional Note

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