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Slang and the "Cultural Turn" in Audio-Visual Translation: A Comparative Analysis of *La Haine* and *La Vie scolaire*

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PLAN

"Introduction – Audiovisual Translation: An overview of its potential"
"Traduire *La Haine* : Banlieue et sous-titres"
Comparing "Introduction – Audiovisual Translation" and "Traduire *La Haine*"
Dubbing and Subtitling *La Vie scolaire*
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TEXTE

1 In 2014, Julie Coleman defined "slang" as an "informal, non-technical language that [...] challenges a social or linguistic norm. It can also imply complicity in value judgements and thus play a performative role in defining personal or group identity" (COLEMAN, 2014, 7). Bearing in mind this socio-cultural value of language, this paper will focus on the translation of slang, more specifically in the field of audiovisual translation (AVT). My analysis will rely on the following set of documents: "Introduction – Audiovisual Translation: An overview of its potential" by Jorge Diaz-Cintas (2009), "Traduire *La Haine*: Banlieues et sous-titrages" by Pierre-Alexis Mevel (2008), and the 2019 film *La Vie scolaire* directed by Mehdi Idir and Grand Corps Malade. The first document, which serves as the introduction to the collected volume *New Trends in Audiovisual Translation*, will allow me to shed light on the main characteristics of AVT, as well as its specific challenges. The 2008 article by Mevel, which draws attention to the subtitling of the movie *La Haine*, is particularly relevant as it illustrates the "cultural turn" mentioned in Diaz-Cintas's introduction, and emphasizes the complexity of translating slang in AVT. Finally, I selected *La Vie scolaire* as my case study since it will enable me to compare the strategies used in translating *La Haine* with those used in this more recent film.

"Introduction – Audiovisual Translation: An overview of its potential"

2 As its title suggests, "Introduction – Audiovisual Translation: An overview of its potential" offers an overview of the field of AVT in 2009. It is divided into four sections: "A Bit of History", "Audiovisual Translation Modes", "The Potential and Pitfalls of AVT", and "About the Content of this Book". I will focus on the last three sections, as the first is not relevant for this study.

3 In the second part of his introduction, Diaz-Cintas distinguishes between the two main modes of AVT: "oral output" and "written output" (4). He then specifies that "oral output" can be either "dubbing" or "voiceover", and that "written output" refers, of course, to "subtitles" (*ibid.*). Diaz-Cintas also emphasizes one of the main difficulties of AVT which is the translation of "fast paced dialogue exchanges among characters, the use of unknown dialectical and sociolectal variations" (*ibid.*) which is something we will come back to when contrasting this text with Mevel's article.

4 The third section is the most interesting for the scope of this paper as it focuses on AVT's "cultural turn" (8). Indeed, Diaz-Cintas states that "topics of research [...] are [...] departing from the technical and linguistic approaches to encompass the sociocultural dimension of AVT" (*ibid.*). Particularly useful for our analysis, the author mentions the "slippery" role of the translator when confronted with "the translation of identities and stereotypes" that might be extremely difficult to transfer to the target language (p8-9). In addition to that, the article points out one of the specificities of AVT which is the acute need of coherence between what is seen or heard on the screen and what is translated (9).

5 In this last section of his introduction, Diaz-Cintas offers an overview of the content of the book. The tendencies in AVT he mentions in relation to the translation of language varieties as "a 'neutral', uniform written standard" in dubbing (17), as well as to the "ton[ing] down" or even "eliminat[ing of] [...] strong language and nonstandard forms" in

subtitling (18) will be of particular interest when it comes to analyzing the choices made in *La Vie scolaire*.

"Traduire *La Haine* : Banlieue et sous-titres"

6 "Traduire *La Haine* : Banlieue et sous-titres" uses the 1995 subtitles of *La Haine* as a case study in order to analyze how the language practices of young people living in *banlieues* are dealt with in AVT. The first section of the article, "Les banlieues - Langue et culture", provides a background for French "banlieues", the specific language practices of these "banlieues" and their representation in the film industry, while the second offers a detailed analysis of the subtitling in the movie *La Haine*.

7 Mevel presents in his article the specific difficulties encountered when subtitling: the constraints of time and space (173) which often lead to a sort of loss, notably the suppression of "gap fillers" (174), as well as the necessity for coherence between the image on the screen and the subtitles (175). Moreover, Mevel explains that the 1995 subtitles of *La Haine* contained AAVE characteristics (175). He also highlights that the swearing is reduced both in quantity and in intensity (175).

8 Mevel concludes his article with a reflection on the consequences of the choices made in the subtitles– especially in terms of the use of AAVE. He argues that this leads to an acute form of displacement of the plot and the characters' identity, since all cultural elements of the film are transposed (177).

Comparing "Introduction – Audiovisual Translation" and "Traduire *La Haine*"

9 To begin with, Diaz-Cintas' and Mevel's articles were published approximately at the same time. Thus, it comes to no surprise to encounter numerous similarities between the two. Indeed, the article "Traduire *La Haine*" seems to illustrate the "cultural turn" of AVT,

outlined by Diaz-Cintas in his introduction. The following quotation: "This task of the translator is particularly slippery when dealing with the translation of identities and stereotypes since there is always the risk of the target language not rendering precisely the locations and dislocations of identity that are present [...] in the source language" (DIAZ-CINTAS, 2009, 8-9) is clearly at the heart of the article "Traduire *La Haine*". Indeed, the notion of identity and translating identity is crucial in the article, as evidenced by Mevel who quotes Armstrong and Jamin: "It has of course been shown in many linguistic studies that the development of many vernacular features is at its highest in adolescent years and that the vernacular reinforces in-group membership and identity. (Armstrong & Jamin, 2002 : 123)" (168).

10 Moreover, the two documents emphasize the tendency of AVT to standardize language. Indeed, this is established in Diaz-Cintas' introduction when he states that "strong language and nonstandard forms tend to be eliminated or, at least, toned town in subtitling" (18), as well by Mevel who points out the reduction of gap fillers (174) and of insults (175).

11 In addition, the time and spatial constraints stressed by Mevel (173) echo the "technical issues" mentioned by Diaz-Cintas in his introduction (8). Another "technical issue" is identified in "Traduire *La Haine*": the inadequacy between the "short bursts" and the fast speech rate of the protagonists (Mevel, 173). Thus, the two documents put forward the technical constraints of AVT.

12 Both authors assert the need for coherence in AVT – as established in Diaz-Cintas' introduction, "AVT is always constrained by the presence of the original production, which lives on semiotically through images (and sound) in the adoptive culture" (DIAZ-CINTAS, 2009, 9), and by Mevel where he writes that there should be a form of coherence between the images of the films and the subtitles (MEVEL, 2008, 75). However, in the article "Traduire *La Haine*," as Mevel analyzes, the strategy of domestication used in the 1995 subtitling of *La Haine* seems to question this notion of coherence. Indeed, the use of a standardized language along with the presence of AAVE which participate in a form of domestication, appear to be in profound contra-

diction with the audio-visual cultural references such as the police uniforms and the songs by Edith Piaf and NTM (MEVEL, 2008, 179).

13 Additionally, the use of standardized language and of AAVE fails to render "the locations and dislocations of identity" (DIAZ-CINTAS, 2009, 9) of the characters since it completely erases their vernacular language which is central to their "in-group membership and identity" (ARMSTRONG & JAMIN, 2002, 123). Moreover, the choice of AAVE is particularly intriguing as it fails to take into account the multiethnic background of the main protagonists of the film, as Mevel points out. This particularly resonates with Venuti's definition of domestication strategies as "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values" (VENUTI, 1995, 20). This leads me to contrast the strategy of domestication in the 1995 subtitling of *La Haine* to the strategy used for the subtitling and dubbing in the movie *La Vie scolaire*.

Dubbing and Subtitling *La Vie scolaire*

14 *La Vie scolaire* is a French film directed by Mehdi Idir and Grand Corps Malade and released in 2019. It encountered widespread success and was nominated for the *Cesar Award for Most Promising Actor*. The film is set in a middle-school (*collège*) in the multiethnic suburb of Saint-Denis just outside of Paris and focuses on a young woman named Samia who has recently been hired by the school to ensure the safety and good behavior of students. This role, known as "*conseiller principal d'éducation*" (CPE), is specific to French schools, within the "*vie scolaire*" division that is responsible for all aspects of student life outside of their classes. Since it takes place in a so-called difficult area, the film also provides an insight into the life of the students, both in and outside of the school walls.

15 The language used in *La Vie scolaire* is quite similar to that used in *La Haine*, which is logical since both films take place in the Parisian *banlieues*. Both films focus on young protagonists, meaning that the main theme of Mevel's article, centring on the translation of language practices among young people in the *banlieue*s, can also be applied to our case study. In addition, the characters in *La Vie scolaire*, similarly

to the "trio of black-blanc-beur" characters in *La Haine* (MEVEL, 2008, 172), also embody the ethnic diversity of the French *banlieues*. Since translating *banlieues* films requires attention to numerous socio-cultural elements, this case study will allow me to illustrate the "cultural turn" in AVT mentioned in Diaz-Cintas's introduction. Furthermore, it will enable me to compare the "skopos" (VERMEER, 1989) of the 1995 subtitling of *La Haine* to the subtitling and dubbing of a much more recent movie, thus showing the evolution of AVT in the last decades. Finally, we will see that the subtitling and dubbing in *La Vie scolaire* seem more coherent with the audio-visual elements of the movie than it was the case in *La Haine*.

16 When subtitling and dubbing films such as *La Vie scolaire*, AVT does "depar[t] from the technical and linguistic approaches to encompass [a] sociocultural dimension" (DIAZ-CINTAS, 2009, 8). In this sense, the audio-visual translation of *La Vie scolaire* is particularly illustrative of the "cultural turn" in AVT. Two tendencies of AVT highlighted by Diaz-Cintas are partly verified in the dubbing and subtitling of *La Vie scolaire*: dubbed language varieties are generally neutralized and the subtitles try to avoid using "strong language and nonstandard forms" (DIAZ-CINTAS, 2009, 17-18). This standardization of slang is indeed rather blatant in *La Vie scolaire*[1]: "*bécane*" becomes "bike", "*taff*" becomes "job", "*teboi*" becomes "club" both in dubbed language and in the subtitles. However, "*Va te faire enculer, gros*" was translated in the subtitles as "Fuck you!" and as "Go fuck yourself, man" in the dubbing. Based on these examples, so-called strong language does not appear to be "eliminated" nor "toned down" (DIAZ-CINTAS, 2009, 18) in the dubbed or subtitled versions of *La Vie scolaire*.

17 Mevel pointed out that gap fillers tend to be suppressed in AVT, and *La Vie scolaire* is no exception. In the dubbed and subtitled versions of the film, the following gap fillers are eliminated: "*hé*", "*wesh*", "*wallah*" (in most cases), and "*bah ouais*". Deleting "*wesh*", an interjection commonly used by young people in the *banlieues* and initially borrowed from Arabic, for instance, also contributes to standardizing the language varieties of teenagers or young adults living in the Parisian *banlieues* (and beyond), as it completely flattens the language of the young characters. Interestingly, there is no trace of AAVE in the subtitles or in the dubbing of *La Vie scolaire*, contrary to the 1995 subtitling of *La Haine*. The slang used in the subtitling and dubbing of *La*

Vie scolaire such as “Nah” or “bro” for example can be said to belong to the broad category of American slang – which, we could argue, is becoming a form of international slang. “Paname”, a slang term for Paris, is translated simply as the more generic “Paris", which again contributes to a form of standardization and deemphasizes the geographical anchoring of the film. In *La Haine*, the use of AAVE, which is a form of domestication, leads to a complete displacement of the plot and the characters' identities (MEVEL, 2008, 179). In the case of *La Vie scolaire*, though the language is also standardized, the use of a broader American slang rather than AAVE renders this sense of displacement less culturally shocking, since it is not “complete”, as in *La Haine*. In fact, in *La Vie scolaire*, the term “*wallah*” is borrowed once in the subtitles, acting as a further reminder of the French setting.

18 I would argue that the “skopos” in translating *La Vie scolaire* allows more coherence between subtitles and images or songs compared to *La Haine*. Indeed, the use of AAVE in the subtitles of *La Haine* appears rather incoherent in relation to the audio-visual elements such as the French police uniforms or the French songs, while a more international form of slang in the subtitling of *La Vie scolaire* and the borrowing of “*wallah*” decrease the gap between subtitles and the audio-visual French context, therefore reducing the feeling of displacement.

Conclusion

19 To conclude, the corpus I selected enabled me to shed light on the “cultural turn” happening in AVT. The movie *La Vie scolaire*, which is strikingly similar to *La Haine* in many regards, allowed me to emphasize a shift in the strategies used in the AVT of the two films. Indeed, it became evident that the choices made in the translation of slang, and the notion of identity to which it is strongly attached, in *La Vie scolaire* lead to less disruption and displacement than in the use of AAVE in the subtitles of *La Haine*. Overall, it seems that the translation of *La Vie scolaire* intended to reduce as much as possible the displacement of identity of the characters which now seems central in AVT as it tries to “encompass the sociocultural dimension” (DIAZ-CINTAS, 2009, 8) of language.

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NOTES

1 The examples regarding the translation of orality and slang discussed here are taken from the conversation between the students Yassine and Fodé (from 1:28:03-1:27:07 on Netflix).

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