

## *Communicating across cultures through film translation*

### *Komunikacja międzykulturowa w tłumaczeniach filmowych*

Hanna Mijas

---

#### **Keywords**

culture specific references, translation, subtitling, narrative, film

#### **Słowa kluczowe**

element kulturowe, tłumaczenie, napisy filmowe, teoria narracji, film

#### **Abstract**

The present article looks at different translation strategies employed by the translator to deal with cultural elements in subtitling as well as the influence of the translator's cultural competence in dealing with such elements. The type of the applied translation strategy will always influence the perception of the source culture and identity in the foreign market, leading to "preserving local colour, perpetuating (positive or negative) stereotypes, undermining or highlighting cultural specificities and possibly even creating cross-cultural misunderstanding"<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, the strategies available to the translator have both their weaknesses and critics. They fail to account for numerous types of manipulation and subscribing to certain ideologies and narratives of domination through film translation, which seems to be particularly vulnerable to this type of practices. Most seriously, perhaps, they all focus on "surface" problems disregarding the agency of the translator, his attitudes and beliefs. Analysing a small corpus of American films translated into Polish and Spanish, we will look at how the translator's cultural awareness (regarding both source and target cultures) may contribute to forging narratives of cultural stereotypes.

---

<sup>1</sup> N. Ramière, *Reaching a foreign audience: cultural transfers in audiovisual translation*, "The Journal of Specialized Translation" 2006, no 6, p. 156.

## **Abstrakt**

Niniejszy artykuł koncentruje się strategiach tłumaczeniowych stosowanych w tłumaczeniu elementów kulturowych i ideologicznych w napisach filmowych, jak również na wpływie kompetencji kulturowej tłumacza na ich przekład. Rodzaj strategii stosowanych przez tłumacza często wpływa na postrzeganie kultury źródłowej przez odbiorców. Niestety, dostępne strategie tłumaczeniowe nie obejmują możliwych manipulacji, które są częstą praktyką w tłumaczeniach filmowych, w zamian koncentrując się na problemach językowych bez uwzględnienia pozycji tłumacza, jego postaw i przekonań. Analizując wybrane elementy kulturowe z dwóch filmów Quentina Tarantino tłumaczonych na język polski i hiszpański przyjrzymy się, jak świadomość kulturowa tłumacza (w zakresie obu kultur – źródłowej i docelowej) przyczynia się do tworzenia oraz rozpo-wszechniania kulturowych narracji a także jak same narracje kształtują zachowanie tłumacza.

### Communicating across cultures through film translation

When dealing with culture-specific elements in subtitling we find numerous studies offering a series of strategies to help the translator render culture specificities in the target language. However, they mostly focus on surface problems and disregard the agency of the translator, his/her attitudes and beliefs that must influence the way a foreign culture is translated. A deeper reflection on the reasons behind a particular rendering of culture specificities is provided by Mona Baker's narrative approach to translation. Although originally used with regards to political aspects of translation and interpreting it can be successfully applied to the treatment of culture-specific elements in subtitling.

The narrative theory<sup>2</sup> helps us understand that people's behavior is guided by the stories concerning the events in which they are located. The narrative perspective does not allow for placing the translator between the original and translation because no one, translators included, can stand outside or between narratives. Translators are always in the middle of interaction, in the narratives that shape their own lives as well as the lives of those for whom they translate. Audiovisual products have a huge impact on the shaping of people's narratives and films, which are the main focus of the present article, contribute significantly to forming narratives of ideological and cultural stereotypes. Thus, screen translators participate in very decisive ways in promoting and circulating narratives and discourses of different cultures and communities.

It can be argued that screen translators might be unaware of making an ideological move while transferring certain narratives. What is more, some may say that such a study of the handling of cultural elements is completely irrelevant as the only people who take notice of the manipulations taking place are the researcher and the academic audience. In cinema, the audience has no time to notice what is being done to them but it does not mean that apparently invisible manipulation has no impact on the reception of films by target audiences.

A plethora of strategies has been proposed by scholars to deal with cultural elements in translation and to compensate for the lack of cultural equiva-

<sup>2</sup> M. Baker, *Translation and Conflict. A Narrative Account*, London and New York 2006.

lence<sup>3</sup>. Kwieciński<sup>4</sup> offers a consolidated taxonomy of the procedures dividing them into four groups: exoticising procedures, rich explicatory procedures, recognized exoticisation and assimilative procedures. These strategies are commonly used in the context of textual material. A systematic examination of the way the strategies are used for the translation of culture specific references in the context of film was carried out by Nedergaard-Larsen<sup>5</sup> and more recently by Ramière<sup>6</sup> and Pedersen<sup>7</sup>. Both Ramière and Pedersen draw on the work of Venuti<sup>8</sup> and arrange the strategies, which comprise retention, direct translation, explicitation, generalization, cultural substitution and omission, on the scale ranging from the most foreignizing to the most domesticating ones. However, we believe they do not cover all the aspects deserving consideration in the study of subtitling. As, to a large extent, subtitling involves the rendering of “cultural data”<sup>9</sup> and reflects cultural inequalities present in encounters between different cultures, there is more to this type of translation than technical and linguistic concerns.

In what follows, we will look beyond linguistic transfer and analyse in greater detail some choices made by the Polish and Spanish translators in the process of cultural transfer in order to point to “the need to understand and acknowledge one’s cultural predispositions and biases” as well as “a translator’s engagement with the culture of the self as well as the cultures of others”<sup>10</sup>.

The culture specific elements analyzed in the present article come from two films directed by Quentin Tarantino: *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Grindhouse: Death Proof* (2007).

<sup>3</sup> The scholars who focused their research on cultural references in translation include, among other, Vinay and Darbelnet (1958/1995), Hervey and Higgins (1992), Aixelá (1996), Mailhac (1996), Gottlieb (1997), González Davies and Scott-Tennent (2005).

<sup>4</sup> P. Kwieciński, *Disturbing Strangeness. Foreignization and Domestication in Translation Procedures in the Context of Cultural Asymmetry*, Toruń 2001, pp. 157-164.

<sup>5</sup> B. Nedergaard-Larsen, *Culture-bound problems in subtitling*, “Perspectives: Studies in Translatology” 1993, no. 2, pp. 207-242.

<sup>6</sup> N. Ramière, *Reaching a foreign audience: cultural transfers in audiovisual translation*, “The Journal of Specialized Translation” 2006, no 6.

<sup>7</sup> J. Pedersen, *How is Culture Rendered in Subtitles?*, “Proceedings of the Marie Curie Euro-conferences MuTra “Challenges of Multidimensional Translation” – Saarbrücken 2-6 May 2005” 2007.

<sup>8</sup> L. Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*, London 1995.

<sup>9</sup> D. Delabastita, *Translation and the Mass Media*, [in] *Translation, History and Culture*, eds. S. Bassnett and A. Lefevre, London/New York 1990, pp 97-109.

<sup>10</sup> M. Tymoczko, *Enlarging translation, Empowering Translators*, Manchester 2007, p. 254.

Quentin Tarantino's films have been characterized in contrastive ways. On the one hand, he is perceived as one of the greatest filmmakers paying tribute to his idols (including Scorsese or De Palma). On the other, he is seen as a plagiarist, whose films are childish and frequently offensive. Whatever is thought of this director, it cannot be denied that the essence of his movies can only be analysed through the prism of popular culture. The assumption might be risked that what he tries to communicate in the majority of his films is connected the ways in which people interact with the world through culture that influences them. As a director "from Generation X... he had his world view shaped by the VCR and cinematic media"<sup>11</sup>. In other words, he was shaped by his particular narrative location and in a similar way he constructs the characters in his films. "His films are about people who have learned how to act from TV, who have grown up in a culture that surrounds them with images, with narratives, with readymade characters whose behaviours and attitudes they can absorb into their own lives"<sup>12</sup>.

This approach is evident in *Reservoir Dogs*. The main characters are strong, tough guys, just like the characters from some gangster films, because, according to Tarantino, by watching such films they learned how to behave as criminals. In one scene, after the two main characters, Mr. Blonde and Mr. White, have an argument, Mr. Blonde concludes:

MR. BLONDE: I bet you are a big Lee Marvin fan, aren't you?	MR. BLONDE: Apuesto a que eres un gran admirador de Lee Marvin, ¿no ?	MR. BLONDE: I bet you are a great admirer of Lee Marvin, no? (back translation)	MR. BLONDE: Musisz być fanem Lee Marvina.	MR. BLONDE: You must be a great fan of Lee Marvin. (back translation)
--	--	--	--	--

Judging from the way the other man acts, speaks and behaves it becomes apparent to Mr. Blonde that Mr. White likes Marvin's films. They both like them and they both have adapted their behaviour from the same source. The scene gives us an insight into what Tarantino wants to communicate. He is of the belief that people today are defined by popular culture and consciously or unconsciously they construct their identities from the elements of the culture they have been exposed to. To some extent, the above scene, and indeed the whole film, is about role-playing and identity. The characters are not showing their own selves as they have been deprived of their individuality which is now hidden behind identical black suits they wear and names they were given by their boss.

<sup>11</sup> J. Bellamy, *The Conversations with Quentin Tarantino. Part 1*, [in:] <http://www.slantmagazine.com/house/2009/08/the-conversations-quentin-tarantino-part-1/> (accessed on 15.01.2012)

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 1

Another scene from *Reservoir Dogs* which focuses on the same issue is when Joe Cabot, the boss, in a conversation with Mr. Pink refers to another man as “dead as Dillinger”.

MR. PINK: Mr. Blue is dead? JOE: Dead as Dillinger.	MR. PINK: ¿El Sr. Azul está muerto? JOE: Muerto como Dillinger.	MR. PINK: Is Mr. Blue dead? JOE: Dead as Dillinger. (back translation)	MR. PINK: Blue nie żyje? JOE: Kompletnie.	MR. PINK: Mr. Blue is dead? JOE: Completely. (back translation)
--	--	--	--	---

The reference to the film character, John Dillinger, is not a simple reference. In this film it is made by Lawrence Tierney, who once played this famous bank robber in the film entitled *Dillinger* (1945). The reason why Tarantino made this reference is that the main characters in the film must have been influenced by the media image of Dillinger as well as by Tierney's performance as the famous outlaw. Tierney appears in the film not only because Tarantino might admire him but primarily to form a link to cinematic touchstones which create bad men like the Dogs.

A similar message is conveyed in the opening scene of the film. It starts with a discussion between men who talk about the songs they like and the radio stations they listen to. It is only after the scene is over, however, that we discover that they are gangsters meeting before a jewellery store robbery.

MR. PINK: „Like a Virgin” is not about some sensitive girl who meets a nice fella. That's what “True Blue” is about.	MR. PINK: “Como una Virgen” no es sobre una joven sensible que conoce a un buen hombre. De eso se trata «Azul Verdadero».	MR. PINK: „Like a Virgin” is not about a sensitive girl who meets a nice man. “True Blue” talks about it. (back translation)	MR. PINK: Piosenka o wrażliwej paninie, która szuka miłego chłopca? O tym jest „True Blue”	MR. PINK: The song about a sensitive girl looking for a nice boy? That's what “True Blue” is about.  (back translation)
--	---	---	--	---

MR. BLUE: I used to like Her early stuff – Borderline – when she got into that “Papa Don't Preach” phase I turned out.	MR. BLUE: Me gustabas sus primeras canciones: “En el Límite» pero cuando entré en esa fase de « Papá, No Sermones », me desconecte.	MR. BLUE: I liked her first songs, « Borderline», but when she entered into this stage of “Papa Don't Preach” I turned off. (back translation)	MR. BLUE: Lubilem jej wczesne numery. Po „Papa Don't Preach” już nie.	MR. BLUE: I liked her early songs. After „Papa Don't Preach” I don't any more.  (back translation)
--	---	---	---	--

On the surface, it might be thought that Tarantino used the references to popular culture in this dialogue because the audience would find it amusing for hardened criminals to talk about Madonna's song "Like a Virgin". However, this dialogue presents their world which is a mixture of popular culture quotations and various stereotypes through which they try to define themselves and through which they communicate with others.

Tarantino's numerous references to popular culture may lead some to believe that he knows everything about pop culture but nothing about real life. This criticism ignores the fact that for an increasingly large number of people today to talk about popular culture *is* to talk about life. In the West, where we are constantly being shaped by the media and people become more and more defined by the culture they consume. Belonging to a certain generation means growing up watching certain cartoons and films as well as listening to certain pop music and these things become not only touchstones in one's life but also markers of one's identity. We feel that someone is like us if they talk about the music we know, the films we watch or the TV shows we enjoy. Tarantino's obsession with popular culture is not just a way of boasting about his own encyclopaedic popular culture knowledge. It is a way of grounding his characters in a society where these things are of importance, where what people watch and what they listen to in some way defines who they are. If they listen to K-Billy's "Super Sounds of the Seventies" (*Reservoir Dogs*) that locates them as a certain kind of person with certain taste. It says something about them. This is Tarantino's major point, namely that popular culture *matters*, it is not meaningless, it is not empty, it is increasingly a big part of our lives which we should acknowledge and engage with. In this light, Tarantino's films are not disconnected from reality. They are all about reality, because reality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has increasingly imitated art, rather than the other way around.

As the majority of films are produced for audiences within the same culture, most cultural elements are easily shared by the director (author) and the audience who is familiar with the underpinnings of the subject matter. However, Polish and Spanish audiences for which the subtitled versions are produced are outside the cultural context from which the original films emerge. How is this situation handled by the translators? Unlike in literary works, they cannot provide explanations of the cultural material in order to compensate for possible cultural ignorance and difference due to temporal and spatial constraints of this audiovisual translation mode. In the above examples, two major strategies are applied to deal with gaps in cultural assumptions separating the director and the audience: culture-specific references are either transposed with no explanation, taking the position that the audience

should be able to understand the material on the basis of general knowledge, or they are omitted.

In the first and third examples presented above references to Lee Marvin and Madonna's songs have been retained in both Polish and Spanish subtitles. We might argue that adopting this most foreignizing strategy does not help audiences in comprehending the implied meaning as the references in question are not easily identifiable for the target audiences. In Poland, the audience might find it hard to make necessary links to Lee Marvin and to understand the Tarantino's message.

Another problem with this strategy seems to be that frequently audience's general knowledge is insufficient. "Colonized populations are often in this position, needing to acquire enough education about the colonizer's culture to understand "metropolitan" texts"<sup>13</sup>. In this regard, Quentin Tarantino's films share some similarities with colonial writings "marking off an impassable distance between the reader (*viewer*) and the text (*film*) raising questions of access or welcome"<sup>14</sup>. Retaining cultural references and failing to adapt the films to the needs of the target audiences make power relations conspicuous where "it is left for those with less power to learn dominant standards regarding what "legitimately" constitutes adequate cultural knowledge and cultural literacy"<sup>15</sup>. Attitudes among scholars towards this type of transfer vary<sup>16</sup>. Some perceive it as the strategy of making the target text more attractive whereas others stress the danger of strengthening negative stereotypes by means of exoticizing. At the same time retention is the most common strategy for subtitling culture specific elements<sup>17</sup>.

Where it is impossible for the audience to make necessary references about meaning, the translator omits culture-specific references. Such is the case of translating the second example into Polish, where the reference to Dillinger was eluded not only because the referent is unknown to the Polish audience but also as an attempt to avoid confusion on the part of the audience. The character of the famous American bank robber referred to in this scene was not made popular in Poland by Lawrence Tierney starring in the

<sup>13</sup> M. Tymoczko, *Enlarging translation, Empowering Translators*, Manchester 2007, p. 229.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 230.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 230.

<sup>16</sup> D. Katan, *Translation as Intercultural Communication*, in *The Routledge Companion to Translation Studies*, ed. J. Munday, London 2009, p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> J. Pedersen, *How is Culture Rendered in Subtitles?*, "Proceedings of the Marie Curie Euro-conferences MuTra "Challenges of Multidimensional Translation" – Saarbrücken 2-6 May 2005" 2007, p. 4.



film *Dillinger* (1945) but by Johnny Depp playing the same character in the film entitled *Public Enemies* (2009).

Omission, however, is not an “innocent” strategy. We might risk the statement that by omitting cultural elements the translator changes the shape of the film. In the above case, shifting a cultural concern from the foreground to the background and consequently paying less attention to the culture-specific reference than in the original, alters the subject matter of the film and creates a product that is less didactic than the source. In our example, the Polish translator applied the strategy of omission in order to suppress a particular aspect of a narrative encoded in the original scene. As alluded to previously, Tierney does not appear in this scene only because Tarantino admires him but primarily because other characters of the film have been molded by the media image of Dillinger and by Tierney’s performance as the famous outlaw. By suppressing this cultural material, the Polish translator fails to reinforce the narrative of roughness and fearlessness elaborated by the charismatic, professional gangster.

Another example of translating culture specific elements makes use of labels in order to pinpoint or identify a key element or participant in a narrative. It features in the translation of a culture-specific reference in a conversation between Nice Guy Eddie and the gangsters, which takes place in a warehouse after the unsuccessful robbery.

NICE GUY EDDIE: You fucking idiot – turned a jew- ellery store into a Wild West show.	NICE GUY EDDIE: ¡Tú jodido idiota! Convertiste la joyería en un espectáculo del oeste...	NICE GUY EDDIE: You fucking idiot. You turned the jewellery store into a West show... (back transla- tion)	NICE GUY EDDIE: Idioci, zrobiliście rzeź.	NICE GUY EDDIE: Idiots, you committed carnage.  (back transla- tion)
---	--	--	---	--

In the Spanish subtitles, the reference to a Wild West show was translated directly as “espectáculo del oeste” whereas in the Polish version, the translator used a different label than the original one, namely that of “carnage”. The decision made in the Spanish subtitles to simply retain the reference without any comment means participating in uncritical circulation of the source narrative. However, in this case the translator does not seem to write from a different narrative location than that of the film’s director as the associations with Wild West show held by American and Spanish audiences seem to be similar, embracing elements such as characteristic battle and western scenes expressing the thrill and danger of the west.

At the same time, the Polish translator framed the culture-specific reference by using the narrative embedded in the larger source narrative, by selecting one feature of a Wild West show. In the context of the entire film, such a solution is successful as it strengthens one of the most important features of *Reservoir Dogs*, namely the narrative of violence. What is more, in this way the translator signals his position in relation to the source narrative, making his associations conspicuous.

However, not all instances of applying the technique of framing by labelling are successful. Let us look at one example of the translation of a culture-specific reference taken from *Death Proof*.

ZOË: To me there is no point in being in America unless you're gonna drive a Detroit muscle car. And I want to drive a Dodge Challenger.	ZOË: Para mí no tiene sentido estar en Estados Unidos si no vas a manejar un deportivo de Detroit. Quiero manejar un Dodge Challenger.	ZOË: For me, there is no sense in being in the USA unless you drive a Detroit sports car. I want to drive a Dodge Challenger.	ZOË: Nie ma sensu być w Ameryce i nie pojeździć miejscowym wozem. Chcę poprowadzić Dodge Challengeera.	ZOË: There is no point in being in America unless you drive a local car. I want to drive a Dodge Challenger.
		(back translation)		(back translation)

In the conversation with other girls, Zoë makes an important reference to a Detroit muscle car, which is translated in Spanish as “deportivo de Detroit” (a sports utility vehicle) and as “miejscowy wóz” (a local car) in Polish. The original reference used in the film becomes a significant symbol of the road and freedom. Tarantino’s road is “a way to move quickly, as quickly as possible, and to forget. It is a way to traverse the referential desert of simulated and anonymous Tennessee (a bucolic landscape harking back to the car chases of *Dirty Mary*, *Crazy Larry*) or the semi-rural road networks surrounding Austin (...) Tarantino’s stunt persons Kim and Zoë find America in the road, in the uninhibited circulation of driving, in the unqualified freedom and freeways. This is a freedom to traverse as much space as one wishes at the moment of one’s choosing”<sup>18</sup>. The translation of the symbol into both languages points to the fact that the translators write from a very different narrative location. The reference used in the source text is alien to them and to the target audiences. “The only truly profound pleasure these days is that of keeping on the move. Tarantino takes this pleasure one step further as he presents the audience with the mythology of the all-powerful Detroit muscle car. With these powerful machines, Tarantino gives Kim and Zoë the practi-

<sup>18</sup> Anderson, 2007, p.18

cally unlimited speed and power of the 1970 *Vanishing Point Challenger*<sup>19</sup>. This important message of the film is suppressed in the translations by the seemingly subtle changes made in order to create the reframed narrative.

The problem with the translation of all culture-specific references is that it is impossible to develop one professional strategy or approach for the translators to use. The key thing, however, is the realization that the translator is never in a neutral position and even the seemingly insignificant changes might impact the interpretation of a given narrative to a large extent.

The analysis of the culture-specific material from the perspective of narratives might be successful in explaining how the treatment of culture-specific references affects the way the source culture is represented and to what extent the representation of the Other is influenced by the narrative location of the translator. An interesting observation is that in the examples under discussion the presentation of American culture has not been shifted to take into account the prospective Polish and Spanish audiences thus leading to translated versions which become marked, perhaps overly erudite, hermetic or even arrogant.

The above analysis has shown the treatment of selected culture-specific terms in subtitling the two films of Quentin Tarantino into Polish and Spanish. Their referents fall mostly under the category of popular culture, which is directly linked to the nature of Tarantino's productions as well as his style. Generally, the Polish translator tends to omit the culture-specific terms or assimilate them into the Polish cultural and linguistic environment. On the other hand, the opposite tendency is observed in the Spanish subtitles, which focus on retaining the original cultural and linguistic values. To use Venuti's terms<sup>20</sup>, the translated versions of the original ST seems to become either a transparent translation which "mirrors the author, (...) values the foreign text as the original, authentic, true and devalues the translated text as derivative, simulacral, false, forcing on translation the project of effacing its second-order status with a fluent procedure"<sup>21</sup> or the one which is "based on an aesthetic discontinuity, it can best preserve the difference, that otherness, by reminding the reader of the gains and losses in the translation process and the unbridgeable gaps between cultures"<sup>22</sup>.

Finally, one may question the purpose of such research asking who may need such an analysis. One can try to impair its credibility and scientific character but one cannot be indifferent to various errors and manipulations

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> L. Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, London 1995, pp. 26-36.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, pp. 26-27.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 36.

in subtitling. There are many sources of such manipulations, like ignorance, vanity, self-indulgence, a wish to change one's image or to promote competing narratives, which all may lead to confusion in the mind of an immature viewer who is not alert enough. Of course, we might fear that it will never be possible to avoid such manipulations or that we can avoid them only to an approximate measure. "But this approximation can be greater or lesser; to an infinite degree, and the efforts at execution are not limited, for there always exists the possibility of bettering, refining, perfecting: "progress" in short"<sup>23</sup>.

---

<sup>23</sup> J. Ortega-y-Gasset, *The Mystery and Splendor of Translation*, [in] *The Translation Studies Reader* ed. L. Venuti, London and New York 2003, p. 53.