

Ain Shams University

Faculty of Al-Asun

Department of English

Intercultural and Intersemiotic Film Translation:

A Study of the Role of the Translator as Semiotician in

Two Multi-modal Film Texts, Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) & Aaron
Sorkin's *A Few Good Men* (1992)

A PhD thesis Submitted by

Abeer M. Al-Anwar

Under the Supervision of:

Dr. Karma Sami

Professor of English Literature
Vice Dean for Postgraduate Affairs and Research
Faculty of Al Asun
Ain Shams University

Dr. Ahmad Seddeeq Al-Wahy

Assistant Professor in Linguistics

Faculty of Al Asun

2010

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	I
ABBREVIATIONS.....	II
ABSTRACT.....	III
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE – PROLEGOMENA TO A THEORY OF INTERSEMIOTIC AND INTERCULTURAL FILM TRANSLATION.....	5
1.1 Cinema Babel: The Complexity of the Filmic Sign System.....	5
1.2 Intersemiotic Film Translation: The Film Translator as Semiotician.....	10
1.3 Film Text(s) and the Concept of Multimodality.....	15
1.4 Translating the Image: The Role of the Semiotician Translator.....	20
1.4.1 Semiotic Cohesion.....	20
1.4.2 Non-Verbal Communication in Film Translation.....	24
1.4.3 The Cinematographic Language: Implications for the Semiotician Translator.....	27
1.5 Translation, Film, Foreignness.....	29
1.5.1 The Defamiliarizing Effect of Subtitles.....	37
1.6 The Semiotics of Film Dialogue.....	45
1.6.1 Linguistic Features.....	45
1.6.2 The Functions of Film Dialogue.....	49

CHAPTER TWO – OLIVER STONE’S <i>JFK</i> : AN INTERSEMIOTIC AND INTERCULTURAL TRANSLATION OF THE FILM.....	59
2.1 Introduction.....	59
2.2 Synchronization in Subtitling.....	60
2.3 Oliver Stone’s <i>JFK</i> : An Intersemiotic Translation.....	62
2.3.1 Filmic Modes in Operation: The Role of the Semiotician Translator.....	63
2.3.2 The Distribution and Integration of Modes in Subtitling: An Intersemiotic Process.....	79
2.4 Identity and the Multi-Semiotic Transfer in <i>JFK</i>	98
2.4.1 The Auditory Semiotic Channel: Diegetic/Non-Diegetic Sounds.....	100
2.4.2 The Visual Semiotic Channel.....	107
2.4.3 The Invisibility of the Visual Channel in Film Translation.....	113
2.4.4 Thick Translation and Cinema: An Example from <i>JFK</i>	116
2.4.5 Rethinking the “Visual” in the Audiovisual Translation Through New Technologies.....	120
CHAPTER THREE – <i>A FEW GOOD MEN</i> : LOST IN TRANSLATION.....	128
3.1 Introduction.....	128
3.2 Sample Source and Target Texts Analysis.....	132

3.2.1 Field.....	132
3.2.2 Tenor.....	140
3.2.3 Mode.....	164
3.2.4 Ideational and Interpersonal Functional Components.....	171
3.2.5 Source and Target Texts: Differences in Textual Functions.....	175
CONCLUSION.....	178
GLOSSARY OF TERMS.....	182
WORKS CITED.....	188

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would not have existed without the intellectual and emotional support of individuals to whom I owe a debt of gratitude. I am especially grateful to Dr. Karma Sami and Dr. Ahmad Siddiq, who generously supervised this research and whose insightful comments enriched this work. It was an honor to work with them and learn from their academic expertise. I am especially indebted to Dr. Karma whose contributions in the field of cinema criticism inspired this work.

Also, I have to extend my gratitude to Professors Chaume Varela, Christopher Taylor and Jorge Diaz Cintas for their constant support and interest in my research.

I couldn't have written this research, had several people not helped me generously and consistently. Mohamed, my dear husband, has been incredibly helpful throughout the time of writing my research. His patience, generosity and support are above what words can describe. My thanks go to Batool Samir, my dear friend, for her constant support and encouragement.

Last but not least, my special thanks are due to my family for their incredible support and help. I hope I made you all proud.

ABBREVIATIONS

ST: Source Text

TT: Target Text

SFL: Systemic Functional Linguistics

TTL: Target Text Language

STL: Source Text Language

SC: Source Culture

TC: Target Culture

ABSTRACT

Al-Anwar, Abeer Mohammad. Intercultural and Intersemiotic Film Translation. A Study of the Role of the Translator as Semiotician in Two Multi-modal Film Texts, Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) and Aaron Sorkin's *A Few Good Men* (1992). A PhD Thesis. Faculty of Al-Asun, Ain Shams University.

This thesis investigates film translation from a multimodal perspective in two American films namely, Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) and Aaron Sorkin's *A Few Good Men* (1992). Approaching film translation from a multimodal perspective is an attempt to consider this type of translation as intersemiotic and film text as polysemiotic. This suggests that film texts are complex semiotic units and that subtitling involves more than the spoken mode. The present thesis attempts to investigate the role of the translator in responding to the exigencies of intercultural and intersemiotic film translation. It negotiates the role of the translator and the processes involved in the transmission of a film text from one culture to another as well as its transformation from one sign system to another.

INTRODUCTION

Film is complex system of signification and its meanings are the product of the combination of these systems (Turner, “Film Language” 134). Sounds, vocal intonation, visual signs, gestures, postures, and film technique combine to create a message for the viewer to interpret. Chaume Varela captures the hybrid nature of audiovisual texts:

An audiovisual text is a semiotic construct comprising several signifying codes that operate simultaneously in the production of meaning. A film is composed of a series of codified signs, articulated in accordance with syntactic rules. Its typology, the way it is organized and the meaning of all its elements results in a semantic structure that the spectator deconstructs in order to understand the meaning of the text. (“Film Studies and Translation Studies” 5)

Given that film translation involves a multiplicity of semiotic modes, the translator takes into account the various ways in which a number of distinct semiotic systems are co-deployed in the creation of a polysemiotic text. The linguistic code thus cannot be accorded priority over the other semiotic resources involved in the creation of meaning; which is the “result of the multiplication, rather than the addition, of the variety of ways in which different classes of phenomena - words, actions, objects, visual images, and sounds – are related to each other” (Taylor, “The Translation of Film Dialogue” 9).

In the present study, two American film texts and their translations into Arabic will be investigated with a special focus on the role of the translator as s/he

responds to the exigencies of intercultural and intersemiotic film translation. The two movies selected for the analysis are: Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) and Aaron Sorkin's *A Few Good Men* (1992). *JFK* is an American film which tells the history surrounding President John F. Kennedy's assassination. The screenplay for the movie was written and adapted for the screen by Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar from the books *On the Trail of the Assassins* by Jim Garrison and *Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy* by Jim Marrs. *A Few Good Men*, written by Aaron Sorkin, was originally a play and subsequently a 1992 film drama that tells the story of military lawyers at a court-martial who encounter a high-level conspiracy in the course of defending their clients, United States Marines accused of murder.

The emphasis of the investigation in the present thesis is upon the role of the translator as a semiotician, (1) whose semiotic analysis of films as a narrative of verbally and visually encoded text(s) is evidenced in subtitles that are anchored in the meaning already provided by other semiotic modalities; (2) whose 'reading' of film sequences in a culturally and ideologically determined manner influences the transfer of identity into the target culture; and (3) whose role in the intersemiotic transfer from the oral code in language A to the written code in language B impacts the textual function of the filmic text and, consequently, affects the message. Apart from being a matter of linguistic equivalence, this thesis shows how the effectiveness of subtitles is crucially dependent upon the hidden semiotic relations between text and image; that is, relations which affect the meaning of the visual-linguistic message and the way in which that message is ultimately received.

The two movies are selected to highlight the multi-faceted role of the film translator: In addition to the usual challenges of subtitling, *JFK* presents many potential problems in its constant break with all the established cinematic conventions. Characterized by experimentation and improvisation, *JFK* makes use

of countless popular visual cultural references, extradiegetic sounds and images, and quick succession of cuts and rapid movements of the camera. These create specific challenges for the film translator. The non-verbal and semiotic dimensions of the image have an important function in *JFK* and the image is privileged over narrative; which leaves the translator with a multiplicity of semiotic channels to consider in the process of meaning-making. In addition, culture-specific references and ‘culturally-loaded’ visual images pose serious translational hurdles for the translator. *A Few Good Men* follows a script and language is Aaron Sorkin’s primary concern. In such a film thick with dialogue, the translator’s efforts at preserving word-image coherence, given space and time constraints in the film medium, become all the more obvious. A study of the translator’s role in producing the Arabic-subtitled version of *A Few Good Men* underscores the translational shifts affected in the transfer of the verbal exchanges into the TL.

The analysis comprises the original English soundtracks and their corresponding Arabic-subtitled versions as rendered by Softitler and Gelula for *JFK* and *A Few Good Men*, respectively. For the visual contextualization of the analysis, the video recording of the analyzed text(s) is converted into an .avi file using the movie-making software program AVS converter. The resulting video clip (the .avi file) is then transferred to tiffs (or film stills) using Virtual Dub software. The present thesis comprises two parts. Part one is divided into an Introduction and Chapter One. Chapter One maps the theoretical foundation of the present study and discusses the concept of multimodality in relation to films. Chapter One further investigates the idea of ‘foreignness’ associated with subtitling. Part Two constitutes practice and incorporates Chapters Two and Three.

Chapter Two examines the role of the translator in Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991); as s/he explores the signifying codes of a film in order to anchor his/her

subtitles in the meaning already provided by other semiotic modalities. It is intended, here, to forge links between film language and translation, and to check whether knowledge of cinematographic components can better inform film translation operations. This chapter particularly attempts to highlight the role of the translator as s/he preserves visual-verbal cohesion in the TT by considering the cinematographic elements of the ST. Chapter Two, in addition, examines the role of *JFK*'s translator in the transfer of identity from a verbal to non-verbal mode of communication through subtitles. This chapter intends to explore the extent to which American culture and identity traits are transferred to the Arab viewers in the context of the visual media. Chapter Three aims to evidence the role of the translator in shaping the dynamics of language use in Aaron Sorkin's *A Few Good Men* (1992); and, as a result, in influencing audiences' perception and reception of the filmic message. In the Conclusion, the results are interpreted against the initial assumptions. A Glossary of the main terms used in this thesis will be supplied.

CHAPTER ONE

PROLEGOMENA TO A THEORY OF INTERSEMIOTIC AND INTERCULTURAL FILM TRANSLATION

1.1 CINEMA BABEL: THE COMPLEXITY OF THE FILMIC SIGN SYSTEM

The biblical story of Babel as mentioned in the *Book of Genesis* illustrates among other things, the terrible consequences of unchecked ambition. As a punishment for an attempt to build a tower that would reach the heavens, the human race was scattered over the face of the earth in a state of confusion – divided, dislocated and unable to communicate. The Babel myth has persisted in its affiliation with other forms of representation. In “Los Toquis, or Urban Babel”, film historian Natasa Durovicova relates film art to what she calls the “Babel Effect” (72) – the experience of extreme linguistic heterogeneity that references both the fear and excitement of difference in global cities. Signifying at once aspiration and denial, hope and defeat, the Babel metaphor is rather an apt means for describing cinema with the introduction of the synchronized-dialogue films. “The name and the idea of Babel...its epitome, and epicenters, were to be found in the many film productions centers on both sides of the Atlantic” (81).

The reality of language difference, the “world-wide babble of mutually incomprehensible tongues and idioms, entails consequences for the cinema” (Schochat and Stam 35). According to the Christian legend that inspired Babel, language is the barrier that keeps the world's masses from ascendancy. In the world of film, language exerts a particularly similar delimiting pressure on cinema.

Language combined with visual signs like gesture, physiognomy, and billboards marks a film as foreign (Nornes, *Cinema Babel* 8). Yves Gambier comments on the belief that visual elements could be considered universally comprehensible based on the assumption that pictures, unlike linguistic signs, were in similarity and direct relation to the reality they presented:

As with all other semiotic systems, the visual system, has a complex code governed by norms and conventions, themselves shaped to a certain extent by cultural constraints ... The visual representations of objects, gestures, proxemics (distance between people) and kinesics (body movements/positions) are to be interpreted in their given context and culture, let alone the fact that every filmmaker has their own way of seeing and directing. (“Moves towards multimodality” 4)

Thus, films are texts of great semiotic complexity in which different semiotic systems co-operate to create a coherent story. In film, viewers make sense of visual and acoustic sign systems that are complemented by an acoustic channel and presented to them on a screen.

In his analysis of the components that constitute the filmic sign, made with audiovisual translation in mind, Delabastita distinguishes the following four categories or communication channels in “Translation and Mass Communication”:

1. Visual presentation – verbal signs
2. Visual presentation – non-verbal signs
3. Acoustic presentation – verbal signs
4. Acoustic presentation – non-verbal signs (199).

At one level, a film will be made up of a complex visual code comprising elements that range from actors' movements, facial expressions and gesture to scenery; as well as costume and use of lighting and color. However, this visual code will also include verbal information in written form that will comprise features such as signposts, street signs, banners and letters. This "arrangement of visuals is united to an acoustic code that consists of not only the words in the dialogues but also of a series of non-verbal sounds such as background noise, sound effect, and music" (Chiaro 142). Film translation is concerned mainly with conveying the verbal audio codes of film into another language.

Being an addition to the finished film, subtitles become part of the filmic semiotic system and are able to function effectively when they interact with and rely on all the film's different channels. The polysemiotic features of film thus need to be considered before deciding on a translation strategy. As stated by Gambier and Suomela-Salmi:

In the discussion of subtitling, very often the language is taken into consideration, as though the audiovisual message did not use interrelated visual and acoustic systems with spatial behavior, posture, gesture and other paralinguistic signs, as though the verbal and the visual were not connected, in either a complementary or a conflicting way. For someone watching a film, visual cues may be more important for comprehension than verbal ones. (249)

Cattrysse states that "there are no grounds for reducing the concept of translation to interlinguistic relationships only ... translation is in fact a semiotic phenomenon of a general nature" (53). This is all the more pertinent in the translation of the audiovisual text as an intricate multimodal entity. As Zabalbeascoa maintains:

Instead of interlingual – intersemiotic distinction it seems more accurate to regard texts as having varying proportions of linguistic and verbal elements combined with nonlinguistic or nonverbal signs. In this light, all translations are the result of the semiotic processes, where nonlinguistic (and/or nonverbal/suprasegmental etc.) signs are more important in some translations than in others. (341)

The interplay between image and word influences meaning and needs to be considered when subtitling a film.

Gottlieb confirms that the quality of a subtitled version needs to be judged in relation to the link between image, dialogue and subtitle. Taking this one step further he remarks: “The time left for nonverbal viewing should match the time spent reading” (“Subtitling: Diagonal Translation” 106). According to Gottlieb’s viewpoint, the viewer needs adequate time to absorb both image and subtitle to eventually grasp the meaning. Remael presents the main concern in subtitling as the ability

to render different types of speech in two lines of concise and intelligible writing with a minimal loss of informative content. Additional concerns include synchrony with the filmic images and dialogue, the rendering of register, slang, linguistic idiosyncrasies and, to some extent, the interactional features of dialogue. (226)

As films cross linguistic frontiers, they eventually need bilingual interlopers. Through the role of the film translator, cinematic experiences with the foreign are mediated. The degree to which subtitles need to relate to the filmic sign systems will vary, and will therefore have to be determined by the film translator. This gives rise to a fundamental question that requires a more profound exploration: