

THE TRANSLATION OF FILM SUB-TITLES FROM ENGLISH INTO ITALIAN

By

Maurizio Viezzi

Freelance Conference Interpreter

In this paper I will consider two main issues - the ambiguity of sub-titles, and possible ways to overcome it, and then the translating approach, or style, film translators could be expected to adopt.

My remarks here will mainly concern sub-title translation from English into Italian as this is what I have been doing for the past two years at the Venice Film Festival, although the same points could probably be made also for other language combinations.

Sub-titles may be unclear or ambiguous for a number of reasons - it is not easy to summarize dialogue; they are often made "abroad" and language use is therefore not always impeccable; they are often the translation of the film script rather than the translation of the soundtrack. Lack of clarity may also derive from the interpreter's difficulty to read the sub-titles and watch the scene at the same time (as anyone accustomed to watching sub-titled films will confirm).

As regards English sub-titles to be translated into Italian there are, then, further reasons for ambiguity which I would define, more specifically, as "linguistic". In particular, I will deal here with the difficulties interpreters may be confronted with when choosing pronouns or genders.

Here is a first set of examples:

- (a) "I wasn't expecting you"
- (b) "Did you enjoy your holidays?"
- (c) "What are you doing there?"
- (d) "Go away"
- (e) "Where have you been?"

The ambiguity of these sentences lies in the

use of the personal pronoun "you" and in the use of the imperative.

The English personal pronoun "you" covers an area which is covered in Italian by no less than three different pronouns: "tu" (informal singular), "lei" (formal singular) and "voi" (plural)¹. Similarly, the imperative form of the verb implies a "you" and again, when translating into Italian, there are three alternative options as to the conjugation of the verb. The choice between the three options can only be made on the basis of previous information or with reference to the context.

Now, what should the film translator do when such information is absent or the context is unhelpful? The sentences above are perfectly acceptable as sub-titles and could well be part of an ordinary conversation, but how can the translator make his choice when he knows nothing about the relationships between characters and does not know, therefore, whether to use the formal or the informal personal pronoun? Or when a sentence including a "you" or a verb in the imperative is addressed to someone off-screen and he does not know whether to use a singular or a plural? It would certainly be disappointing or even frustrating to use the formal pronoun in translating the dialogue between two characters only to discover after a couple of scenes that the two are brothers or to use a singular in translating what a character says addressing someone off-screen only to discover in the following scene that a whole crowd is listening.

¹ The formal plural "loro" may reasonably be ignored for the purpose of this article.

To minimize these risks and to avoid, to the largest possible extent, the wrong use of pronouns, I would propose that, whenever possible, the film translator should choose impersonal rather than personal forms of the verb and resort to general rather than specific statements. Not all of the problems will thus be solved, but this approach may certainly prove useful on several occasions.

A "personal" translation of sentence (a) above ("I wasn't expecting you"), for example, could be one of the following: "*Non ti aspettavo*" (informal singular) or "*Non la aspettavo*" (formal singular) or "*Non vi aspettavo*" (plural). Under certain circumstances, however, the "impersonal" translations "*Non mi aspettavo questa visita*" or "*Questa è una visita inattesa*" may be safer and equally acceptable.

Similarly, sentence (b) ("Did you enjoy your holidays?") could be translated by "*Come sono andate le vacanze*", thus avoiding the "personal" choice between "*Hai passato bene le vacanze?*", "*Ha passato bene le vacanze?*" and "*Avete passato bene le vacanze?*"

I happened to be confronted with sentence (c) ("What are you doing there?") at last year's Venice Film Festival. The question was asked or, rather, shouted by a policeman walking in a square at night. He was the only character on the screen, and, leaving out the polite and unlikely "*Cosa fa lì*", the choice was between "*Cosa fai lì?*" and "*Cosa fate lì?*". Uncertainty and context (policeman on duty) led me to say "*Che succede?*", an "impersonal" solution which I found adequate and safe.

As stated above, imperatives raise the same problems, and for sentence (d) ("Go away") there are again the same options. And again an "impersonal" translation - "*Via di qui*", for example - may be rather useful.

It is not always as easy as that, however, and sentence (e) ("Where have you been?") seems to be the demonstration that the "impersonal" approach could be used on several but not on all occasions, although some solution could perhaps be found there too.

The second difficulty in translating English sub-titles I will briefly deal with concerns the use of adjectives unaccompanied by the nouns to

which they refer and the use of the pronoun "it".

The following sentences will serve as examples:

- (f) "Nice, isn't it?"
- (g) "I bought it yesterday"
- (h) "I saw it yesterday"

The Italian translation, in such cases, may require a choice as to the gender of the objects referred to by the adjective or the pronoun. Again, the interpreter's choice may be proven wrong by the following scenes and, therefore, utmost caution is required.

Each of the sentences given as examples above may be translated in one of two ways, depending on gender: (f) "*Bello, vero?*" or "*Bella, vero?*"; (g) "*L'ho comperato ieri*" or "*L'ho comperata ieri*"; (h) "*L'ho visto ieri*" or "*L'ho vista ieri*".

Here again there may be opportunities for the interpreter to avoid committing himself. The technique to be used may be based on the replacement of adjectives by adverbs and on the replacement of verbs-plus-pronouns by more general statements. In particular: sentence (f) ("Nice, isn't it?") could be translated with something like "*Niente male, vero?*", and sentence (g) ("I bought it yesterday") with something like "*Ho fatto l'acquisto ieri*" (of course, under certain circumstances). A solution like this, however, may be impossible for sentence (h) ("I saw it yesterday") for which, it seems, "risks" have to be run.

Generally speaking, therefore, there may be ways to solve the problems of "ambiguity" of English sub-titles to be translated into Italian. The solutions offered are not always feasible, but in many cases they can certainly be resorted to in an attempt to avoid making mistakes with regard to personal pronouns or genders. The final example presents a string of sub-titles (for each of which there are ambiguities to be solved) and a possible translation according to the "impersonal rather than personal", and "general rather than specific" approach:

- "Have you bought it?" - "*Fatto l'acquisto?*"
- "Yes, I bought it yesterday." - "*Sì, ieri.*"
- "Do you like it?" - "*Com'è?*"
- "Yes, very much." - "*Mi piace molto.*"

As can be seen, in the Italian translation there is no reference to second person pronouns or to

the gender of the noun indicating the purchased object. No risks are run and all pieces of information are given. This is precisely what I am suggesting. Faced with the ambiguity of sub-titles and uncertain as to the pronouns or gender he should choose, the interpreter may find a way out resorting to solutions that, while being "impersonal" and "general", convey the information without leaving anything important out.

Finally, I would like to make a couple of points with respect to the translating style to be adopted by interpreters translating films (or, rather, sub-titles).

David Snelling² supports a "minimalist" approach. He says that not everything in a sub-title needs to be translated and condemns any form of "involvement" on the part of the interpreter. The approach I would suggest is slightly different. Sub-titles are the minimum verbal information with which foreign film viewers are provided. And they generally are a *synthesis* of what is actually said by the characters on the screen. It would not then seem advisable for the interpreter to cut the script any further. Moreover, translating a three-line sub-title with two words or three may lead the viewers to suspect that something important has been left out. This may not be the case, but interpreters should certainly avoid engendering mistrust.

As regards, then, the tone to be used by interpreters, I am certainly in favour of the "low profile" approach exemplified by this dialogue taken from John Le Carré's *The Russia House*³:

- Could she not be an interpreter, you see?

- Good interpreters efface themselves, in my opinion, sir. This lady projected herself.

And I strongly believe that interpreters are not actors. Nor should they be. However, I do believe that film translation requires some involvement - lending a BBC-news tone to a man crying in anguish and despair may be even more annoying than a piece of interpreter's acting.

² D.Snelling, "Upon the Simultaneous Translation of Films", *The Interpreters' Newsletter*, 3, 1990, pp. 14-16.

³ John Le Carré, *The Russia House*, Bantam Books, New York, 1990, p. 41 (original edition published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, 1989).