

NEW TRENDS IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

Vol. 23

Subtitling  
African American English  
into French

*Can We Do the Right Thing?*

Pierre-Alexis Mével

Peter Lang

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In Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, African American character Mookie throws a rubbish bin through the window of the pizzeria he works for, which is owned by an Italian American family. Translators often find themselves in a position of moral ambiguity similar to that of Mookie: at the nexus between cultures, translators have to make clear statements through their choices, with sometimes dramatic consequences.

Drawing on the fields of translation studies, sociolinguistics and film studies, this book analyses the French subtitling of African American English in a corpus of films from the United States. After describing African American English and analysing how this variety is often portrayed in films, the book explores the implications of resorting to the use of non-standard forms in the French subtitles to portray linguistic variation, paying special attention to the consequences of juxtaposing two linguistic varieties on screen. This book goes beyond the mere case study and examines the relevance of the concepts of domestication and foreignization in the context of subtitling.

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Mével • Subtitling African American English into French



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# NEW TRENDS IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

## Volume 23

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## Translation and Moral Dilemma

Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing* received rather mixed reviews when it was first released in 1989, mostly because many people – *New York's* former political columnist Joe Klein, (in)famously, but also *Newsweek's* Jack Kroll, and former *New Yorker's* film critic David Denby – feared that the film would incite the African American audience to riot. Reviews focused predominantly on main character Mookie's moral choice at the end of the film: Mookie, played by Spike Lee himself, delivers pizzas for Sal, an Italian American whose shop is the only white-run business remaining in Bedford-Stuyvesant, a predominantly African American neighbourhood of Brooklyn. His humble function places him at the interface of whites and African Americans, like a mediator, a messenger between the two groups, and a keeper of the peace in the pizzeria. After one of his friends has been killed by a police officer, Mookie picks up a rubbish bin and throws it through the window of Sal's Famous Pizzeria, an act which sets off a riot in the whole neighbourhood that leads to Sal's shop being trashed and burnt down. The moral ambiguity of Mookie's decision to spark the riot and destroy Sal's shop is echoed at the very end of the film, when two quotations by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr are displayed on screen, one advocating violence, the other condemning it. Spike Lee has often commented that the focus of the moral question is a white preoccupation, and that African Americans never ask the question: 'Did Mookie do the right thing?'

Curiously, the translators of *Do the Right Thing* find themselves in a position that echoes Mookie's in the film: at the nexus between cultures, translators have to make decisions, they have to act, and sometimes make clear-cut statements through their choices, with, potentially, dramatic consequences. In the film, the antagonisms between characters are expressed visually of course, but also verbally, through their use of language: most

African American characters have a specific way of talking which sets them apart from other groups, placing translators in a position of great responsibility if they are to translate speech in a way that mirrors the social organization and political message portrayed in the film.

In this book, I examine the French subtitles of a corpus of films from the 1990s portraying speakers of African American English (AAE). I consider intercultural communication as it is portrayed in the films, but also between the source and target cultures. Translation is the interface where and whereby cultures meet, collide, but also collude, and potentially shape each other. The multiple case study presented here considers existing sets of French subtitles and takes a particular interest in the translation of linguistic variation as it is portrayed in the films of the corpus. Beyond the idiosyncrasies of subtitling AAE into French, what is at stake here is the power of translation as a shaping force, and its capacity to mediate between groups of humans. This book brings together translation studies, sociolinguistics and film studies, with the specific purpose of questioning and discussing the extent to which linguistic variation can be communicated across culture in translation, and the way source and target cultures interact in the polysemiotic context of subtitled films.

## Visibility and recognition

The position of the translator in the process of translation has often come under scrutiny, perhaps nowadays more so than ever before. For all their good work though, the reward is meagre: translators are often 'invisible', to cite Venuti (1995) and their status appears to be the subject of a growing number of discussions. Nevertheless, a number of translation critics have pointed out that translators and interpreters are not limited to peripheral roles and are placed at the heart of the action, and, as different cultures come into contact, have come to play a key role in their interactions. Translators play an important part on the global stage, as Baker (2006: 1) argues: 'in this conflict-ridden and globalized world, translation is central to the ability



of all parties to legitimize their version of events'. They have also occasionally taken centre stage in works of fiction. Cronin (2009) analyses how the figure of the translator/interpreter is represented (thematically) in films. In literature, authors such as Brice Matthieussent are also challenging the traditional prerogatives of translators. Matthieussent's novel *Vengeance du traducteur* (2009) is a translation of an imaginary novel, *Revenge of the Translator*, which exists solely in the mind of the narrator. The pages in the book are all left blank – Matthieussent does not give the translation of the book that was never written – all that readers get are lengthy translator's notes that appear at the bottom of pages in footnotes. Matthieussent thus avenges translators, renders them not merely visible, but exclusive, and circumvents the need for an original text.

When it comes to audiovisual translation (AVT) – and particularly subtitling – a translator's input is very visible indeed. One of the differences between literary translations and subtitled films, however, is that in subtitled films the original does not disappear – rather, it is retained and complemented by the subtitles. Because of this, subtitles are sometimes described as a 'vulnerable' form of translation, precisely because viewers can potentially always compare them to the original dialogue (Díaz-Cintas 2003: 43–4).

Throughout the history of translation, translators have been compared to many things: the translator is in turn a bridge-maker, a smuggler, an author, an artist, a poet, a philosopher, a communicator – the list goes on. In the end, translators are so many things that they run the risk of being none at all. While every single one of these comparisons serves a particular purpose (as a bridge-maker the translator might bridge a gap between two cultures or countries; as a smuggler s/he might sneak an Other into one's cultural sphere; as an author s/he might question the problematic relationship between the original and its translation(s) and the nature of his/her input in the target text (TT); as an artist s/he might examine his/her creative input and crafting capacity in the making of the TT, etc.), what these attempts certainly reveal is that the position of the translator is a complex one, at the heart of cultural contacts, tensions and conflicts; in short at the heart of difference and sameness.

AVT is now a relatively well established discipline that has come to the fore in translation studies notably because of the ubiquity of media

products. The audiovisual nature of film translation brings an extra dimension to issues relating to visibility. The hybridity of screen products, that nowadays usually combine sounds and images, makes the translation process somewhat more complex because the translator only has power over part of the product, and has to make it match with the other parts in order to maintain viewers' suspension of disbelief.

What is AVT then, and what distinguishes it from literary translation? According to Chiaro (2009: 141), 'audiovisual translation is one of several overlapping umbrella terms that include "media translation", "multimedia translation", "multimodal translation" and "screen translation"'. With the advent of the 'talkies' (films where spoken dialogue is a part of the soundtrack) in the late 1920s, new solutions had to be found to allow films to circulate to other parts of the globe and be accessible to the greatest number of viewers possible. In recent years, more attention has been dedicated to AVT than in the past, as it is particularly linked to technological advances, the advent of the DVD and digital television.<sup>1</sup> Audiovisual products, then, tautologically, function simultaneously on two levels: auditory and visual, and as such are often referred to as 'polysemiotic' or 'multimodal'; in other words, 'they are made up of numerous codes that interact to produce a single effect' (Chiaro 2009: 142).

The two most widespread modes of AVT are dubbing and subtitling, whilst there are, of course, other modes of AVT, such as voiceover and audio description. While dubbing uses the acoustic channel and consists in replacing the original spoken dialogue with new dialogue in the target language (TL) performed by voice actors, subtitles are visual, ancillary and usually take the form of one or two lines of text that appear at the bottom of the screen at the same time as the original dialogue. This book is primarily interested in subtitling, because it adds to the semiotic complexity of films as subtitles are presented alongside the original dialogue (not instead of it, as in the case of dubbing) and therefore break the traditional boundaries between source and target text, whilst also negotiating cultural permeability.

This book looks specifically at the subtitling of a particular vernacular, AAE, into French, and prompts the following question: to what extent, and

1 AVT is not necessarily linked to digital products. Operas, for instance, are frequently performed in the original language, with surtitles projected in the target language.