

The mute-ation of female characters in film translation

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This paper will attempt to analyse some of the interactions of language, gender and Film Translation. A tall order! The time limit of 20 mins. means the paper is, essentially, a subtitled version of a work in progress.

My interest in Film Translation began when I read Santoyo's *El Delito de Traducir*. Many of you will remember the hilarious examples he quoted from Tejada's work, *La represión sexual en la España de Franco: II; La Censura Cultural*. I was also interested in expressions of popular culture, particularly film and novels, and my frustration at the still prevalent dichotomy between high and low culture in my chosen discipline of Translation Studies led to the research work I would like to discuss with you here today.

Film Translation Studies has a very recent history and one which almost entirely concentrates on extralinguistic constraints. Exceptions to this include Gottlieb and some extremely pertinent questions from Delabastita:

What is the position of the target culture in an international context? Does it entertain frequent relations with the source culture (...) What is the position of the source culture in an international context? Does it enjoy high prestige or is it perceived

as a minor culture, relatively devoid of interest.
(Delabastita; 103)

I began to ask these questions of the American English translation of the work of Pedro Almodóvar for the following reasons:

The Centrality of Language:

The director himself says,- "All my films are literary (...). For me, literary cinema is one in which the language is centre-stage, and is the motive force of the action (...). Dialogue is action for me"¹.

The Centrality of Language in the construction of gender:

He also frequently stresses his love for what is culturally coded as feminine², and it is this centrality of the feminine, in all its changing facets, and expressed with a marked discourse freedom by his (fe)male characters, which seems to have posed the greatest challenge to film translation. I tend to use this deconstructionist term "(fe)male" because I find it a useful instrument to describe the characters who people Almodóvar's work. I think many of you would agree that Almodóvar's characters often defy gendered definitions.

Direction of Language Transfer

The increasing influence and penetration of audio-visual translation is undeniable. Let us look at some of the European statistics:

Netherlands: 30% of all TV Programmes are Foreign (95% sub).

Sweden: 200 hours/week of SUB programmes broadcast.

Denmark: The average viewer watches at least 4 hours/week of sub. (Luyken:1991)

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1. Interview with Paul Julian Smith in Sight and Sound.
 2. Quoted in an interview with Charo Izquierdo: "Ahora está de moda el placer", in *Dunia*, 29th November, 1983.

These figures are several orders of magnitude greater than corresponding figures for readers of text translations. It is a well known fact that translation occurs massively *out* of English and into other languages. This process has sensitised us to the issue of the dominance of a particular world view. My interest is in translations into English, particularly when intended for the US market, as they can reveal much of the fundamental assumptions of the Target culture. I was also interested in the fact that Spain is increasingly mediated through film into English. The process of Film Translation must surely qualify for more serious investigation on all these grounds, and more so when we consider the power of those who control any or all parts of the audio-visual industry.

The constraints of film translation:

There is a very strong perception that the shortcomings of film translation are due mostly to spatial and temporal constraints. One of the most salient features of this type of translation is its neutralising effect, not just on source culture-specific concepts, but as I hope to show you today, on most concepts which do not coincide with dominant target culture ideologies (particularly Patriarchy). Let me show you one example of the most common form of neutralization, i.e., the suppression of swear words.

The case of the disappearing Granny

La flor de mi secreto

Abuela/Madre

| | |
|-----|---|
| O | ¡Me voy al pueblo, que ahí hasta el culo me descanso! |
| SUB | I'm going home to the village! |

¡Atame!

Abuela /Madre

| | |
|-----|--------------------------------|
| O | ¡Cojones, niña, dejame en paz! |
| SUB | Leave me alone! |

Most feminist analyses of language and gender are neither widely available nor studied by translation theorists. Also, the overwhelming focus of film research is on the visual elements³ which are privileged by those who control the encoding of symbols in our society.

I approach this field conscious of an industry which is still male-dominated, consumer-oriented, and time-is-money conscious. I therefore expected to find elements of intensification, simplification, and outright suppression. I have to admit to being surprised by the extent to which the target scripts I examined encode crude male-female binarisms which in most instances systematically undermined Almodóvar's original script. Let us look at some of the background theories which inform my approach.

Negative semantic space

Theorists such as Dale Spender (1975), Cheris Kramarae (1981), Jane Mills (1991), and Jennifer Coates (1993) clearly identify the "negative semantic space" which characterises anything associated with women, while the contrary operates for men. Apparently neutral terms acquire negative semantic connotations once they become identified with women. An example is the 19th century male name, Shirley, since given to girls, it has developed such negative connotations that it can now be used by adolescent boys as an insult with homosexual overtones (at least in Ireland). Otherwise camouflaged as aesthetic rather than social bias, beliefs about the pitch of female voices⁴ and the identification of women's' speech as gossip or gabble⁵ clearly highlight the role of language in transmitting and perpetuating social inequality. This occurs in spite of

3. See examples like the controversy surrounding Hitchcock's *Vertigo* for evidence of this.

4. There is intriguing evidence to suggest that pitch is not necessarily gender related. The voices of deaf male children do not break, for example. There is an interesting character in Almodóvar's *Pepi, Luci, Bom, ...* who is represented in all her possessive jealousy with a grating, high pitched voice and a full beard which she is constantly shaving!

5. Gossip, gabble, see the Scottish poet Liz Lochhead's rap poem.

overwhelming evidence which finds little or no difference between the language of men and women and leads Dale Spender to posit:

The Androcentric Rule

Men will be seen to behave linguistically in a way that fits the writer's view of what is desirable or admirable; women on the other hand will be blamed for any linguistic state or development which is regarded by the write as negative or reprehensible, (Dale Spender, 1975).

In exhaustive studies on single-sex and mixed-sex linguistic interaction, the differences shown are so striking that Tannen (1991) chooses to call mixed-sex communication "cross-cultural". There is overwhelming evidence that men and women use different communicative styles and this tends to lead to miscommunication. A few examples will illustrate this point:

a) *Minimal response*: It has been shown that women use frequent minimal responses in conversation, eg. the use of form like YAH, MHM means "I'm listening, carry on". Men use minimal responses far less frequently. Also, for men, these forms seem to mean something more like "I agree with you". The different use and interpretation of minimal responses can lead to serious miscommunication.

First, men think women are agreeing with them and are irritated when this turns out not to be the case. Second, women are disconcerted by men's infrequent use of minimal responses and accuse them of not listening.

(b) *Questions*: Questions have a different meaning for women and men. Women use questions as part of a general strategy to keep up the flow of the conversation, and this frequently leads to rhetorical questioning. If a woman asks, "what on earth am I going to do about John?" she is often inviting the listener to join her in her exasperation about a problematic relationship. This is not how questions are used by men. Men interpret questions as simple requests for information and respond by giving information, sometimes at length⁶.

6. Tannen (1991) describes the breakdown of communications between husband and wife when a husband responds to a wife's self-disclosure by giving advice. The wife has had a lump removed from her

Other large differences between men and women in conversation include *turn-taking* (women cede the floor more often, men interrupt more often), *topic shifts* (quite abrupt in all male conversations while women tend to stay on the subject for longer), *verbal aggressiveness* and *listening*. Almodóvar's scripting of female characters uses and abuses these stereotypical forms of communication to challenge and provoke - alas, not in English.

There is a perception that *women gossip while men talk*. The evidence shows overwhelmingly that men dominate mixed-group conversations while women are shown to have a more collaborative, supporting style of conversational interaction. I am not assigning positive or negative values to the different conversation styles; however it is obvious that in the public domain of work where a more adversarial style is valued, women are unfavourably evaluated.

I am not going to offer a simplistic causal link between the representation of women's discourse in film, its translation and the continued subordination of women in a society like Europe where, according to the very latest statistics, three out of five of us bring in half or more of our family's income⁷. What I hope to prove to you today, however, is that SUB and DUB can be added to the long list of complex, interdependent factors which ultimately shore up methods of social dominance and control. All of this evidence makes it even more important to analyse the additional layer of translation. If the media is still engaged in this symbolic annihilation, then we will probably find evidence that where female characters fail to live up to target culture stereotypes they are somehow censured and even censored.

Women's "Symbolic Annihilation" in the Media:

In the wider context of women's representation in the media, Tuchmann coins the term *symbolic annihilation* to explain our mysterious

breast and is upset when she looks at the stitches because they have left a seam which has changed the contour of her breast. When she tells a woman friend, the response is "I know - it's like your body has been violated". When she tells her husband, he says "you can have plastic surgery to cover up the scar tissue". The wife felt comforted by the friend's response and was upset by her husband's.

7. Results of the latest European Union survey carried out by the Whirlpool foundation, May 1995.

absence and says: "it is thought that the media perpetuate sex role stereotypes because they reflect dominant social values and also because male media producers are influenced by these stereotypes." (1991: pp.35-39).

The critical response to Almodóvar's work in Anglophone countries, particularly the reception of *¡ATAME!*, is significant in the context of this study. Paul Julian Smith said "*¡ATAME!*'s reception in English-speaking countries was much more hostile than that of his earlier films" (1992: p.204) and, again, "... some critics have seen *¡ATAME!* as promoting (rather than documenting or analysing) a shallow and flashy consumerism in which people are mercilessly reified and commodities lovingly fetishised," (ibid.: p.209) Lawrence O' Toole, writing in *Sight and Sound* in the Autumn of 1991, is savagely critical, as are the majority of English-speaking monolingual critics. The examples given in Appendix 1 go some small way, I believe, towards explaining this response. It is interesting to note the positive reaction of Hispanists like Paul Julian Smith and Peter Evans, both fluent in the language and, more significantly, aware of the sub-cultural themes so effectively used by the director. I would guess that they viewed the work with very little reference to the subtitles and so these translations, which amount almost to caricature, did not inform their analyses.

¡ATAME! is the source of most of the examples I will use today as it was released in both SUB and DUB versions. It was also the film that changed the classification system in the largest audio-visual market in the world and ushered in the controversial NC-17 grade.

In the film, the self-possessed Marina, her feisty sister Lola (Loles León), her loveable mother (the director's own mother, Francisca Caballero) and unflappable niece Paquita (Francisca Pajuelo), form the central norm of social and familial reproduction - quite independent of men. When Riki joins this gyno-family it is on their terms (clearly expressed by Lola in the last scene) and is a result, I believe, of his feminine, nurturing attributes. These, as I had expected, also disappear in translation

The Relationship between the Protagonists:

EX 1: 00.04.57

Riki

| O | SUB | DUB ⁸ |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Ya puedo incorporarme a la sociedad. | I'm allowed to join society. | I'm being let loose on society. |

EX 2: 00.50.22

| O | SUB | DUB |
|--|--|--|
| ¿Cuánto tiempo vas a tardar en enamorarte de mí? | how long before you'll fall in love with me? | I'd like to be told how long I'll have to be here waiting. |

EX 3: 01.02.20

| O | SUB | DUB |
|--|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Si, pero solo para tranquilizarla ¿eh? | Yes, but just to calm her down. | So you make sure she doesn't, o.k.? |

Riki, the nurturing psychotic, becomes far more threatening and aggressive in translation.

Marina

Marina, on the other hand, becomes far more timid and submissive.

EX 4: 00.18.10

| O | SUB | DUB |
|--|---|---|
| Algo tendrás. Si vas a llevarme contigo será mejor que me vaya familiarizando. | Well you have to have something. If you're taking me away, I might as well get used to you. | Still there are eyes. If I am to be yours, I must know what's behind that hood. |

8. Dubbed versions provided by J. McGinn

EX 5: 00.29.27

| O | SUB | DUB |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Claro, por eso me sonaba tu cara. | That's why you look so familiar. | Please go away! |

EX 6: 01.16.45

| O | SUB | DUB |
|--|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Ya entiendo yo por que follas tu tan bien. | That's why you screw so well. | Well, that's life I suppose. |

The Sisters

The relationship is a crucial one in the film. Lola, the older sister is the gyno-family head and consequently comes across as interfering yet concerned for her more fragile sister. In the crucial first scene between the two, Lola is subtitled as an altogether cruder and less affectionate character.

EX 7: 00.07.30

Lola

| O | SUB |
|---------------------------------|-----------|
| ¡uy! ¿Cómo no te vas a acordar? | Bullshit! |

EX 8 : 00.08.30

Marina

| O | SUB |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Si es que te pones mucho. | You've laid on too much make-up |

Lola

| O | SUB |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Algo tendré que ponerme. | I have to lay something. |

The Psychiatrist: Berta

This shift is particularly acute in the more important character of the psychotherapist, who helps Marina kick her drug habit:

EX 9: 00.37.25

| O | Film SUB | Video SUB | DUB |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|
| ¿Queréis porro? | Would you like a cigarette? | Would you like a joint? | Like a smoke? |

Ex 10: 00.34.43

| O | SUB | DUB |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| ¡Hija mía! Eres una toxicómana inata! | You're a born dope fiend! | You're a born addict. I despair for you Marina! |

Ex 11: 00.37.56

| O | SUB | DUB |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|--|
| Pues estáis buenos los dos. | You're quite a pair. | She's too passionate for her own good. |

This complex character is shown in the same scene as the perfect caring, if single, mother, doting over her twin baby girls, while at the same time casually offering the pair a joint. In *EX 10* Berta's exclamation is softened by the affectionately maternal ¡Hija mía! Not so in both translations. In *EX 11*, perhaps the unkindest cut of all, Berta's dubbed comment clearly invites Riki, whom she has just met, to collude in her criticism of Marina.

We see elements in both translations which force the original script to conform to a set of dominant target culture myths of femininity and masculinity, although this is clearly more pronounced in the DUB versions. This despite the fact that these myths are common to both source and target cultures and it appears obvious that Almodóvar set out to undermine them. The net effect is that excluded groups are systematically re-encoded to invite censure if they step beyond of what is conventionally

deemed normal, and acceptance if they behave in a way that upholds cultural norms.

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