# Shaken and Stirred: Language in Film in a Cross -cultural Perspective

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## 1 Introduction

In this paper I want to shed a little light on the role of language in film - or film dialogue - from the perspective of applied linguistics. I believe this is potentially relevant for such areas as foreign language teaching, intercultural pragmatic competence and contrastive pragmatics. The paper is structured as follows: firstly, I will briefly describe what I perceive to be the function of the feature film in educational settings, particularly in schools and universities. Secondly, I will outline the nature of language in film and the relevance of multi-modal linguistic analyses of film dialogue and their translations for the areas of applied linguistics mentioned above. To demonstrate this potential, I will then present and discuss some examples of a contrastive analysis of an English film text and its German dubbed version with respect to cross-cultural communicative preferences, and notions of cultural specificity regarding English and German.

## 2 Uses of feature films

In most educational settings in Germany that are not primarily concerned with media studies or film aesthetics, showing films is either considered as an extra for students, for example after they have patiently read through *Macbeth* or *Death of a Salesman*, or it is seen as a 'window to the world' through which the students are offered a glimpse of the foreign culture under consideration. One can assume then, that feature films are either treated as leisure-time commodities, to be used as entertainment or, alternatively, that they are incorporated into a larger educational framework. From this perspective, then, a film can, by virtue of its representative nature, serve as an illustrative tool in *Landeskunde*, and literary text analysis can make use of films under headings such as 'differences between the literary original work and the film adaptation'. Only very rarely, apparently, does the language in film become an issue in its own right.

## 3 Language in film in a cross-linguistic perspective

The study of film dialogue gives insights into contemporary language use. A film is, as it were, a snapshot of language in use at a particular point in time, and linguistic analyses of original language versions and their translations can reveal cross-cultural differences and preferences in linguistic norms and conventions. The nature and the conventions of the film medium provide a special setting for language use, which sets it apart from any other kind of text. I will first point out some aspects of film dialogue which highlight this difference, and then introduce the notion of the 'triple bind' which operates in translating film dialogues.

### 3.1 Some aspects of the nature of language in film

In contrast to documentaries or all kinds of experimental filmmaking, feature films, in most cases, aim at a 'perfectly disguised fictionality'. They seek to disguise the fact that the content is fictional. Indeed, keeping up the illusion that what is filmed is actually happening can be considered the underlying rationale for several significant aspects of film-making. Firstly, the film is a representative medium. This means that on-screen action mimics off-screen interpersonal constellations and social interaction. Everything that happens between characters

on-screen has to be depicted in such a way that it is recognizable as a valid form of social interaction in a certain situational and cultural context. And it has to be depicted in such a fashion that the *content* of this interaction can be decoded by the viewer. The function of a conventional, non-experimental film depends on its being socially decipherable (cf. Bordwell et al. 1996; Belton 1994). Secondly, films are, as a rule, verbally decipherable. In other words, sound technology ensures that communicative behaviour, such as a character's mumbling or muttering something under his or her breath, is perfectly audible to the audience, even when it would be incomprehensible in an identical real life situation. Incidentally, in such constellations, the character's interlocutor onscreen - in imitation of the real life situation - usually cannot hear the content of the mumbling and the muttering. Thirdly, studies of audience behaviour suggest that the elements of a film that viewers most readily appropriate are the words, phrases and the manner of speaking of the characters on-screen (Kozloff 2001). Fourthly, language in film is primarily face-to-face communication, and despite a variety of filmic genres, in general, it also imitates everyday conversation, because films are commonly directed to linguistically non-specialised audiences. Finally, although seemingly every effort is made to make it appear as such, language in film is not spontaneous speech. It is 'constructed', in the sense that all the linguistic features in the film dialogue can be assumed to be there for a purpose, because sound mixing and editing could always erase any unwanted linguistic elements. It is further 'constructed' in the sense that the every utterance needs to function on two dimensions. On the one hand, an utterance has a function in the speech situation on-screen. On the other hand, the utterance also functions as a major constituent in the film text[1] as a whole, whose addressees are the audience. Within the constraints that the former function sets, the dialogues must always be as explicit as possible, because, in the end, all utterances are directed at the viewer. This means that a character's implicit or indirect communication on-screen must be made explicit in the sense that the viewer needs to be able to decode and interpret the utterance in the context of the film as a whole. Thus, with film dialogue, the ultimate addressee is the viewer, and his role is that of an *overhearer*. It is crucial for this level of communication that the viewer as indirect addressee be provided with information adequate to understanding what is meant by the on-screen exchanges, since there is, of course, no backchannel available.

To summarize, language in film is realised interpersonally in socially and culturally recognizable situations. Everything that is uttered needs to be acoustically and propositionally intelligible to the viewer, who is likely to carry some of the speaking that he/she has (over)heard in the film over into his/her life. Film dialogue is constructed as intentional, self-conscious text, which at the same time mimics everyday face-to-face conversation.

### 3.2 The translation of film text

The notion of the 'double bind' operates on translators, and is central to criteria for translational or functional equivalence between source and target text (Koller 2001; House 1981). Translating speech in *film*, however, operates under a *triple* bind. The re-instantiation of form and content of the original in the target language is first of all constrained by the textual function of the original text and the conditions of language use laid down in its semantic and grammatical structure. Secondly, it is constrained by the conditions of text reception in the target language environment, that is, the cultural context of the addressee, hearer, reader, viewer, audience. Thirdly, in film translation, information has to be lexicalised 'within the picture', as it were. In other words, the translation has to accommodate the invariable[2] visual information (participants in a speech situation in particular physical surroundings) as it is provided by the visual channel of the film. The visual presence of the situational and cultural context also entails that the translation take special account of the two

parallel levels of communication in film. On the one hand, there is the onscreen (diegetic) communicative event in its 'natural', source-culture context. On the other hand, there is the communication situation between onscreen action and the audience. At this point the communication transcends the boundaries of the medium, and, as the text reaches out to its addressee (the viewer), it enters the different cultural context of the receiving society. Assuming that films aim at disguising their constructed artificiality, these parallel contexts have to be related to each other. An analysis of how the translator negotiates these constraints with respect to the use of linguistic devices, and the realization of textual subject matter can reveal cross-linguistic preferences; it can also heighten the awareness of socio-cultural differences and similarities between the source and the target culture and, above all, how they are encoded linguistically. Consider the example below, taken from the 1974 James Bond movie *The Man with the Golden Gun* and its German language release *Der Mann mit dem Goldenen Colt*. The visual co-text has 007 entering the office of M, the head of the British intelligence agency, Bond works for. Apart from M, two other men Bond knows are present. The opening moves of the encounter are as follows:

| | 0 | 1 |
|---|---|---|
| **007 [v]** | Good morning Sir. . Colthorpe. . Chief of Staff. | |
| **007 [German]** | **Guten Morgen Sir. . Colthorpe. . Mr. Tanner.** | |
| **M [v]** | | What do you know about a man |
| **M [German]** | | Was wissen Sie über einen Mann |

| | .. |
|---|---|
| **M [v]** | called Scaramanga, 007? |
| **M [German]** | namens Scaramanga, 007? |

Opening exchanges can be assumed to be highly ritualised across cultures. Therefore the choice of linguistic material habitually used to realise a move like the greeting in section 0 above will also be highly conventionalised in different languages. Via a greeting, the speaker communicates his or her awareness that the addressee is present as a potential interactant (cf. Edmondson 1981: 162). Supposing that this definition is true for English and German, both languages, nevertheless, usually realise greeting moves differently. To greet by simply uttering the name or the rank of the addressee and nothing more, is not conventional language use in German, and can be considered as a violation of culture-specific pragmatic norms (Herbst 1994: 136). Greeting in German always seems to be much more focused on the greeting itself (the wish), while the name of the person greeted serves as a grounding device for the greeting proper. Thus, the German translation of 007's greeting could be said to provide redundant information (007 knows the name; the addressees know their names), or too little (instead of e.g. 'Colthorphe, *schön Sie wieder zu sehen.*'[3]), or maybe even the wrong information (instead of e.g. just '*Guten Morgen.*'). Hence, a contrastive analysis of original and dubbed texts could highlight how greetings in English and German in particular social situations are realised, and may reveal that in some instances the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable forms of greeting are blurred - and may be dissolving.

### 3.3 Outline of an approach towards the analysis of film texts

A film text is made up of different layers of meaning. Meaning is constructed on the interconnecting levels of the word, image, scene, film text, film series, genre, film medium, etc. - the enumeration is not exhaustive. It is important to note that each of these levels relates to

the others in specific ways; each provides the context for the previous one. One could say that these terms stand in a text-context relation to each other; they can be said to be in a meta-redundancy relation (cf. Lemke 1995). In other words, word, image, scene, etc. are interwoven in a relational-contextual constellation of meaning. The question is how the different layers make up particular instances of meaning in a text - for example, the meaning of the sequence of utterances when a character in the film speaks to another character about a certain topic. The challenge for analysis is how to methodically decompose meaning. The task is to open up the context of the text, so to speak, in order to arrive at a functional interpretation of the use of lexicogrammatical devices in that particular situation.

The present approach to the film text is grounded in the framework of systemic-functional theory and the concurrent idea of language as social semiotic (Halliday 1978). Unlike models of visual analysis (e.g. van Leeuwen & Jewitt 2001), the stress here is on *language* use in visual media. At the core of the analysis lies the meaning that is made by words and their contextualisation in film. To encompass the peculiarities of natural spoken discourse on the one side, and preplanned, edited text production on the other side, I draw on models of discourse as interaction (Edmondson 1981; Edmondson & House 1981) in combination with systemic-functional approaches to register and text analysis (e.g. Halliday 1994; Martin 1992). The mode of analysis revolves around the application of House's model for text analysis and translation evaluation (House 1981; 1997).[4] The goal of the analysis is the reconstruction of the types of motivated choices the text producer made in order to create this and only this particular text for a particular effect in the context of situation, enveloping and conditioning the text formation.

## 4  Film texts and cultural specificity

In this section I want to show how a sample of film text relates to the linguistic pattern of cross-cultural differences between English and German. This pattern of linguistic differences is expressed in terms of five dimensions of communicative preferences. Before turning to the examples, I will briefly introduce these dimensions and their relevance for translation in the concept of the so called "cultural filter".

The dimensions of cross-cultural differences were abstracted from converging evidence of a series of empirical German-English contrastive pragmatic analyses (for a summary, see e.g. House 1989). Among the pragmatic and discursive phenomena that were investigated were speech acts, discourse strategies, the realization of discourse phases, gambits and modality markers. Between English and German the dimensions of communicative preferences diverge as follows:

Indirectness - Directness
Orientation towards other - Orientation towards self
Orientation towards persons - Orientation towards content
Implicitness - Explicitness
Use of verbal routines - Ad-hoc-formulation

These are, of course, clines rather than clear-cut-dichotomies with absolute values. One can say, however, that native speakers of German tend to realize lexicogrammatical devices which are associated with the values on the right. Native speakers of English, in the same situations, prefer linguistic structures which are associated with the values on the left. In other words, German text production (spoken and written) can be said to be more direct, more explicit,

more self-referenced, more content-oriented and less prone to using verbal routines than comparable English texts.

A similar tendency has been observed in translations from English to German (Doherty 1997; Böttger & Probst 2001; House 2002; Baumgarten 2002). As I have argued above that language in film must above all communicate to the audience the illusion of non-fictionality, it follows that in translating film dialogue, a *covert* translation is called for in the sense of House (1981), incorporating where necessary the application of a *cultural filter* (cf. House 1997). Thus, shifts along the five dimensions of difference specified above can be expected, specifically when English language films are translated into German.

In order to see how the translation of a film text relates to the dimensions of cross-cultural differences, consider now some extracts from the 1963 James Bond movie *From Russia with Love*/*Liebesgrüße aus Moskau*. The five dimensions of difference given above will be exemplified systematically:[5]

(1) Indirectness - Directness:

| | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Kerim Bey [v]** | | | | |
| **Kerim Bey [German]** | | | | |
| **007 [v]** | Quick, he's coming | | Quick! | |
| **007 [German]** | **Achtung! Er kommt.** | | **Schießen Sie!** | |
| **Desc [nv]** | [Watch out! He is coming.] | · · · · · | [Shoot!] | *one shot* |

Compared with the English text, the German translation is more direct via mood choice: In section 22, the imperative is to get Kerim Bey to act. The English version might be said to express the same urgency to act, but simply via the lexical repetition of "quick".

(2) Orientation towards persons - Orientation towards content:

| | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Kerim Bey [v]** | | | Infrared lens. |
| **Kerim Bey [German]** | | | **Eine Infrarotlinse, . Donnerwetter.** |
| **007 [v]** | | Here. | |
| **007 [German]** | | **Hier.** | |
| **Desc [nv]** | *007 assembles a sniper's rifle* | *hands Kerim Bey the sight.* | [An infrared lens, . wow.] |

| | 7 | 8 |
|---|---|---|
| **Kerim Bey [v]** | | |
| **Kerim Bey [German]** | | |
| **007 [v]** | . . shh. | |
| **Desc [nv]** | | *. . . . .two men walk by* |
| **Desc [German]** | *not realised* | |

Compared with the English text, the German is less interpersonally oriented, because it does not realize 007's 'shushing'. The German translation thus fails to lexicalise linguistic material

24

which supports and details the interpersonal relation of the participants in the text. Note that the "shh" is not primarily used as a device of social domination to silence Kerim Bey, because there is a considerable time lapse between the "shh" and the preceding utterance. Interpersonally oriented noises like "shh" are used to immediately affect the hearer and his or her course of actions in a contextually bound way, without using propositional structures. (cf. Ehlich 1986). In this example, the English and the German texts characterize the interpersonal relationship between 007 and Kerim Bey differently.

(3) Implicitness - Explicitness

| | 8 | 9 |
|---|---|---|
| **Kerim Bey [v]** | | My sons. They will ring his doorbell. He has a private escape hatch. |
| **Kerim Bey [German]** | | **Das sind meine Söhne. . Sie werden gleich bei ihm klingeln. . Er hat einen geheimen Fluchtausgang.** |
| **007 [v]** | | |
| **Desc [nv]** | *. . . . . two men walk by* | [These are my sons. They will ring his doorbell in a moment. He has a private escape hatch.] |
| | | |

In this extract, the German expressions are more explicit than their English equivalents. Firstly, the German translation explicates the elliptical construction "My sons" by adding a dummy PRO-form and the verb BE. The German realization is thus a fully realised sentence syntactically. Secondly, "Das" is a deictic device serving to orient the hearer in the context of situation, focussing attention ahead, namely onto "meine Söhne". This expression is thus highlighted as rheme in informational structure. Clearly "My sons" is also rheme in the English original, but in the German translation "meine Söhne" figures more prominently as new information via syntactic highlighting. Consider too the expression "gleich" in the German translation, which has no equivalent in the English sentence. The additional lexicalisation of the temporal adverbial makes the temporal sequencing of the action more explicit. The quality of the time frame of the action (at which point in time in relation to the moment of the utterance something is going to happen) is more clearly characterized than in the English sentence.

(4) Use of Verbal Routines - Ad-hoc-Formulation

| | 10 | 11 |
|---|---|---|
| **Kerim Bey [v]** | Try this for size. | |
| **Kerim Bey [German]** | **Versuchen Sie ob es über die Schulter geht.** | |
| **007 [v]** | | |
| **007 [German]** | | |
| **Desc [nv]** | *007 handling a sniper's rifle; Kerim Bey steps in front of 007 and points to his shoulder*<br>[*Try, if it works over my shoulder] | *007 aims the rifle over Kerim Bey's shoulder* |

'Trying something for size' can be characterized as an formula that can be used in many situations in which something is tested for suitability or feasibility. The English sentence presupposes the visual context for interpreting the formula: the concrete meaning is made tangible in the situational context and the accompanying physical action. The hearer has therefore to infer the propositional content of the utterance from the context. By way of contrast, the German translation, while also invoking visual, situational information, is more fully specified linguistically, telling 007 exactly what he should do.

In summary, one can say that these film texts, in a number of instances, conform to the expectations of conventional language use in German as these are posited by the dimensions of cross-cultural difference. Whether or not these instances are part of a consistent pattern, that is, whether or not film language tends to reinforce already existent target language conventions, or whether they are just unsystematic, isolated peaks in increasingly converging fields of textual conventions between English and German is at the moment under investigation (Baumgarten, in preparation).

## 5   Conclusion

Contrastive analyses of film dialogue and their translations offer insights into norms and conventions of language use in different linguacultures. It is especially the constructed nature of the natural, spontaneous spoken discourse of the film text, i.e. the overall intelligibility of what is said in film, and the explicitness with which linguistic devices are implemented to realize particular pragmatic and discourse semantic functions, that makes acceptable and licensed linguistic forms and structures visible. Findings of this kind can clarify how language is used in identical social situations across cultures, and how language is put to use in the construction of social reality (see also Koller & House 1983 and Baumgarten, forthcoming). Feature films enact a diversity of social situations (communicative events) that no textbook could ever cover. It is for these reasons that language in film could be usefully integrated into language learning settings that are concerned with raising intercultural (pragmatic) awareness and competence.

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## Appendix

| | 0 |
|---|---|
| **Kerim Bey [v]** | Twice that Krilencu has tried to kill me. The third time he will succeed. Unless I get him first. And that I'll do tonight. |
| **Kerim Bey [German]** | Zweimal hat Krilencu versucht mich umzubringen. . Beim dritten Mal wird es ihm gelingen, . wenn ich ihn nicht vorher erwische. . Und heute Nacht werde ich ihn erwischen. |

| | 1 | 2 |
|---|---|---|
| **Kerim Bey [v]** | | I'm already too much in your debt. |
| **Kerim Bey [German]** | | Nein ich stehe schon zu tief in Ihrer Schuld. |
| **007 [v]** | No, with that arm you won't. . You better leave it to me. | |
| **007 [German]** | Sie vergessen dass Sie verwundet sind. . Überlassen Sie das lieber mir. . | |

| | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Kerim Bey [v]** | | | | Infrared lens. |
| **Kerim Bey [German]** | | | | Eine Infrarotlinse, . |
| **007 [v]** | How can a friend be in debt. | | Here. | Donnerwetter. |
| **007 [German]** | Wir sind Freunde, wie können Sie da in meiner Schuld stehen? | | Hier. | |
| **Desc [nv]** | | *007 assembles a sniper's rifle* | *hands Kerim Bay the sight.* | |

| | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Kerim Bey [v]** | | | My sons. They will ring his doorbell. He has a private escape hatch. |
| **Kerim Bey [German]** | | | Das sind meine Söhne. . Sie werden gleich bei ihm klingeln. . Er hat einen geheimen Fluchtausgang. |
| **007 [v]** | . . shh. | | |
| **Desc [nv]** | | *. . . . . .two men walk by* | |
| **Desc [German]** | *not realised* | | |

| | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Kerim Bey [v]** | Try this for size. | | Do you notice anything? | | She has a lovely mouth that Anita. |
| **Kerim Bey [German]** | Versuchen Sie ob es über die Schulter geht. | | Fällt Ihnen irgendetwas auf? | | Diese Anita hat einen wunder-schönen großen Mund. |
| **007 [v]** | | | | Not yet. | |
| **007 [German]** | | | | Nein. | |
| **Desc [nv]** | | *007 aims over his shoulder* | | | |

|  | 15 | 16 | 17 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Kerim Bey [v]** | | Arm or no arm I have to pull that trigger. | |
| **Kerim Bey [German]** | | Ob ich verwundet bin oder nicht, ich muss ihn selber umlegen . | |
| **007 [v]** | Yes, I see what you mean. | | If you think you can. You got one shot, remember. |
| **007 [German]** | Ja, ich weiß was Sie meinen. | | Und wenn Sie ihn nicht treffen? . Vergessen Sie nicht dass Sie nur einen Schuss haben. |
| **Desc [nv]** | | *whisper* | |

|  | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Kerim Bey [v]** | It'll have to do. | | | | | |
| **Kerim Bey [German]** | Ich muss ihn treffen. | | | | | |
| **007 [v]** | | | Quick, he's coming | | Quick! | |
| **007 [German]** | | | Achtung! Er kommt. | | Schießen Sie! | |
| **Desc [nv]** | | *.... the hatch opens* | | *......* | | *one shot* |

|  | .. | 25 |
|---|---|---|
| **Kerim Bey [v]** | Aah. That pays many debts. | |
| **Kerim Bey [German]** | Haaah, der Bursche wäre erledigt | |
| **007 [v]** | | She should have kept her mouth shut. |
| **007 [German]** | | Sie hat wirklich einen hübschen Mund. |

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[1] Informally glossed, "film text" is the meaning -structure that is made up of the combination of verbal and visual information.

[2] The invariability of the visual information is only relative in so far as it is, e.g., possible  to replace shots of writing in film (letters, inscriptions, sign, etc.) by post -produced close-up shots of the writing in the target language.

[3] However, among other shifts, this realisation entails that the focus would be shifted away from the name 'Colthorpe' to the rhematic 'schön sie wieder zu sehen'. Colthorpe would be expected to answer something.

[4] These are the main *linguistic* frameworks. Of course, theories and models of narration and cinematic representation also come into play, cf. e.g. Branigan  (1984).

[5] See the appendix for the full text. A stop [" . "] with spaces before and after indicates a pause of approximately 1 second.

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