

**CAN WE *DO THE RIGHT THING*? SUBTITLING  
AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH  
INTO FRENCH**

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## Abstract

Situated at the intersection of Translation Studies, Sociolinguistics and Film Studies, this thesis provides an analysis of the subtitling into French of a corpus of films portraying speakers of African American Vernacular English (henceforth AAVE). By analysing the French subtitles, the thesis focuses on the possibility of using non-standard forms in the target language, on their potential impact on the reception of a film, and on the theoretical underpinnings of juxtaposing two linguistic varieties on screen.

Chapter One examines the peculiar nature of interlingual subtitles in the polysemiotic context of films and the vulnerability of this form of translation. Chapter Two provides a description of the main linguistic and interactional features of AAVE, whilst Chapter Three analyses the way AAVE is represented in films, and studies how naturally occurring language is different from language used in films for the purpose of dialogue. Chapter Four provides an analysis of the subtitles of the films under study, and pays particular attention to how linguistic variation is conveyed – or not – in the subtitles. Chapter Five examines the use of *verlan* in French subtitles and its wider implications: through the juxtaposition of *verlan* and AAVE on screen, a cultural hybrid is created, and we investigate this hybridity in the light of Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignisation.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

AAVE: African American Vernacular English

CNRTL: Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales

SL: Source Language

ST: Source Text

TL: Target Language

TT: Target Text



## Introduction

‘Moi qui ne suis même pas sur le grand échiquier le pion d’un pion – une figure qui n’existe même pas, qui ne participe même pas au jeu –, je veux maintenant, contre la règle et pour la confusion de tout jeu [...] prendre la place de la reine, peut-être même la place du roi en personne, si ce n’est de tout l’échiquier...’ Franz Kafka, *Letter to Milena Jesenska*, 1920

### *Preliminary*

Spike Lee’s film *Do the Right Thing* received rather mixed reviews when it was first released in 1989, mostly because film critics – such as Joe Klein and Terence McNally – feared that the film would incite the African American audience to riot. Reviews focussed 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 set at the heart of 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 trash can and throws it into 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?’ The translators of *Do the Right Thing* find themselves in a position that echoes Mookie’s in the film: at the nexus between cultures (the source and target cultures), translators have to take decisions, they have to act, and sometimes make clear-cut statements through their decisions. 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, as we will see below, 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 social organisation.

By examining the subtitling into French of a corpus of films of the 1990s portraying speakers of African American Vernacular English (henceforth AAVE), this thesis considers inter-cultural communication and emphasises the importance of translation in today’s global world. Translation is the interface where and whereby cultures meet, collide, but also communicate, and potentially shape each other. The 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 corpus, and examines the power of translation as a shaping force.<sup>1</sup> Placed at the intersection of Translation Studies, Sociolinguistics and Film Studies, this cross-disciplinary study examines the extent to which linguistic variation

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Case study’ is used here with the meaning it is given in social sciences. As there are ten films in our corpus, it is in fact a multiple case study.

can be communicated across culture in translation, and the way source and target cultures interact in the polysemiotic context of subtitled films.

### ***Translation and audiovisual translation***

The position of the translator in the process of translation is an element that has often come under scrutiny. In audiovisual translation in particular, translators work under strict time constraints, on top of the technical and linguistic difficulties they may have to face. For all their good work, the reward is meagre: translators are often ‘invisible’, to cite Lawrence Venuti, 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 Mona 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. Michael Cronin, in his book *Translation Goes to the Movies* (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 *La 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. Matthieu's thus avenges translators, renders them not merely visible, but exclusive, and circumvents the need for an original text. When it comes to audiovisual translation, 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).

In the history of translation, translators have been compared to many things: the translator is a bridge-maker, a smuggler, an author, an artist, a poet, a philosopher, a communicator, and so 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 (henceforth TT); as an artist s/he might examine his/her creative input and crafting ability 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.

Audiovisual translation is a relatively new discipline that has recently 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 the issues mentioned. 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 audiovisual translation then, and what distinguishes it from literary translation? According to Delia Chiaro (2009: 141), 'audiovisual translation is one of several overlapping umbrella terms that include 'media translation', 'multimedia translation', 'multimodal translation' and 'screen translation'. From the advent of the 'talkies' (films where spoken dialogue is a part of the soundtrack) in the 1920s, 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 audiovisual translation than in the past, as it is particularly linked to technological advances, the advent of the DVD and digital television.<sup>2</sup> Audiovisual products, then, tautologically, function simultaneously on two levels: auditory and visual, and as such are often

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<sup>2</sup> Audiovisual translation is not necessarily linked to electronic products. Operas, for instance, are frequently performed in the original language, with surtitles projected in the TL.

referred to as ‘polysemiotic’; 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 audiovisual translation are dubbing and subtitling.<sup>3</sup> While dubbing uses the acoustic channel and consists in replacing the original spoken dialogue with new dialogue in the target language (henceforth 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 thesis 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.<sup>4</sup>

The thesis looks specifically at the subtitling of a particular vernacular, AAVE, into French, and prompts the following question: to what extent, and in what circumstances are the social and cultural features associated with AAVE conveyed for a French audience, if at all, specifically in the context of subtitled films? This question raises a number of issues that will be tackled in the course of the thesis: how is the passage from film

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<sup>3</sup> There are other less common modes of audiovisual translation, such as voiceover and audio description.

<sup>4</sup> It could be objected here that France has a long tradition of dubbing, and that it would therefore be more relevant, marketwise, to look at dubbing strategies. However, with the recent technological developments, foreign films in France are more and more available in their original subtitled version (either on DVDs, on digital television, or in cinemas) thus giving the possibility to French viewers to be confronted with what is often deemed a more ‘authentic’ version of the product.

dialogue (written to be spoken) to subtitles (written as if spoken) dealt with in the process of translation? What is AAVE, how is it portrayed in film dialogues, for what purposes, and to convey what sociolinguistic information? How is AAVE translated into French, and is it systematically neutralised or have subtitlers found ways to convey in their subtitles the specific social and cultural meanings attached to AAVE? To what extent are Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignisation relevant in the context of audiovisual translation?

### ***Origins and development of the project***

Before undertaking this thesis, and in a bid to acquire first hand experience of subtitling, I worked as a freelance translator for a subtitling company based in the United States and translated English language material into French. I use here the word 'translate' very purposefully: while some specialists of audiovisual translation have tried to create a new terminology in an attempt to better describe the challenges involved by audiovisual translation (see for instance Gambier's (2004) 'tradaptation' or 'transadaptation' for instance), the task I was commissioned to carry out essentially involved translation – rewriting the original dialogue in the TL, with the added constraint of brevity. In order to carry out each subtitling task, I would receive two files: a video file – the 'original' – and an MS Word document which would consist of a spotting list and a transcript of the original dialogue to be translated for each subtitle.<sup>5</sup> For each line or double line of subtitle, depending on how long it was to stay on screen, a

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<sup>5</sup> A spotting list is a list of the time in (time of appearance of a particular line – or double line on screen) and time out (time of disappearance) of each subtitle.

number of seconds – then converted into a proportional number of characters to be used in the subtitle – was attributed. My task was then to write a line of text in French that used a number of characters equal or smaller than the number of characters allowed for each line. One of the first videos I worked on was one of the type referred to by the company as ‘featurettes’, that is, a short programme of approximately five minutes in length. It was an episode from the American programme *Wild’n Out*, a type of game show that pits two teams of comedians – the Red Squad and the Black Squad – against each other in a series of games that rely on improvisational comedy. For the episode I was working on, the presenter of the show would say a word, and a person from one of the teams would immediately have to step onto the stage and make a pun using that particular word. The audience on the show then reacts to the pun – cheers and laughs if the pun is good, or silence if the pun is deemed to be bad.

This three-minute programme embodies some of the challenges of subtitling very well: first, I was faced with the task of not only translating the puns,<sup>6</sup> but also of making them accessible in writing, which involves ‘media-specific awareness’ (Gottlieb, 1997: 207) given the different natures of speaking and writing. Whilst the spoken puns involved mostly collocational homonymy or paronymy (where the central feature of the wordplay is ‘word-in-context ambiguity’ (Gottlieb, 1997: 210)), subtitles necessarily had to rely on slightly different clues. As the puns were central in the original, the subtitles could not replace them with non-wordplay,

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<sup>6</sup> The translation of puns or wordplay has been addressed in a number of papers, including Culler (1988), Delabastita (1993, 1994, 1996, 1997), Gottlieb (1997) and Spanakaki (2007).



because the humorous effect would have been lost, rendering the programme rather pointless. The question was also raised about what words should be used to translate the words the presenter would say (the words that were the base of the puns). Those words would appear on the screen in the original and would not be removed in the subtitled version, thus making the subtitles particularly vulnerable, a direct comparison between the original word and its translation, both written on screen at the same time, being made possible. How to translate these words then? Literally, or using a cognate, or even using any word with which a good pun could come to mind? Very often, the comedians would also use gestures or mime to accompany their puns, so ideally the subtitles would have to match those gestures to maintain the semiotic coherence of the product. In addition to this, most of the comedians were African Americans, used a lot of features of AAVE, and a very informal register. All of these features would ideally also have to be taken into consideration, each raising particular issues.

This experience captures a number of the challenges of audiovisual translation, of ultimate relevance for the thesis. While such puns are always going to be demanding to translate, they emphasise the need for subtitles to match or complement in cognitively acceptable ways the visuals of the film. They also remind us of the problem of transcribing speech in writing or, in other words, of giving written words a spoken flavour, particularly in French, a language for which the difference between the spoken and written variety is very important. This raises the question of the relation

between spoken and written, and of how subtitlers can suggest orality in writing, possibly blurring the boundaries between the two, whilst also bearing in mind that subtitles have to be as unambiguous as possible for viewers to understand them. In addition, the use of non-standard features – whether by speakers in the ‘real’ world or by characters in films – is always significant in that it provides information about the speaker. Naturally, non-standard features are so essentially tied to a given social and cultural environment that their translation is always going to present a challenge, particularly in the case of films, where there is the possibility of tensions between the images and the soundtrack which relay information about the source culture on the one hand, and the subtitles which relay potentially conflicting information about the target culture on the other.

A limited number of studies have been dedicated to the translation of dialects, and even fewer to the translation of dialects in audiovisual contexts, a field that is currently undergoing significant developments. And whilst the translation of AAVE into other languages has been examined in two journal articles,<sup>7</sup> no extensive study has been dedicated specifically to the subtitling of AAVE for a French audience.

### ***Corpus***

The corpus of this thesis consists of DVD versions of ten films, all released between 1989 (*Do the Right Thing*) and 1999 (*The Wood, In Too Deep*). DVD versions of the films were all made available in France with subtitles

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<sup>7</sup> Namely Berthele (2000) and Queen (2004). A literature review is provided at the end of Chapter One.

between 2000 and 2006. These films form part of the 1990s prevalence of films portraying predominantly African American casts, and representing the experiences of African Americans in urban areas of the United States. Although older films also portrayed some African Americans (*Shaft*, 1971; *Uptown Saturday Night*, 1974), they were not included in the corpus so the present research could focus on more contemporary representations, and also to limit the interference of diachronic differences between the representations of AAVE (although admittedly such a study would undoubtedly prove extremely interesting). In the 2000s, far fewer films about the experiences of African Americans in urban areas of the United States were released, with the noticeable exception of *Get Rich or Die Tryin* (2006) which was not included in the corpus for the reason stated above. Other films such as *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1992), *Fresh* (1994) and *Set It Off* (1996) were not included because they have never been released on DVDs with subtitles for the French market. Finally, a few films portraying African Americans were left out of the corpus because characters do not use – or only use on very few occasions – features of AAVE. These include *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), *Crooklyn* (1994), *He Got Game* (1998), *Love and Basketball* (2000), and *She Hate Me* (2004).

The authors of the subtitles and the companies involved are credited very differently in the films of the corpus. In three of the films (*Do the Right Thing*, *Jungle Fever* and *Clockers*) neither the company nor the author(s) are credited and it is impossible to know who wrote the subtitles, or even whether the same person(s) did all three. In the case of *New Jack City*,

*Boyz n the Hood*, and *White Men Can't Jump*, only the company is credited (SDI Media Group for *New Jack City* and *Boyz n the Hood*, Gelula/SDI for *White Men Can't Jump*). For two films (*The Wood* and *Get on the Bus*), only the author is mentioned (Valérie Le Guen for the former, Alex Keiller for the latter). In two cases (*Menace II Society* and *In Too Deep*), both the company (CMC for both) and the authors are mentioned (Didier Ruiller for the former, Henri Behar for the latter). Despite repeated efforts from the researcher, it has unfortunately proven impossible to get in touch with any of the translators, either through the subtitling companies themselves or via private channels, and it is impossible, as a consequence, to ask what decisions they felt they had to make when writing the subtitles, and to get further insight into what the translators were aiming for. The films of the corpus are presented in the following section, where a short summary of the narrative is provided, as well as a short analysis of the main underlying issues.

#### *Do the Right Thing (1989), Spike Lee*

The main character, Mookie – a young African American who lives with his sister Jade in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn – works as a delivery man at Sal's Famous Pizzeria. Salvatore 'Sal' Frangione – an Italian American who has owned the pizzeria for twenty-five years – has two sons: Vito, who is friends with Mookie, and Pino, who feels racial contempt for African Americans.

For one whole day, the film follows the street's residents. The local radio DJ, Mister Señor Love Daddy, is used as a narrator at various moments in the film and warns the audience straight away that the day is going to be hot. Da Mayor is a philandering drunk who spends his day either buying beer or trying to win the affection of the neighbourhood matron, Miss Mother-Sister. A young man named Radio Raheem hangs in the street with a boombox blasting Public Enemy's 'Fight the power' wherever he goes. A mentally disabled white man, Smiley, constantly tries to sell people hand coloured pictures of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.

During the day, Buggin Out, an African American young man and friend of Mookie's, asks Sal why there are no pictures of African Americans on his wall of fame. He argues that only African Americans buy pizza from Sal, and that therefore, they should have a say. Sal takes offence: he is a proud Italian American, and does not want to feature anyone but Italians or Italian Americans on his wall of fame. Buggin Out tries to call for a boycott of Sal's, but no one follows him except Radio Raheem who earlier got into an argument with Sal for playing his music too loud in the pizzeria.

That evening, just before the shop closes down for the night, Buggin Out and Radio Raheem walk in and insist that Sal changes the pictures on the wall. Sal refuses and destroys Radio Raheem's boombox with a baseball bat, causing a fight to break out. When the police arrive, they arrest Buggin

Out, and accidentally kill Radio Raheem, who was agitated and had been placed in a chokehold by a police officer.

Onlookers are enraged by Radio Raheem's death, and contemplate retaliatory action against Sal. At that moment, Mookie smashes the window of Sal's pizzeria with a trashcan, triggering the sacking of the shop by the crowd. The angry crowd turns into a riotous mob, and Smiley sets the pizzeria on fire. The mob then turns to the Korean market next door, but finally spares the shop owner when he claims 'I no white! I black! You, me, same! We same!' The firefighters arrive and after several warnings use their hoses on the mob. Smiley goes back inside the restaurant to hang a picture of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr on what is left of Sal's wall of fame.

The following morning, Mookie goes to see Sal to demand his weekly pay, which Sal reluctantly gives him. There is then a textual epilogue to the film with the two quotations by Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X.

The African American characters, of all ages, use many features of AAVE, with the exception of Jade who is portrayed to have strong ethics and to make the most sensible decisions. The few white characters – Sal and his two sons, Smiley, the police officers, and a man who lives in the neighbourhood and accidentally steps on Buggin Out's new trainers,

almost causing a fight – naturally, do not use features of AAVE, or are ridiculed when they do.<sup>8</sup>

*New Jack City (1991), Mario Van Peebles*

The film is set in 1989. Nino Brown and his gang, the Cash Money Brothers (all African Americans), want to become the dominant drug ring in New York City after the introduction of crack cocaine to the city's streets. They convert a whole apartment building called the 'Carter' into a crack den, and business flourishes. Two detectives, Scotty Appleton (himself African American) and Nick Peretti want to take the gang down and stop their illicit activities. Scotty recruits Pookie, an African American teenager and former drug addict, to work at the Carter to help them gather evidence against the Cash Money Brothers.

Pookie initially earns the trust of the Cash Money Brothers before relapsing and compromising the mission. He is found dead, and attached to a bomb that Peretti defuses. The Cash Money Brothers, realising that their cover has been blown, abandon the Carter. At Pookie's funeral, Scotty decides to take the matter into his own hands, and goes undercover as a drug dealer who wants to get in with the Cash Money Brothers. He gains Nino's trust by revealing that his right-hand man, Gee Money, wants his own drug empire. Scotty's cover is eventually blown as well, and Nino kills Gee Money, before holing up in an apartment and continuing his drug empire on his own.

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<sup>8</sup> Smiley tries calling Mookie his 'bro', prompting a dismissive gesture from Mookie in reply.

Nino is eventually caught by the police, and Scotty reveals that Nino actually killed his mother as an initiation into his first gang. Peretti convinces Scotty to let Nino live, and Nino's trial begins. Nino turns state's evidence while on the stand, and pleads guilty to lesser charges. He walks triumphantly out of the courthouse and is killed by an older man who previously accused Nino of destroying his community.

Nino and his crew are all African Americans in a very poor, drug-riddled and predominantly African American neighbourhood. All the African American characters portrayed in the film use features of AAVE.

#### *Jungle Fever (1991), Spike Lee*

Flipper Purify is an African American man in his thirties who lives with his wife (also African American) and daughter in a comfortable house in Harlem. Flipper works as an architect in Manhattan for a large firm. A new secretary is appointed for him, Angela, an Italian American, despite the wish Flipper had expressed to his bosses for an African American secretary. Angela lives in Bensonhurst with her bitter widower father Mike and her two older brothers, and is engaged to Paulie Carbone. One night when Flipper and Angie are working late, a mutual kiss occurs which leads to a steamy affair between the two which turns many people's lives upside down.



Flipper confides in his best friend Cyrus about his affair, and despite Cyrus's promise not to tell anyone, he tells his wife Vera, who then tells Drew, Flipper's wife. Drew is extremely angry and throws Flipper out. Meanwhile, Angela also confides in two of her friends who betray her by telling her father. Mike gives her a very violent beating before throwing her out. She then confesses to her fiancé, Paulie, a mild-mannered shop assistant, who is heartbroken. He however finds the courage to ask Orin Goode, an African American regular customer in his shop, out on a date. She turns him down, out of blind loyalty to her parents whom she knows would disapprove.

Elsewhere, Flipper's drug-addicted brother Gator, who has several times conned his mother into giving him money to pay for crack, tries his luck one last time, but his father gets a gun and shoots him dead.

Against everybody's advice, Flipper and Angela start a relationship, and move in together. One night, the police almost arrest Flipper after receiving an inaccurate report that a white lady was being attacked. Flipper and Angela get into an argument and he tells her that he does not want to have half-blood babies. He then admits that he was only curious about white women and they break up. Angela returns to her father's house.

In the end, Flipper is seen having sex with Drew again. When they are finished, she sends him off, and it is clear that they are not yet back together.

Gator uses features of AAVE very often, unlike Flipper who uses them more sparingly.<sup>9</sup> In one scene where Drew and her friends gather to discuss female-male relationships, the women use a rhetorical strategy referred to as call-and-response (or backchanneling) by specialists of AAVE.

*Boyz n the Hood (1991), John Singleton*

The film opens with two messages shown on the screen: ‘1 in 21 black males die of murder’ and ‘Most will be killed by other black males’. The story begins with a flashback to 1984. The main character, Tre Styles, a young African American then aged nine or ten, misbehaves in class, although his teacher acknowledges on the phone with Tre’s mother that he is a bright boy, he is excluded from the school. His mother then sends Tre to live with his father from whom she is separated, in South Central Los Angeles. His father, Jason ‘Furious’ Styles, is very strict with Tre and tells him that being responsible will make Tre a man and keep him from ending up dead or in prison. During Tre’s first night at his father’s, a burglary takes place and Furious shoots at the burglar who escapes. The police arrive on site more than an hour later and decide the crime is not important because nothing was stolen. The following day, Tre is reunited with his childhood friends, Chris, Darin (nicknamed Doughboy) and Ricky. Days later, Furious takes Tre on a fishing trip and warns him about unprotected sex. When they come back to their house, they see Chris and Doughboy being taken away by the police for stealing.

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<sup>9</sup> This difference in character is mimicked in their names. Gator is short for alligator, a wild and dangerous predator, while Flipper is the name of a dolphin – a more dignified creature – in a very successful 1960s TV show.

The film then jumps ahead seven years, to a party to celebrate Doughboy's release from prison. Tre has a job selling clothes and stayed away from pushing drugs. Doughboy's mother asks him to pass some of his wisdom to Doughboy, whom she fears will soon be sent back to prison. At this stage, Tre hopes to go to college, as does his girlfriend Brandi. Ricky also hopes to go to college on a football scholarship and is later visited by a college recruiter, who tells him he needs to score 700 at the SAT test if he wants to qualify for a scholarship.

During a night out, Ricky is provoked into a fight by another African American youth, Ferris, and is defended by his brother Doughboy. The whole scene degenerates into gunfire. As they are driving away, Tre and Ricky are stopped by the police, one of whom is the officer who decided years earlier that the burglary at Tre's father's house was not important. He is an African American too, but displays his hatred of other African Americans physically and verbally by shoving a gun in Tre's face before finally letting him off.

The next day, a fight breaks out between Ricky and Doughboy after Ricky's girlfriend asked him to go get a box of cornmeal. Their mother rushes to Ricky's aid, amplifying the fact that she values him and his college potential more than she values Doughboy. Ricky and Tre head for the grocery store and are attacked by Ferris and his crew on the way back.

Ricky is shot dead. Later that night, his mother finds out that he passed the SAT test with 710.

Doughboy and Tre want revenge, but Furious talks Tre out of it. Doughboy and two friends track down Ferris and his gang and kill them. A textual epilogue states that Doughboy is murdered two weeks after Ricky's funeral, but that both Tre and Brandi go to college in Atlanta.

All the protagonists use features of AAVE in this film. There is a high density of features used in the dialogue.

*White Men Can't Jump (1992), Ron Shelton*

Billy Hoyle is a former college-level basketball player who makes a living hustling (predominantly African American) streetball players who assume he cannot play because he is white. Billy meets Sidney Deane, an arrogant African American player, and humiliates him twice on the pitch. Sidney does not take it well but thinks that Billy could be useful to him.

They begin a partnership and start hustling other players for money. When they unexpectedly lose a game, it turns out that Sidney has double-crossed Billy, making him lose all his savings to a group of Sidney's friends. Billy's girlfriend Gloria is understandably upset. They both go to visit Sidney; Gloria appeals to Sidney's wife and they agree to share the money.

Billy and Sidney later win an outdoor tournament with a \$5000 prize. Although he is pleased, Sidney points out that Billy cannot slam-dunk and suggests that white men can't jump. Billy bets his share of the prize money on the fact that he can dunk, but he fails. Gloria leaves him. A friend of Sidney's who works as a security guard on the TV show Jeopardy agrees to get Gloria on the show if Billy can sink a half court hook shot, which he does. Gloria is later seen earning \$14100 dollars on TV. Gloria and Billy get back together.

Later, Sidney's home has been burgled, and he needs help from Billy. They play a game in which Billy bets the money Gloria has won (despite her warnings that she would leave him if he did). They win the game thanks to a dunk by Billy. When he gets home, however, Gloria has left for good.

In the film, all of the streetball players but Billy are African American, and they use a lot of features of AAVE, and brag a lot, leading to very comic exchanges, and two extended scenes where two African American characters play the dozens. Billy tries to play the dozens with Sidney in the ultimate lines of the film but he is very hesitant, and Sidney is very dismissive of Billy's attempt at 'blending in'.

*Menace II Society (1993), Albert & Allen Hughes*

The action takes place in South Central Los Angeles. The film opens on Caine and Kevin (nicknamed O-Dog), two African American teenagers, shopping for beer in a liquor store. The Korean shop-owner and his wife

are very suspicious of them, and the two protagonists are rude to them, and start drinking in the store. O-Dog goes on to pay the shop-owner, but as Caine and O-Dog are on their way out, the shop-owner tells O-Dog 'I feel sorry for your mother', with rather unfortunate consequences. O-Dog shoots him repeatedly point blank before turning to the shop-owner's wife, asking for the surveillance videotape. He retrieves it, shoots her too, empties the cash register and the shop-owner's pockets, and then runs away with Caine. O-Dog later shows the videotape to his friends and talks about possibly selling it, which greatly upsets Caine. This opening scene serves as a prologue to the film and deliberately introduces the two main characters and their everyday environment as tense and violent.

It is the last day of school, and Caine is graduating. His grandparents seem very proud of him (we do not know where Caine's parents are). Caine deals drugs to support a friend of his, Ronnie, an African American girl of the same age as Caine, and her son Anthony. She lives alone with her son, and is a rather serious girl – later in the film she gets an office job in Atlanta. Anthony's father, Pernell, is serving a life sentence in prison with no parole, and taught Caine how to get by before he went to jail. Later that day, Caine and his cousin Harold go to a party where they meet their friends (all African American teenagers), A-Wax, a cocky street thug, Stacy, who has just earned a scholarship to play football at Kansas University, and Sharif, 'an ex-knucklehead turned Muslim'. After the party, they get in their cars to get some food, but Caine and Harold are carjacked – Harold is too slow to surrender his wallet and to get out of his

car, and he is shot point blank while Caine is shot in the shoulder. Harold dies and Caine is rushed to the hospital. A week later, O-Dog tells Caine he knows who the thugs are, and along with A-Wax, they kill them later that night.

A few weeks later, while they are trying to steal a car, O-Dog and Caine are arrested by the police. O-Dog is released because he is only seventeen, and the authorities lessen the charges against Caine, and although the police link him to the killing of the Korean shop-owner and his wife, he is released. He then buys a stolen car and robs another African American teenager at a fast-food drive-through for his wheel rims, rings, and pager.

The following night, Caine and Sharif are beaten by police officers and dumped in Mexican gang territory, probably expecting them to be beaten further or even killed. The Mexicans, however, take them to the hospital. While at the hospital, Caine is visited by Ronnie, who tells him she has found a job in Atlanta and would like him to join her there. Caine initially seems reluctant, but finally accepts, a week later, at a party at Ronnie's. During the party, while he is playing cards with O-Dog and Stacy, another guest, Chauncy (another African American teenager) tries to force himself on Ronnie, and Caine repeatedly punches him in the face to punish him. Chauncy holds a grudge and gives a copy of the videotape to the police who start looking for the two killers.

The next morning, Caine is just outside his grandparents' house with O-Dog when a man approaches and claims Caine has impregnated his sister. Caine refuses to take responsibility and assaults him violently. His grandparents, having witnessed the scene, decide to throw him out despite Caine's plea to wait until his departure for Atlanta. On the day Caine and Ronnie are set to leave Los Angeles, as they are loading the car with the help of Stacy and (a very reluctant) O-Dog, a car drives by and starts shooting in their direction. One of the shooters is the man Caine beat up earlier. Sharif is killed and Caine left badly wounded as he was trying to protect Anthony. The film ends on a voiceover, with Caine admitting that he wished he had made better decisions: 'I had done too much to turn back, and I had done too much to go on. I guess, in the end, it all catches up with you. My grandpa asked me one time if I care whether I live or die. Yeah, I do. And now it's too late'. Caine then dies, whilst O-Dog is hustled into a police car in handcuffs, perhaps for the liquor store murder.

All the protagonists use features of AAVE in this film, with the noticeable exceptions of Caine's mother and Ronnie. There is a high density of features used in the dialogue, all the way through the film.

#### *Clockers (1995), Spike Lee*

The film takes place in Brooklyn, where a group of 'clockers' – street-level drug dealers – sell drugs under the tutelage of local drug baron Rodney Little. The main character, Ronald 'Strike' Dunham, is an African American teenager with an allergy to milk who is asked by Rodney to kill



Darryl Adams, another clocker, because he has been stealing from Rodney. Strike then meets with his brother Victor, who is married with two children and lives in a relatively stable situation, and persuades him to kill Darryl for him.

Detectives Rocco Klein and Larry Mazilli are the first to get to the scene of Darryl's murder. They receive a phone call from another detective who says a man has confessed at a local church that he killed Darryl. They meet Victor at the church and he is taken for questioning. When interrogated, Victor claims he killed Darryl in self-defence, but Rocco finds holes in his story, and is somewhat puzzled that a man with a job, a wife, two children and aspirations to move out of the projects would commit such a crime. Rocco also knows Victor's brother Strike, and suspects that Victor might be covering for him.

Rocco pressures Strike into confessing, while Rodney and his brother Errol (Rodney's enforcer who caught AIDS through an infected heroine needle) constantly breathe down his neck and do not want him talking to the detective. Rocco is aware of Rodney's game, and somehow manages to persuade him that Strike has confessed the murder and also blown the whistle on Rodney's drug ring. He then arrests Rodney and humiliates Strike in front of his fellow clockers. Strike makes plans to leave town with the money he has saved, but a younger boy finds Strike's gun and shoots Errol. Rocco calls in a social worker to help the boy and allows Strike to leave town.

The scenes between the clockers are particularly interesting from a linguistic point of view – they are a group of African American teenagers who talk about their current preoccupations: business, music and girls. They all use features of AAVE quite densely, while in the film the two detectives are Italian Americans, whose way of talking is also very informal but contrasts with that of the teenagers.

*Get on the Bus (1996), Spike Lee*

The film tells the story of a bus journey taken by a group of African American men from Los Angeles to Washington DC where the Million Men March is being held. The men get to know each other along the way and discuss various topics, such as their personal lives, political beliefs, or the OJ Simpson case.

Evan Jr, a teenager who fancies himself as a gangster and has nicknamed himself ‘Smooth’, is under his father’s guard but manages to escape his vigilance during a rest break. He is eventually found, and his father, Evan Sr, realises that his son is only seeking his father’s attention.

Another character, Xavier, who refers to himself as ‘X’, has a camcorder and begins interviewing the passengers and asking for their opinions on various topics. The tension rises when Xavier interviews Flip, an aspiring actor more preoccupied by his own sexual prowess and with getting a film role than with the march. Flip reveals himself as a homophobe and racist

after provoking two passengers for being homosexuals and Gary for being biracial. Gary reveals he is an off-duty police officer who works in South Central, and is used to being ostracised by other African Americans for being a biracial police officer. These revelations lead Jamal to unveil that he is an ex-gangster converted to Islam, and is in charge of a programme to discourage youths from becoming involved with gangs. He also reveals that he committed murder and rape, and Gary informs him that he will place him under arrest upon their return in California. Kyle then reveals he is a war veteran who was shot by his own platoon because of his race and sexual orientation. A fight with Flip ensues in which Kyle is victorious.

During the trip, the bus breaks down and the group boards a new bus with a white driver, Rick. He is Jewish and feels the need to speak out against Farrakhan's anti-Semitic statements; some members of the group fight back using Jewish stereotypes. Rick abandons the trip, leaving George, the tour operator, to share the driving with Evan Sr.

As the bus approaches Washington DC, Xavier discovers that Jeremiah, the elderly member of the group, is unconscious in his seat. He is rushed to the hospital but dies as the group watches the march on television.

All the protagonists are African Americans and use some features of AAVE. Some of them are presented as relatively educated and all have strong political opinions. Evan Jr, the rebellious son, is the one who uses

features of AAVE the most, causing his father to react quite strongly (when Evan Jr calls him ‘dawg’ for instance).

*In Too Deep (1999), Michael Rymer*

Jeffrey Cole, an African American detective and recent police academy graduate, gets an undercover assignment on the day of his graduation. The film follows him in this scheme to take down the local drug lord, Dwayne ‘God’ Gittens, who is very powerful and controls eighty percent of the drug traffic in Cincinnati. Posing as J. Reid, from Akron, Cole is initially determined to bring him down.

Cole slowly infiltrates God’s network. He is good at earning the trust of small-time drug dealers, and gradually gets closer to God. But the deeper Cole involves himself, the harder it becomes for him to know where his loyalty lies. As he gets closer to God’s inner circle, he learns about God’s violent tendencies, but also sees him as a benefactor to the poor, a dedicated family man, and a man who staunchly defends his friends.

In the meantime, Cole’s commanding officer starts fearing that he has become too close to God, has gone in too deep, and having had his judgment clouded may not be able to retain his identity. When the big bust against God takes place, Cole remains faithful to his original allegiance and betrays God.

Most of the characters involved in drug trafficking are African Americans and use some features of AAVE. Cole's superiors are all white and whilst they use police slang, do not use features of AAVE.

The Wood (1999), *Rick Famuyiwa*

The film tells the story of three African American friends, Mike, Roland and Slim, and how they grew up in Inglewood, California. It opens two hours before Roland is supposed to get married to Lisa. Mike narrates the story of how the three friends met, and there is a flashback to ten years previously when he also first met Alicia, his high school sweetheart. When he was younger, Mike touched Alicia's backside, leading to a fight with her brother Stacey.

Back in the present, Roland has disappeared, and another friend, Tanya, phones to let Mike and Slim know that Roland is with her and is very drunk. The two then go to Tanya's house to pick him up and drive him back to the wedding, but Roland vomits on his wedding jacket.

In another flashback, the three friends go to their first dance of the year. They stop by a store that gets held up by Stacey, who then drives them to the party. They are stopped by the police who eventually let them go. The party is almost over when they get there, but Mike manages to get a dance with Alicia who even gives him her phone number.

Back in the present again, the three friends take their clothes to the cleaners, with only one hour left before the wedding. Mike reminisces again about their junior year in high school when they were talking about sex, about ways to get it, and making bets about who will get it first. They finally make it to the ceremony where Roland apologises to Lisa for worrying her before the ceremony, and they finally get married.

The vast majority of the cast is African American and all male characters use features of AAVE. As in the other films, their closeness is illustrated by the fact that they speak very informally with each other.

#### ***General remarks about the corpus***

The first noticeable feature is that most films in the corpus are set either in New York or in California, with the exception of *In Too Deep* (Cincinnati) and *Get on the Bus* (the bus travels across the United States), and all of them (except *Get on the Bus*, for obvious reasons) take place in urban areas. All the films have a predominantly African American cast and also show some topical similarities: *Menace II Society* and *Boyz n the Hood* for instance have very similar plotlines. They both take place in Los Angeles and deal with groups of friends who deal drugs in a poor, predominantly African American neighbourhood. Violence and drugs are omnipresent, and both films end with the death of one of the main characters. In both films, some characters have experienced or are experiencing time in prison, and the city of Atlanta is presented in both films as a safe haven. In all but

two films of the corpus (*White Men Can't Jump* and *The Wood*), a murder is committed or has been committed and an African American has died.

Other topics that are frequently explored include family structure and family relationships, schooling, friendship, relationships with the opposite sex and police violence. Racism and relationships between communities are also frequently discussed, but antagonisms within the African American community (and particularly black-on-black violence) are also frequently tackled. The ghettoisation of the African American community is also often voiced by characters. There are also some leitmotifs such as football scholarships (as a way of leaving the ghetto) (*Menace II Society*, *Boyz n the Hood*), conversion to Islam (*Menace II Society*, *Get on the Bus*), the fear of AIDS (*Boyz n the Hood*, *Clockers*) and perhaps more surprisingly Korean shopkeepers (*Do the Right Thing*, *Menace II Society*, *The Wood*). These elements may be stereotypical, but to some extent they reflect the major preoccupations of the characters, and by extension also evoke the wider interests of some African Americans in the United States.

Most films present characters in environments that are familiar to them: discussions with friends, family, or rivals. The register is therefore frequently informal – if not plain rude – and characters often use slang words and insults. Most African American characters, especially but not exclusively teenagers and young adults, dress in similar fashion, with very loose-fitting clothes and baseball caps, and use at least some features of AAVE. They also display similar characteristics and have a tendency to

become violent easily. The vast majority carry guns and know how to use them. All these features contribute to a sense of what life in the ghetto might be like, both creating and recreating an image of African America, while a range of narrative, formal and characterisation strategies are drawn upon to evoke African American culture to viewers.

### ***Plan of the thesis***

The first chapter of this thesis contextualises the study by discussing the polysemiotics of subtitling and the complexity of films as sign systems. Subtitles are ancillary, they are added to a product, and are meant to portray spoken utterances, whilst complying with certain technical and linguistic requirements. This chapter looks at the situation of French, where the level of diamesic variation is particularly important,<sup>10</sup> and for which, consequently, a written medium such as subtitling might be essentially inadequate for the representation of the spoken qualities of foreign discourses. The final section of this chapter is dedicated to a literature review of the translation of dialects and more specifically of the translation of AAVE.

Chapter Two examines what AAVE is, who its speakers are, and what its main features are – whether lexical, syntactical, phonological or interactional. By investigating the abundant literature written about AAVE, my aim is to map out its main features and to relate them to patterns analysed by sociolinguists in order to understand the social and cultural

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<sup>10</sup> In sociolinguistics, this is the name of the variation between the written form of a language – usually considered to have undergone a greater level of standardisation, and therefore perceived to be more ‘correct’ – and the spoken form.



implications of the use of AAVE, which potentially inform its representation in translation.

In Chapter Three, I look at the way AAVE is represented in the films of the corpus. It is often taken for granted that a language and its representations in films are in fact the same. However, we demonstrate here that scriptwriters do not rely on all the features of AAVE to portray it on screen.

Whilst Chapters Two and Three establish the object of our study (AAVE), and how it is represented in films, Chapter Four is a detailed analysis of the subtitles of our films. Whilst there appears to be a general tendency to standardise non-standard features in subtitles – perhaps because of the linguistic and technical constraints of the medium – the subtitles of some of the films of the corpus indicate that it is, however, possible to convey a certain level of informality and to reflect register in the French translation. The subtitles of three of the films present a feature of *banlieue* French known as *le verlan*, which, I argue, can be justified by the proximity between the African American street culture and the French *banlieues*. The use of such features however is far from being unproblematic, and we examine here how the two cultures come into contact, how they collide, and how they interact in the filmic medium.

In light of the previous chapters, the final chapter of this thesis is a discussion of the interplay between the form and the content of subtitles,

more specifically where culturally-bound items are concerned. In this chapter, we re-examine Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignisation. Whilst the two concepts are at the core of many studies made in Translation Studies including audiovisual translation, they are rarely discussed critically in relation to subtitles, and we consider here their pertinence in the context of subtitled films and explore the implications of this criticism for the usefulness of these key concepts more generally.

## Chapter One – On the Nature of Subtitling

### *Introduction*

Films often try to portray reality not only visually, but also in terms of the language used by the characters. The dialogue in the films of the corpus work with the images to give the viewers a sense of what the community of AAVE speakers is like. Dialogue is but a part of a complex polysemiotic system, to which subtitles, especially when they are intended for a foreign audience, add a further level of complexity. Subtitling is a specific form of audiovisual translation which will have to be defined clearly before we can tackle not only its own linguistic and technical complexities, but more specifically translational issues linked to non-standard varieties. AAVE is a variety of English with very specific structural properties. Analysis of the subtitling into French brings to the fore issues related to the representation of a specific linguistic variety in a translation as well as to the polysemiotic nature of subtitling.

The aim of this initial chapter is not to make an exhaustive list of all the technical and linguistic constraints of subtitling that could be discussed at length, or of the particular problems translators have to deal with when they are writing subtitles: there are some very good textbooks such as *Audiovisual Translation: Subtitling* (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007) or *Subtitling* (Ivarsson & Carroll, 1998) which have mapped out the constraints specific to subtitling in a very clear and thorough fashion. Rather, the purpose of this chapter is to explore the ways in which

subtitling in French can prove problematic when dealing with a variety such as AAVE.

A definition of subtitling is necessary to understand and illustrate the different ways in which subtitles can be written: in what language, for what media, for what purpose. On the most basic level, Gottlieb (2001: 87, also cited in Chiaro, 2009: 148) defines subtitling as ‘the rendering in a different language of verbal messages in filmic media, in the shape of one or more lines of written text presented on the screen’. In general, subtitling ‘consists of incorporating on the screen a written text which is a condensed version in the target text of what can be heard on screen’ (Chiaro, 2009: 148). In other words, subtitling involves two basic processes: the original spoken word is put into writing, and also undergoes reduction, so the subtitles can be fitted onto the screen and so the audience has time to read them. We will come back to these features later.

Various audiovisual translation specialists have distinguished between different kinds of subtitles, whether open or closed, interlingual or intralingual, vertical or diagonal, traditional or simultaneous, and whether for the cinema or for the television. The difference between open and closed subtitles is that in the case of open subtitles, ‘the subtitles are burned or projected on to the image and cannot be removed or turned off’ (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007: 21), which means that the programme and the subtitles cannot be dissociated from each other, and that viewers have to watch the film with the subtitles on. In the case of closed subtitles, ‘the

translation can be added to the programme at the viewer's will' (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007: 21). Before the arrival of DVD and digital TV, subtitles in foreign languages were always open. The second distinction mentioned above, namely that between interlingual and intralingual, is one of the most commonly described by specialists. Intralingual subtitles – which are written in the same language as the on-screen dialogue – can be used for the deaf and the hard-of-hearing, for language learning purposes,<sup>1</sup> for karaoke effect, for dialects of the same language,<sup>2</sup> or for notices and announcements. Interlingual subtitles – which are written in a different language to that used in a film's dialogue – can be written for hearers, as well as for the deaf and hard-of-hearing (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007: 14).

In all the films in the corpus, closed titles and intralingual subtitles, as well as French subtitles, are always available, so viewers can potentially switch back and forth between English and French subtitles, usually simply by pressing a key on their remote.<sup>3</sup> They can also rewind to watch a scene again, although the point of condensing subtitles is to adapt them to the average reading speed of viewers thereby eliminating the need to rewind and maintaining suspension of disbelief.

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<sup>1</sup> For a study on the intralingual promotion of subtitles in language learning, see Caimi (2006). For the use of teletext as a tool in language learning, see Vanderplank (1988).

<sup>2</sup> In Danny Boyle's DVD version of *Trainspotting* (1996) for the American market, Begbie's (played by Robert Carlyle) unending stream of swearwords in Scottish is subtitled in Standard English. In *The Acid House* (1998), which, like *Trainspotting*, is adapted from a book by Irving Welsh, most interventions by Scottish speakers are subtitled into Standard English. Admittedly, such examples remain quite rare.

<sup>3</sup> *In Too Deep* is an exception to this, and was released in France with open subtitles.

The third type of distinction mentioned above, namely that of vertical versus diagonal subtitling, is one that is drawn by Gottlieb (1994, 2004). By vertical translation, Gottlieb means translation that transcribes oral discourse in writing (and which we have described above as intralingual translation). By diagonal translation, on the other hand, Gottlieb means the type of translation, such as subtitling, that involves two dimensions and crosses, from oral discourse in the original language to the written of the target language: ‘Subtitling [...] “jaywalks” from source-language speech to target-language writing’ (Gottlieb, 2004: 220). Although it is not entirely clear how faithfully intralingual subtitles are supposed to transcribe oral discourse – that is, by rendering non-standard features or features of spoken dialogue – this distinction between vertical and diagonal has the advantage of drawing attention to the fact that translators who write subtitles are not only dealing with translation, but that in fact shifting the dialogue from spoken to written is also a considerable part of their task, arguably even more so when they are subtitling non-standard features, as will be discussed below.

Specialists also tend to distinguish between traditional and simultaneous subtitles (or pre-prepared subtitles and live or real-time subtitles). Whereas for simultaneous subtitles the subtitling process takes place at the same time as the broadcasting of a programme, for traditional subtitles translators write the subtitles after a programme has been shot, some time

before it is aired which according to Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 19) gives ‘translators ample time to carry out their work’.<sup>4</sup>

The final distinction mentioned above is in terms of the distribution format: the medium (television, DVD, VHS, internet, cinema) may have an influence on the way subtitles are produced. Most companies now use a rule that consists in leaving the subtitles on screen for a time that is directly proportional to the number of lines (usually no more than 2) and characters (usually no more than 28 to 37 for television, 40 to 43 for cinema, 38 to 43 for DVDs) displayed in a particular subtitle.<sup>5</sup> While ‘some companies have traditionally applied what is known in the profession as “the six-second rule”, which refers to the time it takes the average viewer to read and assimilate the information contained in two lines of a subtitle’ (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007: 23), the differences between media can be explained by a few criteria: longer subtitles for the cinema seem to fit the better definition and the larger screens, as well as the cultural profile of the audience and the greater level of concentration that theatres allow, although Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 24) are careful to remind us that this has not been investigated. For DVDs, subtitling companies also tend to go for longer lines, as viewers have the possibility to watch a scene again if they feel they have missed a key element. DVD subtitles present the extra difference

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<sup>4</sup> This particular point is debatable, as it is quite difficult to say exactly what ‘ample time’ means, and what is ‘ample time’ to write a translation. Arguably, some programmes are harder to write subtitles for than others, and different companies have different policies on how long translators can work on a programme. In most cases however, it seems to be a matter of hours rather than days. In these circumstances, it is certainly questionable whether this is ‘ample time’ when dealing with features that require careful assessment such as non-standard language or play on words.

<sup>5</sup> See Díaz Cintas & Remael (2007: 24).

of sometimes being used as a tool to learn a foreign language,<sup>6</sup> while it is also argued that ‘consumers of DVDs – who also have access to the dubbed version and can choose the language combination of their liking for the sound and subtitle tracks – [...] prefer a translation that follows the original more closely and abridges as little as possible’ (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007: 24).

The subtitles offer viewers the possibility of watching a film in its original version, allowing them to be in contact with what is arguably a more genuine form of the film, where the original dialogue is preserved.<sup>7</sup> The subtitles on the DVDs used in the corpus have all been especially written for this medium, and can therefore be quite long (in terms of characters per line) and thus contain decent amounts of information. While reduction may still be necessary, it is not as dramatic as it would be for a television programme. Finally, all subtitles are professionally pre-prepared,<sup>8</sup> rather obviously, which means that although translators can sometimes be made to work under very strict time constraints, the subtitles have been proof-

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<sup>6</sup> Hajmohammadi (2004: 2) dedicates a whole section of an article to this idea.

<sup>7</sup> Dubbed versions, for which the original dialogue is quite literally replaced by new dialogue in the TL, may occasionally present discrepancies between what characters say, and their lip movement, which again, may affect the suspension of disbelief.

<sup>8</sup> Here, it has to be said that subtitling companies may want to follow certain rules whereas ‘fansubbing’ (i.e., when fans write their own subtitles, and make them available for download online) ‘lies at the margins of market imperatives and is far less dogmatic and more creative and individualistic than what has traditionally been done for other media’ (Díaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006: 51). While a growing number of studies conducted on fansubbing (recent examples include Ferrer Simó (2005), Hatcher (2005), Díaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez (2006), Pérez-Gonzalez (2006)), and despite its questionable legality, it might prove very valuable to investigate this activity in more detail, in order to analyse the major similarities or differences with professional subtitles, and also to see whether amateur translators, working outside the rigidity of the professional environment, would come up with inventive possibilities. They ‘are clearly more daring in their formal presentation, taking advantage of the potential offered by digital technology’, according to Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez (2006: 51), and a study dedicated to how fansubtitlers apprehend non-standard varieties and other socially or geographically-bound phenomena in their translation work would without a doubt prove very informative.



read, corrected if needed, and match at least to some extent the expectations of the client.<sup>9</sup>

To further enunciate the specificities and also illustrate the complexity of the present study, Jakobson's well-known summary of translation types provides a useful framework:

We distinguish three ways of interpreting a verbal sign: it may be translated into other signs of the same language, into another language, or into another, nonverbal system of symbols. These three kinds of translation are to be differently labelled:

- 1 Intralingual translation [...] is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language.
- 2 Interlingual translation [...] is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.
- 3 Intersemiotic translation [...] is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems. (Jakobson, 2000: 114)

Whereas translation usually involves only one kind of interpretation, subtitling is more complex and can encompass all three ways of interpreting verbal signs: first, the subtitles are interlingual because they involve a shift from one language (English) to another (French). Yet, and although this may seem counter-intuitive given the distinction described above, in some cases there can also be a level of intralingual translation, as a translator who wants to render some non-standard features of the original in the translation would have to gauge how these features in the original depart from the standard variety,<sup>10</sup> and potentially think about an

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<sup>9</sup> Distribution companies may contact subtitling companies directly, and may have certain expectations regarding the quality but also the tenor of the subtitles.

<sup>10</sup> The distinction drawn at the beginning of this chapter between interlingual and intralingual subtitles is in fact one of output: the subtitles for a film are either interlingual or intralingual. For example, on a DVD, one can usually select subtitles in the language of the original (intralingual) or in another – foreign – language (interlingual). The point is that Jakobson's definitions indicate that the making of interlingual subtitles can potentially also involve an intralingual dimension, as the subtitler has to explore the various levels of

equivalent in the TL.<sup>11</sup> And finally, subtitling is also an intersemiotic form of translation because it involves a shift from spoken to written language. Although Jakobson's definition of intersemiotic translation does not quite cover the shift from spoken to written, it is possible to argue that intersemiotic translation, rather than being limited to a shift from 'verbal' to 'non verbal', could also encompass translation from one sign system to another. As we will see in the final chapter of this thesis, this is especially important in the case of French in particular, because of the level of prescriptivism resulting in important diamesic variation. As such, the transition from spoken to written can really be considered a shift from one sign system to another: both systems use different channels (auditory and visual) and different codes (spoken language and written language), and therefore require different cognitive efforts.

As mentioned above, subtitles are usually added onto a film after it is completed,<sup>12</sup> thus making it accessible to a foreign audience. In this chapter, I shall explore this polysemioticity before analysing the specific issues that arise when one tries to subtitle non-standard features. This will lead on to a discussion of previous works on the translation of AAVE, highlighting the different options and the different approaches that have been taken to translate AAVE in literature and in films.

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variation within one language (whether source or target) to capture, and potentially translate, the extent to which a particular variety departs from the standard.

<sup>11</sup> This process is not specific to subtitling, and would also be relevant for the translation of non-standard features in other media (literature for example).

<sup>12</sup> Subtitles are added afterwards, unless of course they are needed for the audience even in its original version, for instance to allow the audience to understand foreign or made-up languages, such as the Elvish language in Peter Jackson's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), or various extraterrestrial languages in George Lucas' Star Wars saga.

### *The polysemiotic nature of subtitled films*

We often talk about the last film we have ‘seen at the cinema’ or ‘watched on the telly’. Unless it was a silent film or the sound was turned off, this is not an accurate description of the activity, as our ears tend to be mobilised just as much as our eyes. In Chiaro’s words (2009: 142), ‘products for the screen (i.e. films, TV series and serials, sitcoms, documentaries, etc.) are completely audiovisual in nature’. This means that they use both the audio and the visual channels, at the same time, and are, consequently, polysemiotic in that they combine two (or more) different systems of signs, or as Chiaro (2009: 142) argues, ‘they are made up of different codes that interact to produce a single effect’. As already noted above, subtitles are ancillary, and thus provide an additional layer to add to the complexity of films as semiotic system.<sup>13</sup>

### *The complexity of films as sign systems*

Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 45) state that ‘films are texts of great semiotic complexity in which different sign systems co-operate to create a coherent story’. This is a fairly basic assumption for anybody working in the field of Film Studies, and, in general, films present viewers with both visual and acoustic signs, which have traditionally been divided between verbal and non-verbal, as per the following table:

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<sup>13</sup> Pedersen (2007: 13) describes subtitles as ‘additive’, in that they constitute an addition to an already autonomous product, and thus also emphasise their own non-autonomous nature. Reading film subtitles on their own, without watching the film at the same time, provides a very limited insight of the general plot.

	<b>Visual</b>	<b>Acoustic</b>
<b>Non-verbal</b>	Scenery, lighting, costumes, props, but also gesture, facial expression, body movement	Music, background noise, sound effects, but also laughter, crying, humming, body sounds
<b>Verbal</b>	Street signs, shop signs, written realia	Dialogue, song-lyrics, poems

*Table 1 – The polysemiotic nature of films*<sup>14</sup>

What this table emphasises is the fact that films are both seen and heard by the audience, and that visual and acoustic cues complement each other in creating a coherent whole. Subtitles are then added on to this.

The subtitles of the films of the corpus focus on conveying acoustic verbal signs, particularly dialogue. They also occasionally (but not systematically) convey song lyrics, and sometimes provide a translation of visual verbal signs should the original not be transparent enough. Subtitles are not, however, limited to merely translating the dialogue, but rather they also have some level of relation with the other systems, the importance of which has to be determined by the translator, as there can be a fair amount of overlap between the dialogue and the visual cues in a film.

While they have essentially the same function as a film dialogue in that they convey what characters say, subtitles often have to be shorter, because of the above-mentioned constraint of reduction (the limitation of characters per line). Translators therefore have to be more selective in the information they convey, thus relying heavily on the overlap between sign systems, in

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<sup>14</sup> This table is adapted from Chiaro (2009: 143), but similar descriptions can be found in Delabastita (1989: 199), Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 46-7), Hajmohammadi (2004: 3), and Nedergaard-Larsen (1993: 213).

order to optimise space and maximise meaning. The dialogue, whilst imitating real-life interaction, also informs viewers of what is going on in the film, and on the nature of the interactions that take place between the characters. The relationship that is established when one is watching a film is therefore dialogic: while some characters talk to each other on screen, their very interaction also communicates something to the viewers, or in the words of Zabalbeascoa (2005: 29): ‘in audiovisual dialogue there are often two distinct types of hearer. There are the film viewers, on the one hand, and, on the other, the frequent presence of one or more characters [...] listening to the speaker’. However, as illustrated in the opening remark of this section, viewers are not merely ‘hearers’, they are also ‘watchers’ – that is to say, they also rely on other clues. As far as viewers’ understanding is concerned, the boundary between the visual and the audio is blurred. As Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 49) summarise, subtitles, which are ‘extraneous to the diegesis or narrative, obviously address the viewers [and] must therefore contain the information that is meant for the public’. It is important to highlight here that the information in question often goes beyond the mere denotative meaning of characters’ utterances. Through their words, information about characters’ social backgrounds, their relationships, and important themes or issues tackled by the film are communicated. In addition, some of the formal structure of a film might also give some clues to what is going on in terms of interactions.<sup>15</sup>

Subtitles, however, can sometimes afford to be selective, insofar as the

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<sup>15</sup> For instance, a shot reverse shot sequence informs viewers that a face-to-face conversation between two characters is going on. One character is shown looking at the other character, who is often off-screen, and the other character appears in another shot, as if looking back to the first character, leaving viewers assuming that they are actually facing each other.

selection is carefully thought out, and relies on overlap between the different channels. They cannot however be so selective that the semiotic cohesion between film and subtitles is lost, as is explained below.

*On maintaining semiotic cohesion between film and subtitles*

Needless to say, there must be a form of synchrony between the subtitles and the film. The subtitles must combine with the film, must not appear on screen before the narrative unfolds visually, and must stay on screen long enough for viewers to have time to read them, but also to look at the images, which is precisely why the ratio between the number of characters (including spaces) in a subtitle is directly proportional to the amount of time that a particular subtitle stays on screen. A fine balance has to be maintained so the audience's attention can be split between the subtitles and the other semiotic systems of the film without hindering its understanding. In order to do that, subtitles must also be unambiguous, and follow a relatively unequivocal syntactical structure, so viewers can make sense of them straight away. We have seen that there is often a certain level of overlap between the different channels (visual and acoustic, verbal and non-verbal) of a film. Pedersen calls this 'Intersemiotic Redundancy', and sums up the implications of this redundancy for the subtitler as follows:

From a subtitling point of view, the greater the Intersemiotic Redundancy, the less the pressure for the subtitler to provide the TT audience with guidance. An example: if something is referred to in the dialogue and at the same time clearly visible in the picture, it may be enough to refer to it by using a pronoun in the subtitles. (Pedersen, 2007: 13)

Replacing an object by a pronoun in the subtitles when that object is clearly the one being designated is obviously a fairly basic illustration of

what is at stake here. As can be deduced from Pedersen's comments, Intersemiotic Redundancy is not in fact restricted to the strictly linguistic, and the translator should consider the multimodality of language – that is, the interaction between speech and gesture. As far as the corpus is concerned, African Americans sometimes display specific discursive habits, which may be portrayed in films, and audio and visual clues may occasionally be 'redundant' on some level. Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 52) note that 'in film, which aims to tell a story, this interaction between words and gestures is always very purposeful, as is the positioning of the characters within a scene. [...] like any form of iconography, body-postures and gestures communicate information non-vocally and are often culture-bound'. The culturally-bound aspect of body postures and gestures evoked by Díaz Cintas and Remael complicates matters further, meaning that the translator might in fact need to use the subtitles to provide clarification of the significance of a particular gesture or posture for viewers from another culture. Intersemiotic Redundancy then becomes a very relative concept, since although some redundant elements can be deleted, or replaced by shorter equivalents (like pronouns) in subtitles, there may be cases where a particular reference may require an explanation in the subtitle in order to maintain the semiotic cohesion. To mention but one example from the corpus, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two, African Americans – in reality and in films – can sometimes be seen playing the dozens: they insult each other, or each other's family, displaying aggressive body postures, but in actual fact these verbal jousts have little risk of ending in fights. Such a practice of insulting one another

to no consequence may however seem surprising to outsiders, and may require some kind of explanation in subtitles.<sup>16</sup>

To briefly conclude this section, the polysemiotic nature of films is a double-edged sword: it may allow translators to save some space in the subtitles and rely on other clues to convey meaning to viewers, but it also means that translators may have to use the subtitles for explanation purposes, for instance when there are cultural elements that may not be readily understandable. Therefore, subtitles have to take into account the specificities of such culturally-bound elements, whilst making the most of the information that is already present in the images in order to maintain a certain level of brevity, leaving time for the viewers to pay a balanced attention to the subtitles and to the images. The issue of Intersemiotic Redundancy is one that is intrinsically linked to the reduction constraint of subtitling: the necessary brevity of subtitles is not sufficient to ensure that viewers will understand what is going on in the film, and the information presented in the subtitles should also complement what is appearing on the screen.<sup>17</sup> The translator makes decisions about what particular elements s/he can omit. This is particularly important when culturally specific elements come into play, as Szarkowska argues:

In an attempt to convey ‘the core’ of the script, translators often forget that it is not only the dialogues from the main plot that constitute the substance of the film. Other factors, such as various dialects, idiolects, register or expressions of politeness, which

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<sup>16</sup> In fact, original viewers may not necessarily be speakers of AAVE or be familiar with playing the dozens, and may not accurately interpret what is going on.

<sup>17</sup> As Zabalbeascoa (2005: 40) explains, ‘brevity [is not] a guarantee that reading will be any faster or easier if coherence is seriously compromised’, and the translator has to balance out all these parameters, bearing in mind that ‘rhetorically-driven repetition demands more creative solutions than mechanical omissions’ (Zabalbeascoa, 2005: 40).



frequently undergo reduction, can be equally important in the full comprehension of a particular work.<sup>18</sup> (Szarkowska, 2005: 7)

This is a key issue for the thesis. African American characters portrayed in the films of the corpus often speak a distinctive variety of English, one that is remarkable in terms of register, and in terms of departure from the standard. As a consequence, Intersemiotic Redundancy has to be assessed extremely carefully, so the original dialogue undergoes a reduction process that is sensible and does not deprive viewers of meaningful clues: redundancy might imply repetition, but repetition may well be necessary for an effective, unambiguous understanding. It can be added that meaning cannot be quantified, and the selection process of subtitling has to be undertaken very carefully. Mera (1998: 7) highlights that ‘the minor subtractions [...] may not seem significant in terms of the general understanding, but during the course of a whole film they add up to a large number of drastically altered meanings’. The idiosyncrasies of any language in which subtitles are written, the possibilities available to the translator, and the potential as well as the limitations of the medium somehow have to match what is on screen; specific cultural features of the original that may prove elusive to a foreign audience as well as the main narrative need to be conveyed to viewers in the TL in a way that preserves the integrity of the film as a product.

The question of the possibility of maintaining the audience’s attention is also raised. Should the subtitles manage to avoid redundancy as much as possible, there is also the possibility that the cognitive effort required of

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<sup>18</sup> The translation of dialects is addressed below in this chapter.

viewers in the target audience will be considerably greater than that required by the source audience.<sup>19</sup> As Zabalbeascoa rightly points out:

If one looks carefully at a lot of subtitles, one might say that frequently the subtitles do achieve their overall aim of giving a condensed version of the source text. But this may only be the case if the viewer/reader maintains undivided attention for about two hours, spending considerable energy in not missing a single detail of both the captions and any other audiovisual items that the translator feels the viewer must pay attention to since they are complementary to the written words in producing meaning and effect. (Zabalbeascoa, 1996: 238)

Attention is obviously difficult to quantify and therefore to measure. Although statistics are lacking, it is safe to assume that it takes more effort for viewers to watch a film with subtitles – especially if Intersemiotic Redundancy between the subtitles and the images has been greatly reduced – than to watch a film with the original soundtrack and dialogue in one's own language. This is particularly important for the thesis because the use of AAVE has strong social, cultural and geographical connotations attached to it. Some of these connotations might be considered to convey the same information as the images – that is, to be semiotically redundant – raising the issue of the extent to which non-standard features in the original should be translated with non-standard features in the subtitles, and for what purpose. This issue will be addressed in the final chapter of this thesis.

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<sup>19</sup> The cognitive effort required to watch a subtitled film is mentioned in passing by Delabastita (1990: 98), Hajmohammadi (2004: 2) and Szarkowska (2005: 7), while D'Ydewalle & Gielen (1992) focus on eye movements of viewers watching a film with subtitles in order to record the timing with which subtitles are assimilated in real time.

*Subtitling practice in France and the question of the norm*

In sharp contrast with countries like Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Greece, Portugal and the Scandinavian countries, who all have a traditional preference for subtitling,<sup>20</sup> France, Italy, Germany and Spain – sometimes referred to as the ‘FIGS’ group by translation specialists – have a strong tradition of dubbing. Whilst France is still usually referred to as a ‘dubbing country’ by specialists of audiovisual translation, recent technological developments, and more particularly the development of DVDs have changed the situation somewhat.<sup>21</sup> On DVDs, most films tend to also be available in their original version, with open or closed subtitles, even in the FIGS group.

The tradition of dubbing in France, Dennis Ager (1990: 221) argues, comes from the fact that ‘historically speaking [...] French language planning has derived from a set of policies and practices having their origins in government and in political life, in economics and in employment, and in certain social and cultural, usually *élitiste*, environments and attitudes’. The French have always been proud of their language, and according to Ager (1990: 222), the general public is greatly interested in language questions. Another linguist, Françoise Gadet (2003: 20), argues that whilst historically rooted, ‘la complainte sur la qualité de la langue est une constante du 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle’. This complaint, however, is a reflection of

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<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that these ‘preferences’ reflect the dominant mode of audiovisual translation used, but that other modes of audiovisual translations such as dubbing or voiceover may also be found in those countries.

<sup>21</sup> On this particular point, see Díaz Cintas & Remael (2007: 18).

social judgments about language, and not a comment on inherent properties of the language:

Attitudes [...] are the outward manifestation of a society's, or an individual's, beliefs, which are themselves based on underlying values. In summary, therefore, perceived language attitudes can be said to be based on the belief that French achieved perfection in the eighteenth century, and that this perfection renders it a universal human possession worth defending, by centralised control, against change, against internal fragmentation or 'creolisation', and against external attack, by unified, fierce, defensive and offensive moves. (Ager, 1990: 222)

The preference of a country for a particular kind of translation (for instance dubbing as opposed to subtitling) can have various explanations, but it is not coincidental that the 1930s witnessed the growth of dubbing as the dominating practice in Germany, Italy and Spain, in an attempt both 'to inhibit English and to exalt national languages, as well as censor content' (Chiaro, 2009: 143).<sup>22</sup>

The case of France, albeit slightly different, bears crucial importance for the present research, because of the very fact that subtitles are written, and as such tend to follow the conventions of written French. Throughout its history, French has undergone a very strict process of standardisation, and after feeling threatened by Italian in the sixteenth century, it is nowadays English that seems to represent the greatest threat, and is often talked about

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<sup>22</sup> One would think that a preference for subtitling might reflect a more open attitude towards other languages, but in fact, subtitling also presents the key advantage of being a lot cheaper than dubbing, and is common all across Europe because of its cost-effectiveness. Conversely, smaller entities like Wales, Catalonia and the Basque country often have recourse to dubbing as a way to promote and standardise their language. Interestingly, the very same countries that show a preference for dubbing are amongst the worst countries in Europe in terms of the percentage of the population able to participate in a conversation in a language other than their mother tongue, according to a study conducted by the European commission entitled 'Europeans and Languages' (<http://ic.daad.de/barcelona/download/deutsch-zweite-sprache.pdf> [accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2011]). France scores 45%, Italy and Spain 36%, and they all are significantly below the European average (50%).

in the media using vocabulary of war, contamination and rape.<sup>23</sup> French has been rigidly codified in dictionaries, grammar books, and the *bon usage* is promoted by the Académie Française, while television programmes such as Bernard Pivot's spelling contest and *Les Chiffres et les lettres* still enjoy considerable success. This popularity is but one illustration that the French public believes firmly in the benefits of spelling and grammatical accuracy. Regarding standardisation, Gadet comments:

La standardisation soumet les locuteurs à une 'idéologie du standard', qui valorise l'uniformité comme état idéal pour une langue, dont l'écrit serait la forme parachevée. Accompagnant toujours la standardisation, cette idéologie est pourtant spécialement vigoureuse en France [...] Le standard est donné comme préférable de manière intrinsèque, forme par excellence de la langue, voire la seule. (Gadet, 2003: 18)

The standard variety, Gadet (2003: 18) continues, is 'une construction discursive sur l'homogène', and is traditionally associated with the written form of the language, thus leading not only to the disqualification of oral forms that depart from the standard, but also to a certain rigidity of the written form, in constant need of validation, or as Gadet (2003: 18) puts it, 'la standardisation mettant en avant l'écrit, la distance entre oral et écrit se charge de jugements de valeurs. Le statut du standard a ainsi toujours à être rassuré'. Naturally, for this thesis, Gadet's statement is highly problematic, and raises a number of issues, both in terms of translation, and of transcription: can a non-standard form be used in the French subtitles (to render a non-standard form from the original) bearing in mind that the means of putting it in writing (preferably without affecting its legibility)

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<sup>23</sup> For examples of such discourses based around violence, see Gadet (2003: 21).

may not even exist?<sup>24</sup> Subtitling in French is made that much more difficult by the gap between the written and the spoken forms of the language, to the extent that some linguists refer to the situation in France as a diglossic one, since it involves a functional repartition between two varieties of the language, a high one (written French) and a low one (spoken French). Gadet argues:

Dans les pays de littérature et d'idéologie du standard, le pouvoir de l'écrit minorise le statut de l'oral. Tout spécialement en français, l'écrit, lieu essentiel où a porté la standardisation, apparaît plus homogène que l'oral, où le foisonnement variationnel peut difficilement être jugulé, ce qui conforte et creuse l'opposition convenue entre écrit normé et oral instable. (Gadet, 2003: 32)

The discrepancy between oral and written French means that subtitles will tend to be written in standard French, following not only established rules of grammar and spelling, but also in a way that has been codified. As far as the subtitling of AAVE is concerned, the conventions of written French make it difficult to potentially convey features that would depart in any way from the standard, and which would render features from the original. While a certain amount of neutralisation is thus to be expected, it will be argued in Chapter Four that should translators be ready to depart from these deep-rooted conventions of written French – which are the crystallisation of social judgment rather than bearers of essential linguistic quality – potential solutions can then be explored which arguably do not diminish the legibility of the subtitles.

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<sup>24</sup> There are dictionaries or even grammar books (see Major (1994) and Miller & Smith (1997)) that try to capture the spelling and rules of AAVE, or of certain varieties of French – such as *banlieue* French – and there are even attempts to portray some non-standard linguistic varieties in fiction. Such uses, however, remain rather rare.

The problem of the representation of non-standard features in writing is not a new one, however, and subtitlers can certainly benefit from attempts in other disciplines. Sociolinguists working with non-standard varieties have suggested a number of ways of transcribing speech in writing. Gadet (2003: 29) highlights that ‘après le recueil, les données orales doivent être préparées pour l’analyse, par la transcription qui les transmute en objet de travail visualisable, donc écrit. Il apparaît exclu qu’un mode de transcription unique satisfasse tout objectif descriptif’. This is one of the difficulties subtitlers may have to face. One has to bear in mind that the collection of linguistic data – whether it is in fact coming from a film or from the real world – usually involves a form of transcription or conversion from spoken to written, for potentially very different purposes. Different modes of transcription may present a wide variety of levels of complexity. Whereas sociolinguists for instance may use very specific conventions not necessarily readily understandable by non-specialists, subtitles have to be unambiguous and legible by the greatest possible share of the audience. Therefore, subtitles that make even a simple use of the phonetic alphabet to transcribe a particular utterance – in the way that linguists might – cannot be considered, as this sort of knowledge cannot be expected from the audience, and only the simplest, immediately recognisable forms (through media exposure) of non-standard speech in writing can be considered.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> This point is discussed further in Chapter Four of the thesis.

The problem with the current study is that in the case of French subtitles, should translators want to render the qualities of orality into writing, they would have to be able to convey in – or transpose into – writing the complexity of the oral system, in a way that would unmistakably evoke it to a French audience. Such possibilities will be explored throughout the course of the thesis where I will claim that translators can open up new spaces by breaking the boundaries between oral and written, through the use – in subtitles – of forms traditionally associated with spoken discourse.

### ***Representing non-standard features in writing***

The issue of the translation of non-standard features and varieties has only come to the fore very recently in audiovisual translation, and a number of conferences have been organised to try and tackle this particular issue, such as the *Translating Voices*, *Translating Regions* series, or the *Multimedialec Translation Conference*, which takes a particular interest in the translation of dialects in audiovisual contexts. It is generally acknowledged that translating non-standard forms is problematic in that there is often no straightforward equivalent across languages. The majority of studies are descriptive in nature, and analyse existing translations.<sup>26</sup> For the purpose of the thesis, we will look into the issue of the representation of non-standard features in writing. The spoken nature of varieties such as AAVE is in contradiction with the prescriptive nature of codified languages, such as French or English. Therefore, the means to put non-standard varieties into writing may not necessarily be readily available – they may not exist, or

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<sup>26</sup> A noticeable exception for subtitling is Karamitroglou (1998), which is openly and deliberately prescriptive and seeks to establish subtitling standards common to all European languages.



may not be immediately understandable (and therefore not usable for subtitling purposes). In addition, we have already said that non-standard varieties also present the extra difficulty of being strongly grounded in a social and geographical context.<sup>27</sup>

Man spoke before he could write. As writing has been invented relatively recently, one could even wonder if it is, in fact, a medium that is appropriate to represent what we say when we speak. Conventions for putting speaking into writing have developed all over the world, gradually leading, along with other factors, to the codification of languages. As we have seen above, even for linguists, the standard is often associated with the written form of the language, which arguably does not offer as much flexibility as its spoken counterpart. A non-standard variety – that is a corpus of discursive habits associated with a group of speakers presenting a form of unity, whether social or geographical, that has not (yet) undergone a process of standardisation – is all the more difficult to represent in writing, since the very conventions of writing have been established to represent the standard, and writing is therefore a relatively inappropriate means to represent a variety that is essentially spoken. AAVE is a non-standard variety, and speakers of English and of AAVE can generally understand each other. AAVE is, as its name indicates, related to English, but also presents some differences with it, both in terms of some of its

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<sup>27</sup> This particular issue will be tackled in the following chapter.

linguistic and its interactional features. AAVE has not been codified to the same extent as English.<sup>28</sup>

The main problem with the representation of non-standard features in writing is that writing is again essentially inadequate, to the point that Michael Toolan (1992: 37) goes so far as to ask the question, ‘how can one represent the other?’ thus indicating that the representation of speech in writing is always political, since it involves an apprehension of linguistic otherness, and its appropriation through one’s own language. Toolan (1992: 40) argues further that ‘language and dialect undoubtedly signify’, thus revealing that the use of a specific dialect (especially when non-standard) – in particular in fiction – is always meaningful, and serves the purpose of characterisation. Speakers of a non-standard dialect use non-standard features that can reveal information about their social status, geographical origin, or cultural background. In writing, the standard variety is the one that is used the most often, or in other words, the norm is to use the standard variety in writing. A direct consequence of this is that ‘non-standard dialect speech [in fiction] is invariably noteworthy, and almost invariably treated as significant’ (Toolan, 1992: 35). Interpretations of the use of non-standard features may however vary: their use can be seen as a deliberate departure from the standard, or as a way for a character to assert

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<sup>28</sup> For other linguists such as Taavitsainen (1999), it is precisely the existence of a written form that distinguishes standard and non-standard dialects. It has to be said here that AAVE has been codified to some level in dictionaries and grammar books (Major (1994), Miller & Smith (1997) and Smitherman (2000) among others), albeit not to the level of American or British English, and certainly not in ways that are relevant to speakers of AAVE, as these attempts rather aim at indexing variation for the use of linguists, and the standard variety (American English for American linguists who have described AAVE) is always the pole of reference.

his/her membership to a group. In written fiction, non-standard features almost systematically imply a certain idea of the social hierarchy, and speakers using non-standard features are often represented as socially inferior, according to Berthele (2000: 590): ‘Dialectal variation is almost invariably linked to social hierarchy and differentiation which relegates those who do not speak “the standard” to a lower position’. However, it would be simplistic to reduce the difference between standard and non-standard to an opposition between high and low prestige, since the use of non-standard features can also serve to reassert bonds within a peer group, or can have positive connotations, and, as Berthele (2000: 590) concedes ‘establish the speaker as “natural”, sincere, without artifice’. As far as AAVE is concerned, speakers of AAVE may be perceived as vulgar or lacking education, whether because they tend to use a lot of swearwords,<sup>29</sup> or because of the loose relationship between the grammar of AAVE and that of American English.<sup>30</sup> Queen (2004: 515) argues that ‘certain features [of AAVE] and their attendant social meanings are highly recognizable, salient and accessible to a broad and general American audience’, although he does not say whether these features are generally perceived positively or negatively. The important point here is that if these features are salient and identifiable, then they carry some meaning, albeit a kind of meaning that is difficult to pinpoint or identify in general terms.

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<sup>29</sup> See Chapter Four for an in-depth discussion of insults and their translation into French in subtitles.

<sup>30</sup> See Chapter Two in this thesis for a discussion of the differences between AAVE and the standard variety.

Writing not being necessarily adapted to the representation of speech in fiction, Toolan (1992: 31) even talks about the ‘impossibility of a faithful record of actual speech [...] since even linguistic transcription of speech is itself a representation, a partial rather than an essential record, an “illuminating version” orientated to some concerns rather than others’. Toolan implies that there is a principle of relevance according to which certain salient features would be represented to the detriment of others, following an agenda. He also highlights that:

There are criteria and conventions underpinning speech transcriptions [...] and one of the most fundamental assumptions we make in reading direct speech is that, barring peripheral and inessential details (stumblings, repetitions, fractured and incomplete sentences), all the detail of a character’s actual speech that is relevant to proper uptake of the character [...] will, in fact, be represented.’ (Toolan, 1992: 34)

According to this principle, as far as fiction is concerned, readers can therefore consider that the author provides them with all the details necessary to the understanding of what they are reading. Sternberg (1982: 114) calls this principle – the presumption of readers that direct speech is, or should be, a representation strictly identical to a verbal exchange – ‘direct-speech fallacy’, and concludes that ‘direct-speech variations are always shaped by the precarious balance of mimetic commitment and communicative exigency’.

A solution for representing phonological variation, according to Macaulay (1991: 281), is to use alternative spelling in order to ‘exploit the phonetic power of normal orthography to guide the reader to an interpretation of nonstandard speech’. This strategy can be used to ‘portray characters who

Speak differently (than other characters, than the standard language) without really having them speak differently' (Berthele, 2000: 596). Bowdre (1971: 179) goes even further, and argues in favour of the use of 'eye dialect', which is defined by Ives (1971: 154) as 'spellings that mean nothing at all phonetically; they are merely a sort of visual signal to the reader'. To take but a few examples from the corpus of words that appear often in the dialogue, this approach might lead to using 'motha' for 'mother', 'cuz' for 'because', or even 'nuffin' for 'nothing'. Too complex a transcription would become too difficult to read, and it is assumed here that unfamiliar forms would take longer for viewers to decipher in subtitles, whilst not being necessarily relevant, if relevance is defined in terms of 'well-recognized, socially stereotyped dialect alternations' (Labov & Fanshel, 1977: 40). This indicates that representing non-standard pronunciation in writing, without being entirely unproblematic, is certainly possible.

As far as morphology and syntax are concerned, Ives (1971: 155) recommends the use of means that do not hinder the understanding of an utterance for readers, whilst still showing a level of non-standardness, such as for instance 'I seen' instead of 'I have seen' or 'I saw'. Using such devices, an author represents forms s/he knows are non-standard, thus placing characters in a specific social and geographical environment:

When representing a dialect, these authors have been acutely conscious that they were depicting something peculiar, something different from their own conception of the 'standard' language. The characters who speak 'dialect' [in this context, dialect means non-standard] are set off, either socially or geographically, from the main body of those who speak the [standard] language'. (Ives, 1971: 146)

Thanks to his/her selection of non-standard forms, the author therefore indicates that a given character does not speak using the standard variety: ‘By the very fact that he has represented the speech in unconventional spellings, the author has passed judgment; he has indicated that it is *not*, in his definition of the term, Standard English’ (Ives, 1971: 165). These forms are in turn interpreted by readers who should, ideally, gain an understanding of them that is in line with what the author wanted to convey. In order to do so, readers must of course identify and recognise these forms, and in the end, their understanding depends on an agreement *a priori* between reader and author. Some sociolinguists have argued that linguistic styles are usually well known, and that they are what make the indexing of speakers possible, or in the words of Rosina Lippi-Green:

In traditions passed down over hundreds of years from the stage and theater, film uses language, variation and accent to draw character quickly, building on established preconceived notions associated with specific regional loyalties, ethnic, racial or economic alliances. This shortcut to characterization means that certain traits need not be laboriously demonstrated by a means of character’s actions and an examination of motive. (Lippi-Green, 1997: 81)

Understanding non-standard features as they are represented in writing or on screen therefore appeals to a general pool of experience and knowledge shared by authors and readers, filmmakers and viewers alike. It is the task of translators to evaluate to what extent this pool of experience is cross-cultural.

Concerning AAVE, this idea of a pool of experience is further commented on by Queen (2004: 517), who specifies that ‘the representation of AAVE relies on indexes to socio-cultural life that pre-exist its incidence in film’.

In other words, viewers have certain expectations about AAVE, who speaks it, and what it means in context. The role of the transcription of non-standard forms in writing is to act as a trigger, to bring to the fore connotations that are known and recognised by readers/viewers, for character or thematic elaboration.

To briefly conclude, there is something irremediably paradoxical in trying to establish rules for putting non-standard forms in writing, in that their very use is supposed to warrant a certain authenticity, as they aim to render the world as it is – or as it is perceived. The representations of non-standard forms in writing have little chance of corresponding to real world distributional patterns, but they still have the advantage of provoking a form of social juxtaposition. Linguistic forms are sometimes treated as a proxy for social and geographical identity, and in fact the use of specific linguistic forms is meaningful, and also serves to strengthen bonds within a group, or depart from the standard. The above section illustrates the fact that the subtitling of dialects presents challenges beyond that of a passage from one language to another, because the structural conventions of writing are very different to those of speaking – and we have said that non-standard forms in particular, but also their supposedly life-like representations in films, remain essentially spoken. Because of the prescriptivism of written languages, French in particular, non-standard forms are resistant to being put into writing, and yet writers and translators do have the option of drawing on conventions for representing non-

standard language varieties that are – at least to some extent – accepted and established in some contexts.

*Translating African American Vernacular English – a literature review*

As mentioned above, the translation of linguistic varieties that are geographically bound (dialects) or that are associated with a given social layer (sociolects) and of non-standard features in general has gained more prominence in academic research over the last twenty years or so. The majority of papers that explore the subject in the context of audiovisual translation tend to focus either on dubbing or on subtitling, and rarely offer a comparison between the two types of audiovisual translation for a given dialect. Although audiovisual translation, as a discipline, is nowadays gradually coming to the fore, the subtitling of variation into French remains largely unexplored.<sup>31</sup> AAVE itself has rarely been tackled by translation specialists, and even less so by audiovisual translation experts. The three articles that are the most relevant have been written by Raphael Berthele, Robin Queen, and Gaëlle Planchenault. Berthele's contribution is primarily about the literary translation of AAVE, whereas Queen's and Planchenault's articles are both primarily about dubbing. There are naturally some more general opuses that have dealt with the translation of audiovisual translation of dialects,<sup>32</sup> however superficially, but not a single study has focused on the subtitling of AAVE into French. This may come as a surprise, given the relative prominence of AAVE in American films, most of which are presented in French theatres in either a dubbed or a

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<sup>31</sup> Among the few studies that have been carried out are Jäckel (2001), Armstrong (2006), Leoncini (2006), and Planchenault (2008).

<sup>32</sup> See for instance Armstrong & Federici (2006) and Federici (2009).



subtitled version. In this section, we will have a brief look at the three articles named above that deal directly with the translation of AAVE, and examine to what extent what they suggest is relevant for the present study, and how their conclusions can be used and possibly expanded.

Queen argues that by examining the dubbing of AAVE in German, she wants to explore the translation of sociolinguistic variation. Her conclusions are twofold: on the translation side of the question, she demonstrates that ideas about language being used as an index to social groupings can in fact be transferable from one language to another, insofar as these ideas overlap between the source and the target culture. As far as sociolinguistic application is concerned, she also shows that such transferability is important to issues related to cross-cultural communication. In her article, she demonstrates that unless a character is young, Black, male, urban and involved in street culture, linguistic variation is erased in dubbed films. When it is not erased, AAVE is translated using a particular style that evokes urban youth culture, geographically and socially marked as being typical of northern and central parts of working class Germany. Queen bases her argument on the idea that the linguistic style of a speaker (the author does not distinguish between speakers in the real world and on screen) involves connotational meaning, which is dynamically constructed ‘around a consistent package of linguistic features and usage patterns’ (Queen, 2004: 516).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Its construction is dynamic, because linguistic styles develop out of ‘the ongoing interaction between real-time language use and beliefs about the place of language within the social world’ (Queen, 2004: 516).

Although Queen seems to be essentially commenting on the real world, it is fair to say that the use of language variation in films (or other media that represent language and language users) is commonly used to draw character quickly, relying on certain stereotypes regarding a particular group. Viewers are therefore led to understand a particular type of linguistic variation according to the rule that speaking in a certain way gives essential information about a character's background (which can in turn be confirmed or debunked by the unfolding narrative, thus potentially confirming, transforming or creating new stereotypes). As far as AAVE is concerned, and although patterns of linguistic variation in films are unlikely to correspond to real world distribution, it should be stated here that its representation in fiction, whether films or literature, shows an attempt to represent social juxtaposition found in the real world.

On the topic of the validity of the analysis of sociolinguistic markers and usage in films, Queen argues that:

While it is the case that these kinds of presentations appear to approximate real-world language use in that they are more or less spontaneous and unscripted, there is no *a priori* reason to assume that scripted productions are of less sociolinguistic interest than are un-(or less) scripted productions. In fact, scripted productions may be more conducive than unscripted ones to the study of sociolinguistic indexicality because the stylized choices found in scripted productions are generally highly focused and easily manipulated indexes that can be (and are) taught to actors. (Queen, 2004: 516-7)

The author makes a point that is directly relevant to the present study: the language used in scripted productions – and naturally, such productions can be scripted to a lesser or greater extent – is a tool used for characterisation purposes, and as such does have a sociolinguistic

justification and validity. In fact, for the purpose of the translation of AAVE, Queen (2004: 533) specifies that ‘for language to evoke any particular social meaning within the films, it needed to be linked in some way or another to pre-existing social variability. In the case of film dubbing, that linkage must be pre-existent in two different contexts, a requirement that strongly circumscribes its possibilities’. If like Queen (2004: 519), we consider that ‘films represent stylized rather than accurate characterizations of real-world variation’, it should come as no surprise then that variation in translations may not follow strictly real-world distributional patterns, but rather rely on pre-existing stereotypes and social representations assumed to be well-known.

Queen’s study tackles various genres of film portraying African American characters. More specifically where films representing youths living in an urban context are concerned, the author finds that in the German translation, some features of *Jugendsprache* (‘youth language’), of language that is informal or has urban working class connotations are often used. The stereotypical assumptions linked to these kinds of German, as well as their relation to the standard variety then constitute a sort of model for the interpretation of linguistic variation in films. Queen (2004: 523) argues that ‘when used to dub AAVE, this style helps align AAVE speakers with speakers of German urban varieties and in so doing constitutes them ideologically along similar lines’. In the German version however, it is through the use of urban youth features, rather than ethnically marked features, that the characters’ affiliation with a

stereotypical street background (and its traditional associations with theft, drug use and petty crime) is reinforced. In fact, the very use of urban youth features in the translation ‘corroborates the information about the characters available to the audience from their physical appearance, gestures and activities’ (Queen, 2004: 524). Naturally, this is not unproblematic, and it remains very difficult to find comparable regional features to translate regional variation, and ethnically marked features to translate ethnically marked variation. Ethnicity plays a different part in the socio-cultural life of Germany, the United States, or France for that matter, and it plays a different role in different cultures. For translators, it is not so much about replacing the source language (henceforth SL) by the TL as it is about substituting a whole cultural paradigm – and the intricacies of the (fantasised) relations between communities and between linguistic varieties – by another one. In the last two chapters of the thesis, we will explore to what extent this possibility of replacing ethnically marked features with youth-marked features is exploited by translators who write subtitles for AAVE in French. As can be expected from Queen’s somewhat large corpus of films (more than thirty), all produced by different studios and translated by different people, different translating strategies are used in different films. Whilst in some films, as mentioned above, German youth language is used for dubbing purposes, there are also cases where standard German is used throughout, and therefore where AAVE speakers are not distinguished from speakers of other varieties in the translation.

Berthele’s study focuses on all the German translations of Mark Twain’s

*Huckleberry Finn*, and in particular on the translation of non-standard features in the speech of Jim (an African American character) into German. The author's historical study reveals that in older translations, translators have used a pidgin-like model when portraying Jim's speech, while more recent translations have used features that are more colloquial but less stigmatised socially and geographically. Perhaps not surprisingly, Berthele also correlates these changing practices with the rise of anti-racist discourses in Germany. This reveals that a translation is always written for a particular socio-cultural and historical audience, one that has specific cultural norms and expectations. Whilst this is arguably true in the case of audiovisual translation as well, the latter must also contend with constraints that are medium-specific, as was detailed above.

Berthele summarises the complexity of the problem for the translator in a similar way to Queen, and puts the emphasis on the translator's understanding of the complex set of sociolinguistic relations between standard and non-standard varieties. According to Berthele, such relations include:

- 1- the sociolinguistic relationship of standard and non-standard source-language varieties;
- 2- the author's ideas about 1;
- 3- the author's attempt to render 1 in the literary text and his/her purpose and intentions for the use of non-standard varieties;
- 4- the sociolinguistic relationship of standard and non-standard target-language varieties;
- 5- the translator's ideas about 1, 2 and 3;
- 6- the translator's attempt to render 1 (or what s/he thinks to be 1) in the target language, based on the translator's understandings of 4. (Berthele, 2000: 588-9)

This process is very similar for audiovisual translation. The portrayal of

non-standard varieties on screen involves the representation of a certain idea of variation, one that is, ideally, shared by the filmmaker (and through him/her the actors, which, in a way, are agents of this representation) and the audience. In turn, this set of relationships has to be transposed to the target culture.

What is particularly relevant to this study in Berthele's article is that the author puts particular emphasis on the way non-standard orthography is used. Unlike Queen's paper which focuses on dubbing, and in which writing is therefore not involved in the finished product, Berthele's provides an insight into the meaning and the possibilities of representing non-standard features in writing for characterisation purposes.

In his article, Berthele is particularly concerned with orthographic, morpho-syntactic, syntactic and lexical patterns in the translations of *Huckleberry Finn*, and reveals the evolution of translation strategies. While early translations established the character Jim as having a cognitive deficit (through misspelled words for instance, or other language 'mistakes') or a lack of intelligence, later ones tend to put the emphasis on geo- or sociolinguistic difference (through the use of colloquialisms or of regional expressions). All the translations cover a great range of possibilities to illustrate variation in writing (albeit in German), and Berthele's study shows that the choice of non-standard features to render the variation in the original is always highly political and has great implications for readers. Berthele then concludes that later translations succeed in not portraying

Jim as cognitively or linguistically deficient or inferior in any way, but still manage to show a level of variation, one that uses colloquial, slangy German, which can be located in the ‘Ruhrgebiet’, thus giving ‘the German parallel to AAVE a clear proletarian overtone’ (Berthele, 2000: 607). The author also adds that:

It is possible to render AAVE with a sociolect or dialect that represents analogous (low) social strata or even analogous regional linguistic identity. But the analogy is, of course, never complete; there is no perfect equivalent of Black/White race relations (and corresponding sociolinguistic relationships) in the German-speaking world. (Berthele, 2000: 608)

The author, however, does not comment on the potential consequences of the dislocation of Jim’s accent, and on the consequences for readers of using non-standard forms specifically tied to a local German context.

It is interesting and crucial for the present study to note that the two studies mentioned above point to the same elements: they all acknowledge that it is paramount for the translator to be aware of the relations between the standard variety and the non-standard variety both in the source and in the target cultures. Capturing the nature of this relation appears to be in fact central to contemporary translation, and it is the nature of the discrepancies between standard and non-standard that is deemed important to convey in the translation, in order to define characters in relation to one another, independently of the consequences of using a variety that might be associated with a particular age range, social group, or geographical area in the translation.

The study by Planchenault – probably the most directly relevant to the present research because it looks at translation into French in the context of film – explores the dubbing of the American documentary *Rize* into French, and tackles precisely the consequences of the amalgam of two youth languages from two different cultures. The author starts by drawing a parallel between the French *cités* and American inner cities, before making a historical comparison between *banlieue* French and AAVE, and points out (and this is reminiscent of Queen’s argument) that although AAVE is an ethnically-related variety, *banlieue* French is not. In the dubbed version, a significant range of linguistic features attributed to *banlieue* French have been consistently used, whereas in the original – maybe because of the semi-formal context that the filmmaker established when he interviewed the protagonists – very few features of AAVE were used, and not by all the characters. The author therefore concludes that:

S’il s’agissait pour les distributeurs du film en France d’attirer le public des banlieues en particulier, on peut se demander si le risque de véhiculer de fausses représentations n’était pas démesuré [...] les dialogues de la version française reposent essentiellement sur des *a priori* dans leur conception des cultures urbaines aussi bien américaine que française. (Planchenault, 2008: 197)

The linguistic forms thus presented in the French version constitute a sort of cognitive-narrative dissonance, whereby viewers’ perception of characters is altered by the use of a variety that is all too familiar, and in the particular case of the dubbing of *Rize*, borders on caricature. It seems rather unfortunate that the dubbed version somehow reinforces stereotypes and prejudices that the target audience may have against *cités* youths, or in the words of Planchenault:



Il semble désormais nécessaire de reconnaître ces choix de traduction comme des exercices démagogiques. La version française du film *Rize* est finalement très rassurante pour le spectateur français qui, se trouvant en terrain familier, apprécie sans doute le fait que sa conception de la jeunesse urbaine défavorisée ne soit en aucun cas déstabilisée. (Planchenault, 2008: 197)

The author, although suggesting in the title of her paper with the use of the word ‘amalgam’ that there might be something of a superimposition of cultures as a result of the use of marked language in the translation, does not analyse systematically the consequences of the cultural relocation of the dubbed film and the potential misunderstandings of viewers. In fact, she does not make it entirely clear what this ‘amalgam’ is: is it an amalgam of two cultures that is produced in the dubbed version of the film through the use of a marked linguistic variety? Or is it in the translation process, as the translator substitutes one variety, grounded in its own particular context with another one, that ‘un amalgam’ – a confusion – is made between AAVE and *banlieue* French?

### ***Conclusion***

It is precisely these issues that this study wishes to explore. From the above discussion on subtitling, it appears that in a subtitled film – even more than for a dubbed film, because the original is still present –, two cultural spheres collide and collude to create a complex system of signs that, in turn, will be interpreted by viewers. As illustrated in the three studies mentioned above, there is no ideal parallel between two linguistic varieties – AAVE, just like *banlieue* French, is deeply rooted in a geographical, social, and ethnic context. Its relationship with the other linguistic varieties it is in close contact with – either in socio-geographical terms or through

speakers of AAVE, who may well be able to switch between linguistic varieties – is largely unique, and because of all its idiosyncrasies, it is unlikely, if not impossible, that another linguistic variety, in another country, will present all the same characteristics and relationship with the standard or neighbouring varieties. What the attempts at translating AAVE analysed above reveal is that certain linguistic varieties in the TL are easier to relate to linguistic varieties in the SL – whether in a text or in a film. In the case of subtitling however, with the specificities mentioned in the initial section of this chapter, the problems related to the juxtaposition of the original soundtrack and the subtitles are rarely explored, as is the dissonance potentially borne from watching a foreign character expressing himself using features traditionally associated with *banlieue* French. Subtitles, precisely because they are written on screen, and force viewers away from the images, act as a permanent reminder of the ‘foreign’ nature of a film; at the same time, the use in the subtitles of linguistic features that belong to a variety that is stigmatised in the target culture relocates to a certain extent the action of the original.<sup>34</sup> These opposing forces pull the film in two directions, and the cultural spheres of the source and target languages are made to overlap by the translator.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> On this particular issue, see Egoyan & Balfour (2004).

<sup>35</sup> This point in particular is addressed in the final chapter of the thesis.

## **Chapter Two – Definition and Description of African American Vernacular English**

### ***Introduction***

There is an abundance of literature on AAVE. What is immediately striking is the diversity of names that are given to the variety spoken by some African Americans, predominantly in the United States. In fact, it seems that there are as many ways of naming it as there are linguists. Whether it is called ‘African American English’ (Green, 2002), or simply ‘Black English’ (Rickford & Rickford, 2000), or whether the issue of naming is deliberately dodged (as in the title of Geneva Smitherman’s book *Talkin that Talk* (1999), where the variety in question is only referred to through the use of the deictic word ‘that’), the naming process of this variety appears to be inherently problematic. The diversity of labels reflects certain generalities as well as different ideological approaches to AAVE. However, what all the scholarly studies of AAVE have in common is a desire to illustrate the systematicity of AAVE, to analyse its patterns of use, its grammar, sound system, syntax, morphology so as to demonstrate that AAVE is not merely a compilation of random deviations from what could be called ‘Standard English’,<sup>1</sup> but a rule-governed system. Before

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<sup>1</sup> In the opening pages of her book, Green explains that African American English ‘is different from but not a degraded version of classroom English (i.e., general American English, mainstream English) or the English which is the target of radio or television announcers’ (Green, 2002: 1). Comparing AAVE to the so-called standard variety is not unproblematic – for instance Standard American English shows differences with Standard British English. We do, however, have an extensively codified English grammar which is generally regarded as correct in a classroom and offers a theoretically sound pole of reference, without denying the possibility for diaphasic variation. Green argues further that ‘the comparison to classroom English is important because [...] it may be useful for those in the school system who work with speakers of AAE to see how the variety differs systematically from classroom English’ (Green, 2002: 1). The issue here is that we use the

examining the translation of AAVE, however, it is of paramount importance to define AAVE, and analyse what it means from a sociolinguistic perspective. Through careful examination of the literature, the aim of this chapter is to provide an answer to the following questions: What is AAVE, who are its speakers, and what do they know when they know AAVE?

### *Labelling the variety*

Whether we refer to AAVE as a language or as a dialect for the purpose of this thesis is largely irrelevant since both languages and dialects are rule-governed (that is, in any language, units are organised according to certain principles or rules, and the ‘rules of a language [...] are inferable from the observable patterns of the language’ (Brinton, 2000: 6)), and also because there are different definitions of the two terms. Languages are granted a higher prestige status than dialects, but it is not the place of the linguist to decide whether one particular linguistic entity (whether it is called a language or a dialect) is superior or inferior to another. We will henceforth refer to AAVE as a variety of English, to emphasise their close relationship, and because Standard English<sup>2</sup> is used as the pole of reference, but in no way to suggest that AAVE should in some way be subordinated to Standard English. Rather than referring to AAVE as a dialect of English, we will use the term ‘variety’ as a neutral term that highlights the relationship between AAVE and Standard English without

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standard as a pole of reference against which to compare AAVE, for the purpose of description and understanding, and it certainly should not be understood that AAVE is in any way sub-standard or inferior.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars working on AAVE are predominantly American, and therefore use Standard American English as their pole of reference.

subordinating one to the other in any way. Such issues have been addressed in Geoffrey Pullum's paper 'African American Vernacular English is not Standard English with mistakes' (1999). In addition, the present research attempts to move away from social judgments in relation to language concurring with Rickford and Rickford's (2000: 92) view that the 'characterization of [AAVE speakers] as careless and lazy [is a] subjective social and political evaluation that reflects prejudices and preconceptions about the people who usually speak [this] variety'. Louise DeVere (1971: 38-9) provides further insight into this matter explaining that although 'Black English is recognized as a social dialect with a demonstrable correlation to social status and socio-ethnic stratification [...] it is not justifiable to describe Negro [*sic*] speech in terms of a supposed racial inferiority manifested in "misinterpreted" speech sounds and "indolence" of speech habits'. William Labov (1969: 74) expressed a similar view and noted that AAVE 'differs from other dialects in a regular and rule-governed way, so that it has equivalent ways of expressing the same logical content'. We could add that whilst the English language has been codified in grammar books and dictionaries, AAVE has not been mapped to the same extent, as is the case for most – if not all – non-standard varieties. English has undergone a process of standardisation, on either side of the Atlantic Ocean, through the way it is taught in schools for instance. This system is self-perpetuating, and value judgments are passed on any forms that deviate from the standard, and these are considered incorrect or wrong. This is the reflection of a social judgment, not a linguistic one. It is only because a certain prestige – whether institutional, social, economic, cultural

or political – has been granted to Standard English that non-standard forms such as those used in AAVE sometimes evoke a negative perception of its speakers.

To a large extent, the name of this variety has been linked to the people who speak it. Lisa Green (2002: 5) notes that ‘the period during which AAE was referred to as Negro dialect or Negro English was precisely the period during which African Americans were referred to as Negroes. [...] the same label that is used to refer to the speakers is used for the variety’. This last point shows how important the link between a variety and its speakers is, and ties in with Lippi-Green’s idea that if styles are well known, recognisable and are what makes possible the indexing of speakers, then language can be used in films as a shortcut for characterisation. In other words, according to Lippi-Green, the indexing of speakers would follow the same rules in films and in the real world.<sup>3</sup>

The early labels such as Negro English already emphasise the social and ethnic characteristics of the variety. A whole range of labels has subsequently been used, some emphasising the relation of AAVE with English, while some deliberately avoiding mentioning English in an attempt to highlight relations between AAVE and its African or Creole roots: Negro dialect, Negro English, American Negro English, Black street speech, Black English, Black English Vernacular, Black Vernacular English, Afro American English, African American English, African

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<sup>3</sup> The differences between AAVE in the real world and its representations in films will be addressed in Chapter Three.

American Vernacular English.<sup>4</sup> The last two labels are the most widely used today. For the purpose of this thesis, we use the acronym AAVE in order to emphasise the oral component of the variety (which is predominantly spoken) evoked by the term ‘vernacular’. This also emphasises its problematic relationship with the standard, as well as its geographic and ethnic component evoked by ‘African American’. As the various labels indicate, and as highlighted by Green, the name of this particular variety is systematically connected to its speakers, whether those are called Negroes, Blacks or African Americans. The labels also reflect changing trends in naming processes and political correctness.

### *Speakers of AAVE*

Despite what the labels might suggest, not all African Americans speak AAVE, or as Pullum (1999: 53) humorously puts it: ‘Knowing AAVE does not come free with either knowing American English or African American ethnicity’. Most speakers of AAVE are of African descent, but one can imagine non-African American speakers trying to reproduce some of the features of AAVE in order to appropriate some of its prestige, whether

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<sup>4</sup> The term ‘Ebonics’, although nowadays frequently used by non-specialists to talk about AAVE, has been deliberately left out of this list, because Robert Williams (1975: vi), who coined the term, defined it thus: ‘A [...] term created by a group of black scholars, Ebonics may be defined as the linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represents the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendants of African origin. [...] Ebonics [...] refers to the study of the language of black people in all its cultural uniqueness’. Ebonics is synonymous with Pan African Language and African Language Systems, and is therefore different from AAVE in terms of its scope and identity. The use of Ebonics as a synonym for AAVE is sometimes deemed to be Eurocentric, and according to Smith (1998: 57), the scholars who use Ebonics as a synonym of AAVE ‘reveal an ignorance of the origin and meaning of the term Ebonics that is so profound that their confusion is pathetic’. Such confusion, it has to be said, may in part come from the attention that the term Ebonics received in 1996 during the Oakland Case when the Oakland Court (California) passed a resolution recognising the legitimacy of Ebonics as a language.

because AAVE is sometimes perceived as expressing male toughness, or simply because it is ‘cool’.

In general terms, however, it is true to say that speakers of AAVE are predominantly African Americans, mostly from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, although the variety is socially quite problematic to circumscribe. In line with sociolinguistic works on other varieties, some studies have tried to link AAVE and social stratification, and have demonstrated – often through the observation of one particular linguistic feature – that in general the lower the social background of speakers, the more they would use the particular feature associated with AAVE.<sup>5</sup> However, it has been pointed out that most speakers of AAVE also know a great deal of Standard English and can be proficient in switching between varieties, as explained by Pullum:

Even African Americans who have hardly any social contact with whites know an enormous amount of Standard English by the time they are adults. [...] It is quite typical for speakers of AAVE to be able to switch back and forth between their dialect and one much closer to Standard English. (Pullum, 1999: 52)<sup>6</sup>

What the switching emphasises is that AAVE has a different status from the standard and as such is used in different circumstances. While AAVE might be privileged for domestic exchanges, speakers are often able to resort to the use of Standard English when the situation requires it, for social or cultural reasons for instance.

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, see Wolfram (1969).

<sup>6</sup> Pullum’s statement that speakers of AAVE can switch to a variety that is ‘much closer to Standard English’ illustrates that fact that varieties are idealised and are not in fact discrete entities, but rather that there is a whole continuum between them.



The reason for switching from one variety to another is that different varieties can carry different levels of prestige. Code-switching (switching between two varieties) relates and sometimes indexes social-group membership, and a number of sociolinguists have studied the relationship between code-switching and social factors such as class or ethnicity.<sup>7</sup> Despite linguists' arguments that a particular variety cannot be said to be intrinsically inferior or superior to another, varieties are inevitably subject to stigmatisation and social judgment. Perhaps because the standard variety is 'taught in schools and to non-native speakers learning the language [and because it] is normally spoken by educated people and used in news broadcasts and other similar situations' (Trudgill, 2000: 5-6), other varieties sometimes have bad reputations, are perceived as substandard, and trigger negative opinions of their speakers, as is often the case with speakers of AAVE. Peter Trudgill argues that:

Because language as a social phenomenon is closely tied up with the social structure and value systems of society, different dialects and accents are evaluated in different ways. Standard English, for example, has much more status and prestige than any other English dialect [...] So statusful are Standard English and the prestige accents that they are widely considered to be 'correct', 'beautiful', 'nice', 'pure' and so on. Other nonstandard, non-prestige varieties are often held to be 'wrong', 'ugly', 'corrupt' or 'lazy'. Standard English, moreover, is frequently considered to be the English language, which inevitably leads to the view that other varieties of English are some kind of deviation from the norm, the deviation being due to laziness, ignorance or lack of intelligence (Trudgill, 2000: 8).

AAVE does not escape this rule, and a brief survey of internet forums on languages and language use rapidly illustrate that AAVE is often

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<sup>7</sup> On code-switching, see DeBose (1992) and Heller (1992). Sociolinguists such as Howard Giles have tried to relate the use of code-switching to speakers' attempts to minimise or emphasise the social distance between him/herself and the other person in the conversation: according to Giles, in a social situation, speakers can modify their accent, dialect or para-linguistic features to converge or diverge with their interlocutor (Giles, 1979).

considered crass, and its speakers uneducated, unrefined, or even illiterate, as again is often the case with speakers of non-standard varieties. Attitudes to non-standard varieties tend to be negative and can potentially lead to some forms of social exclusion. In the words of sociolinguist Ralph Hudson (1980: 194), ‘language, in the form of variety differences, contributes to social inequality by being used as a yard-stick for evaluating people, and by being a highly unreliable yard-stick’. Some people (but by no means all) believe that speakers of AAVE perform all the negative stereotypes mentioned above when they are using features of AAVE. Consequently, speakers of AAVE are perceived to have less of whatever is highly valued in a society (for instance a good education, politeness, etc) than they really do as a result of the way they speak.

While according to linguists, the use of AAVE is not restricted to a particular age group,<sup>8</sup> it is nowadays predominantly associated with urban contexts and socially deprived areas. Furthermore, while not all African Americans use AAVE, or all the features of AAVE, those who do may display regional differences. Among African Americans who speak AAVE, a certain diatopic variation (that is, variation on a geographic level) can also be observed. If the lexical and syntactic variants described in the section below are shared by most speakers of AAVE, some minor differences can be observed at the level of pronunciation between speakers from different parts of the United States.<sup>9</sup> However, all are considered to be

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<sup>8</sup> See Green (2002: 7).

<sup>9</sup> See Green (2002: 1).

speakers of AAVE,<sup>10</sup> and it would be unfair to expect more homogeneity from AAVE than we would for any other variety.

### *Linguistic features of AAVE*

The list of lexical, syntactic, phonological as well as interactional features of AAVE provided below gives examples of its most important features observed by specialists of AAVE. It should be highlighted here that the work of these specialists is descriptive in nature, and not prescriptive (i.e. their target readership is students and academics, and not exclusively speakers of African American descent, and these books aim to present a snapshot of AAVE as it is used by speakers of the variety nowadays, rather than for purposes of codification or standardisation). Because AAVE is predominantly a spoken variety that has not effectively been codified, AAVE is an all the more flexible, dynamic and ever changing variety – some features are constantly being added, while some become increasingly less used. This also accounts for the slight differences of patterns between AAVE as described by linguists, AAVE as it is represented in films, and AAVE as used in the real world. What is more, the level of complexity of some sentence constructions in particular (see the section on the syntactic features of AAVE below) can be very great, and we lack space to present the complexities of AAVE in greater detail in this thesis.

The aim of the following sections on the lexis, syntax and phonology of AAVE is thus not to provide an exhaustive list of all the linguistic features of AAVE, which would be unnecessary and most likely impossible given

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<sup>10</sup> See Green (2002: 1).

its fluidity (or any other variety for that matter). Rather, the aim of this section is to try and isolate the features that are recognised as the most widely used by speakers of AAVE – and identified by linguists as typical of AAVE – through the examination of recent authoritative monographs about this variety, namely those by Green (2002), Rickford and Rickford (2000) and Smitherman (1999). Following these authors, the features under observation will not be discussed in specialist linguistic terms (or whenever technical terms are used, an explanation will be provided), but rather using layman's terms, and illustrated with examples: this decision is deliberate and allows for concision and clarity of representations of extracts from the dialogue of the films of the corpus. The transcription system tailored for the purpose of this thesis and which is indebted to the authors mentioned above allows for an easier reading of the lines from the films dealt with in the next three chapters.

### *Lexical features*

The lexis of AAVE is, roughly speaking, identical to that of standard American English, but just as British speakers say 'lorry' where Americans say 'truck', speakers of AAVE sometimes use words that are not used in other varieties of English, or that have taken on different meanings. Linguists affirm that this lexical element of AAVE is in fact crucial in defining the boundaries between groups of people, mainly black and white.<sup>11</sup> But whilst divisive to a certain extent, it can also have a unifying function, or in the words of Rickford and Rickford (2000: 93): 'one of the many fascinating features of black vocabulary is how sharply it can divide

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<sup>11</sup> See Green (2002: 32)

blacks and whites, and how solidly it can connect blacks from different social classes'.<sup>12</sup> The salient features of the lexicon of AAVE are a specialised meaning of certain words and phrases, and an extensive use of swearwords. Specialists of AAVE usually give a few examples of words or phrases used by some speakers of AAVE. Here are three examples reproduced from Green (2002: 16):

1. Kitchen (noun): nappy hair around the nape of the neck, especially on women or girls. (also cited in Rickford & Rickford, 2000: 94)
2. Seddity (sometimes spelt 'saddity') (noun): bourgeois black person; snobbish and pretentious.
3. Get over (verb): take advantage of, to succeed by using wit but little effort.

'Kitchen' is a word existing in the standard variety with a completely different meaning in AAVE, while 'seddity' is a word used exclusively by some speakers of AAVE. 'Get over', again, is a case of a phrase existing in the standard variety but that has a different meaning for some speakers of AAVE, as is often the case for many verbs that are quite common in the standard variety. Other examples include 'come', which can be used specifically to express indignation, as in 'He come coming in here, raising all kind of hell' and 'he come walking in here like he owned the damn place' (Green, 2002: 22),<sup>13</sup> and 'stay', which can be used to express habitual meaning, for instance 'He stay hungry' (He is always hungry) or

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<sup>12</sup> Again, this is not strictly specific to AAVE. Rather, studies on AAVE corroborate sociolinguistic work on the social functions of language which indicate that language can be used to express or reinforce belonging to a particular group as well as to exclude other people.

<sup>13</sup> Both examples, quoted in Green, originally come from a study by Spears (1982: 852-4).

‘He stay in the air’ (He is a frequent flyer, he travels by plane regularly)  
(Green, 2002: 23).

Attempting to give an up-to-date account of slang use for a particular variety presents major challenges: slang changes so rapidly that it is virtually impossible to give an accurate snapshot of current slang items in use in any variety. Green points out that ‘a large number of lexical items originate in and are perpetuated through hip-hop culture, including music’ (Green, 2002: 27). Some speakers of AAVE, predominantly adolescents and young adults according to Green, make extensive use of slang.<sup>14</sup> Teresa Labov (1992) notes three categories of slang: one for labelling people; one for describing people and activities; and one for leisure. In her study, she also finds that out of thirty-three slang terms, ‘eight show a 2.5 times or greater likelihood of African American usage, and twenty-five at least 3 times or greater white usage’ (Labov, 1992: 351).<sup>15</sup> In other words, AAVE’s lexicon is also defined by the frequency of use of certain words, in particular as far as Labov’s first category (labelling people) is concerned. Green provides an extensive but certainly not exhaustive list of some of these words, used by speakers of AAVE to designate females and males. Here are a few examples of such terms of reference:

Terms for females  
bopper  
dime

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<sup>14</sup> See Green (2002: 31). This point is again not unusual, as teenagers and young adults are often the most prolific users of slang.

<sup>15</sup> While the results of this study partly depends on the method and samples used, Rickford and Rickford (2000: 98) also acknowledge that AAVE is in constant evolution and that AAVE and the standard are not discreet varieties: ‘many blacks complain about white and mainstream adoption of black slang [...] new slang terms that provide secrecy and reflect rebelliousness are constantly being created within the black community’.

honey  
hot girl  
ma  
shorty  
wifey

Terms for males

balla  
cat  
cuz  
dawg (also dog)  
fool  
homes  
hot boy  
kinfolk  
mark  
money  
player (playa)  
scrub  
slick (Green, 2002: 28)

Each of these words can have specific connotations. ‘Dawg’ for instance can be used negatively to designate a man who mistreats a woman, but without negative connotations if used as a term of address.<sup>16</sup> The use of these terms of address is restricted to speakers who are part of the group. According to sociolinguist Holmes (1992: 193), the use of such features ‘express[es] the sense of cultural distinctiveness of many African Americans’. Studies on naming practices have also confirmed the relationship between the use of terms of address and power and solidarity, and have demonstrated that relationships of familiarity are expressed through the mutual use of familiar terms of address. They also report that the asymmetric use of terms of address (where a speaker uses more formal terms of address than his/her counterpart) indicates inequality in power.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Green (2002: 29).

<sup>17</sup> See Brown & Ford (1961), Ervin-Tripp (1972: 231) and Wardhaugh (2002: 267-71).

Language can be a very important factor in group solidarity and identification, and more generally in the signalling of difference. The translation of dialogues of films portraying speakers of AAVE has to be undertaken with this in mind: beyond the fact that it is used to communicate on screen, AAVE is also used to make a statement to viewers about characters who speak it, to (re)establish the relationships that unite or separate characters, and to establish networks of characters within the narrative. When it comes to translation, the use of lexicon to define group boundaries presents itself as a major issue: if lexical patterns serve to define group practices and membership, and are used to both reassert membership to one's group in particular and to signify a departure from the standard, then it might be seen as paramount to make sure these features are rendered in the subtitled film because these features might play a key role in characterisation. Inevitably, however, such features may not be available in the TL or may carry different connotations.<sup>18</sup>

### *Syntactic features*

AAVE is more than the sum of its words, and its syntactic, phonological and interactional patterns also constitute an integral part. In this section, I will outline patterns in the syntactic features of AAVE. Green notes:

Oftentimes, negative opinions are formed about AAE and the people who speak it [based on their use of syntax]. Listeners understand that AAE features differ in some way from features of general American English, but they seldom understand that the differences are based on specific rules that account for the way words are combined to form sentences in AAE (Green, 2002: 76).

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<sup>18</sup> This will be examined in Chapter Four.



Green goes on to describe the systematicity of AAVE, which, according to her, is anything but random and linguistically incorrect.<sup>19</sup> She argues, however, that syntax is the main criterion that non-speakers of AAVE use to create poor opinions about speakers of AAVE, and that it is one of the most salient aspects of AAVE. Smitherman also insists that ‘linguistically speaking, the greatest differences between contemporary Black and White English are on the level of grammatical structure’ (Smitherman, 1999: 87).<sup>20</sup> The examples cited in this section are taken from Green (2002) and Rickford and Rickford (2000) but there is a vast number of sources that deal with the syntactic properties of AAVE and which are cited in footnotes. For purposes of clarity, the following features are presented in list format.

1. Multiple negators, such as ‘don’t’, ‘ain’t’, ‘no’, ‘nothing’, ‘never’, can be used in a single negative sentence, as in the following examples: ‘Bruce don’t want no teacher telling him nothing about no books’ (in Standard English, ‘Bruce doesn’t want a teacher to tell him anything (giving him advice) about books’) (Green, 2002: 77); ‘Ain’t nothing you can do’ (‘There is nothing you can do’) (Green, 2002: 78).<sup>21</sup>

2. Existential ‘it’ and ‘dey’ can be used in AAVE to indicate that something exists, and are used where a Standard English construction would use ‘there is’ or ‘there are’. For example: ‘It’s some coffee in the

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<sup>19</sup> See footnote 1 of this chapter.

<sup>20</sup> Also cited in Rickford & Rickford (2000: 109).

<sup>21</sup> See also Rickford & Rickford (2000: 122-4) and Weldon (1995).

kitchen' or 'Dey some coffee in the kitchen' (in Standard English, 'There is some coffee in the kitchen') (Green, 2002: 80).<sup>22</sup>

3. Questions in AAVE can follow structures that depart from the standard. Yes-no questions in particular can be formed without auxiliaries in initial position, as in the following: 'You know her name?' (in Standard English, 'Do you know her name?');<sup>23</sup> 'He sleeping in the car?' ('Is he sleeping in the car?'). However, Green (2002: 84) notes that whilst there are no auxiliaries in initial position of the sentences to indicate that they are indeed questions, 'the intonational pattern used in uttering the sentences marks them as questions', which is also the case in other spoken varieties of English. 'Do' is the auxiliary that occurs at the beginning of sentences with invariant 'be',<sup>24</sup> as in the following: 'Do it be dark?' ('Is it usually dark?'). Alternatives are sometimes possible, and a question can be formed without an initial auxiliary. The question is then signalled by intonation ('He be sleeping in that car?') where 'do' can be used as initial auxiliary ('Do he be sleeping in that car?') (Green, 2002: 84-5).<sup>25</sup> Both sentences would be equivalent to 'Does he usually sleep in that car?' in Standard English.

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<sup>22</sup> See also Rickford (1999: 8-9), and Rickford & Rickford (2000: 111). Rickford and Rickford (2000: 122-4) only discuss existential 'it' and give the following example: 'it's a lot of girls (=there are a lot of girls)'.

<sup>23</sup> We note here that the question 'You know her name?' is also possible in Standard English in informal contexts.

<sup>24</sup> Invariant 'be' is discussed in the following paragraph.

<sup>25</sup> Rickford & Rickford (2000: 124-5) also discuss question construction and provide additional insights on the construction of questions in indirect speech.

4. Invariant ‘be’ is the use of ‘be’ in a sentence where speakers of Standard English would use a conjugated form of the verb ‘to be’. It is used for an action that takes place on a regular basis. For example: ‘I just be broken down. I be tired’ (in Standard English ‘I am usually broken down. I am usually tired.’) (Green, 2002: 98).<sup>26</sup>

5. The verbal –s in the present tense is often neutralised, as in the following example: ‘When he come down here, I be dən talked to him’ (‘When he comes down here, I have usually already talked to him’).<sup>27</sup> However, verbs may also bear the verbal –s, and it can have a number of different functions as in the following: ‘I sits and rides’ (agreement marker, ‘I sit and ride’); ‘Well, that’s the way it bes’ (habitual marker, ‘Well, that’s the way it is’) (Green, 2002: 100-1). AAVE speakers also sometimes use a singular verb with a plural subject (‘we was’, ‘they is’).<sup>28</sup> At this stage, it is important to point out that some of the features described here are not necessarily specific to AAVE. For instance, multiple negations or verbal –s as habitual markers can also be found in what is usually referred to as Southern American English, a variety spoken mostly in the South East of the United States, while other features such as ‘we was’ can also be heard in other varieties of English (Cockney for instance). Southern American English displays similarities with AAVE because of the strong historical ties of

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<sup>26</sup> Further examples are provided in Rickford & Rickford (2000: 113-4). See also Bailey & Maynor (1987), Holmes (1992: 194), Myhill (1991), Pullum (1999: 46), Rickford (1999: 265-7), Rickford & McNair-Knox (1994: 256), and Singler (1998: 241).

<sup>27</sup> Verbal marker ‘dən’ is explained later in this section (point 9).

<sup>28</sup> Further examples of the neutralisation of verbal –s in the present tense can be found in Rickford & Rickford (2000: 111-2). On the use of verbal –s in AAVE, see also Myhill & Harris (1986).

African Americans to that region.<sup>29</sup> There is a fair degree of overlap between AAVE and Southern American English, particularly as far as syntactic features are concerned, but also important differences (the most salient of which is usually said to be the pronunciation of vowels).

6. Past morphology<sup>30</sup> in AAVE can depart from the standard and there is usually only one form of a verb (either simple past or past participle) used in AAVE. For example, ‘I drunk’ and ‘I have drunk’ (in Standard English ‘I drank’ and ‘I have drunk’); ‘I ate’ and ‘I have ate’ (‘I ate’ and ‘I have eaten’). According to Green (2002: 95), one or the other form is used in all contexts.

7. The unstressed form of ‘been’ (usually notated ‘bin’) is used where Standard English would use ‘have been’, as in this example: ‘He bin doing it since we was teenagers’ (‘He has been doing it since we were teenagers’). It is also used in front of the –ing form of a verb, where Standard English would use ‘have’ followed by a past participle, as in: ‘I bin knowing her for a long time’ (‘I have known her for a long time’) (Rickford & Rickford, 2000: 117).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> On the relationship between Southern American English and AAVE, see Wolfram (1974).

<sup>30</sup> Past morphology is discussed under the heading ‘Morphosyntactic properties’ in Green (2002: 94), whilst it is discussed in the section entitled ‘Grammar’ in Rickford & Rickford (2000: 117). We have decided here to include it in the section on morphosyntactic properties, because the phenomena described below impact directly on the way the past tense is built in AAVE.

<sup>31</sup> See also Winford (1992: 344).

8. The stressed form of ‘been’ (usually notated ‘BIN’ – in capital letters – in the literature on AAVE) can be used to mean something has been done ‘for a long time’ or ‘a long time ago’. When followed by a verb, BIN ‘describes the state that the subjects has been in for a long time’ (Green, 2002: 96).<sup>32</sup> For example: ‘The mirror BIN broke’ (in Standard English ‘The mirror has been broken for a long time’ or ‘the mirror broke a long time ago’) (Green, 2002: 96).<sup>33</sup>

9. A weak form of ‘done’ (usually noted ‘dən’) can be used for past situations. For example: ‘I dən already finished that’ (in Standard English ‘I have already finished that’); ‘I dən done all you told me to do’ (‘I have already done all you have told me to do’) (Green, 2002: 60).<sup>34</sup>

10. The last noteworthy feature is known amongst linguists as the zero copula (noted  $\emptyset$ ) – that is, the absence of ‘be’, as in the following examples: ‘People  $\emptyset$  crazy’ (‘People are crazy’); ‘He  $\emptyset$  still doing it’ (‘He is still doing it’) (Rickford & Rickford, 2000: 114-5).<sup>35</sup> This usage is limited to the present tense. Rickford and Rickford also give an example of a study where copula deletion varied according to the topic under discussion during interviews (for the same person). For instance, an African American teenager’s copula deletion rate fell to 43 percent when talking about

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<sup>32</sup> This particular point also relates to the phonological aspect of AAVE (see below). BIN can be produced with a certain stress, and if it is not stressed, then it does not indicate remote past meaning.

<sup>33</sup> Further details are provided in Rickford & Rickford (2000:117-9).

<sup>34</sup> Also discussed in Rickford & Rickford (2000: 120).

<sup>35</sup> See also Holmes (1992: 194), Labov (1969), Rickford & Rickford (2000: 114-6), and Singler (1998: 236).

graduation and plans for college and career, but rose to 86 percent when talking about boy-girl relations.

This only illustrates how dynamic and variable AAVE is.<sup>36</sup> Just as they would for any other kind of social capital, speakers ‘deploy [AAVE] to greater or lesser extents to delineate identity, to mark differences of social class, gender, and age, and to express how comfortable they are with their audiences and topics’ (Rickford & Rickford, 2000: 128). Like other varieties, AAVE can display variation in terms of style and register, and can be used by speakers to signal their membership of particular groups. The register and style of AAVE – or of any other linguistic variety, for that matter – can be shaped by the particular functional demands of a given context and therefore shed light on the speaker’s social status, but also on the addressee’s, and provide information about the context of utterance.

Other studies of the grammatical system of AAVE also reveal that variation is closely connected to the social class, age and gender of speakers. For instance, Wolfram’s Detroit study shows that the lower the social class, the more speakers of AAVE use multiple negations (Wolfram, 1969), and this is an example of what Wolfram describes as ‘sharp stratification’, where the line between working and middle class is much clearer than seen in the case of, for example, consonant cluster simplification. For instance, according to Wolfram, lower-working class

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<sup>36</sup> Sociolinguistic studies examining other varieties have reached similar conclusions, and the phenomenon in itself relates to style and register and is not in itself specific to AAVE. Rather, Rickford and Rickford’s study reveals that AAVE conforms to known sociolinguistic patterns.

blacks (unskilled workers) use multiple negations 78 percent of the time, while upper-working class blacks (skilled workers) use it 55 percent of the time, lower-middle class blacks (white-collar workers) 12 percent of the time, and upper-middle class blacks (highly educated business and professional people) 8 percent of the time. Still according to Wolfram's study, lower-working class black males delete the copula more often than lower-working class black females (66 vs 48 percent).<sup>37</sup> According to this study, age is also important when it comes to variation, and Wolfram's study again indicates that lower-working class teenagers delete the copula significantly more than their adult counterparts (68 vs 38 percent of the time). Again, these differences can be explained in terms of social barriers and social distance. In order to understand how this phenomenon works, Trudgill (2000: 24) argues that 'the diffusion of a linguistic feature through a society may be halted by barriers of social class, age, race, religion or other factors. And social distance may have the same sort of effect as geographical distance: for example, a linguistic innovation that begins amongst the highest social class will affect the lowest social group last, if at all'.<sup>38</sup> This process known as social stratification refers to the hierarchical ordering of groups within a society, and which gives rise to

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<sup>37</sup> On this particular point, Rickford and Rickford (2000: 127) highlight that the 'association of black vernacular speech with maleness and toughness was common in early studies, and it may still be true today. But many of the early studies were conducted by men, who did not get down with the sistahs as effectively as they did with the brothas. In more recent studies in the black community of East Palo Alto, California, a black woman, Faye McNair-Knox, who grew up in the same community, established a close rapport with her female interviewees; the teenage girls she recorded deleted their copulas a striking 81 to 90 percent of the time'. We will see below that the association between AAVE and maleness is, however, still conveyed in films.

<sup>38</sup> It should be highlighted here that Trudgill's model cannot be used to explain all social differences in language and all linguistic changes, and that attitudes to language (discussed in the opening section of this chapter) also play an important part in the preservation or removal of linguistic differences.

socially identifiable varieties. Naturally, the whole question of social classes is not uncontroversial, and sociologists still have not come to any agreement about the definition or even the very existence of social classes. Trudgill (2000: 25) defines social classes as ‘aggregates of individuals with similar social and/or economic characteristics’ and in the field of Sociolinguistics, studies by Labov, and particularly *The Social Stratification of English in New York* (1966), provide scientific evidence of variation across the social spectrum. Wolfram’s study corroborates Labov’s theory and indicates that there is a correlation between speakers of AAVE’s use of certain features and their social positioning.

### *Phonological features*

Words in AAVE generally have the same meaning as in Standard English, but can have a different pronunciation. The following section will provide a list of the most important phonological features of AAVE. I will distinguish between variation at the level of individual segments – that is consonant and vowel sounds within a given word – and variation on the suprasegmental level – patterns affecting words, phrases or even sentences.

### Segmental features

The segmental features of the phonology of AAVE are again presented as a list.



1. Final consonant cluster reduction occurs for words ending with several consonant sounds such as ‘test’, ‘desk’ or ‘hand’, and become ‘tes’, ‘des’ and ‘han’ in AAVE<sup>39</sup> (Green, 2002: 107).<sup>40</sup>

2. Consonant clusters preceding –er and –ing may also be affected by the above rule, and therefore the words ‘colder’, ‘spending’ and ‘acting’ for instance can become ‘coler’, ‘spening’ and ‘acking’ in AAVE (Green, 2002: 112).

3. Devoicing, that is the process of pronouncing a usually voiced sound without any vibration of the vocal chords so as to make it voiceless, also happens sometimes with some consonants at the end of words. Consequently, words such as ‘cab’, ‘feed’ and ‘pig’ can be pronounced ‘cap’, ‘feet’ and ‘pick’ in AAVE (Green, 2002: 116).

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<sup>39</sup> While consonant cluster reduction is a phenomenon that happens in many languages, the particular point on the reduction of final consonant cluster reduction in AAVE is one of the issues that is the most often commented upon by linguists, perhaps because of its ideological ramifications. In actual fact, there are two ways of approaching this issue. The first (which might be called standard-centric) assumes that at some level in AAVE, the final consonant clusters in these words are intact, and that the final consonant sound is reduced under certain conditions (which as a matter of fact is also the case in Standard English – it just happens more often to words in AAVE), and that it is the result of a phonological process. The second (which is usually referred to as the Africanist approach) postulates that speakers of AAVE pronounce *tes*, *des* and *han* for instance, not because the final consonant sound is deleted in certain environments, but that because of the alleged West African origins of certain sound patterns of AAVE, the final consonant was never there in the first place. In the words of Ernie Smith, ‘the scholars who view African-American speech as a dialect of English describe the absent final consonant cluster as being a “lost”, “weakened”, “simplified”, “deleted”, or “omitted” consonant phoneme. But viewed as an Africanist Language system that has adopted European words, African-American speech is described by Africologists as having retained the canonical form, or shape, of the syllable structure of the Niger-Congo African languages. Thus, in Ebonics [sic] homogeneous consonant clusters tend not to occur. This is not because the final phoneme has been “lost”, “weakened”, “simplified”, “deleted”, or “omitted”, but because *they never existed in the first place*’. (Smith, 1998: 56, emphasis in original) However interesting this debate may be in the academic community, it is not one of the aims of this thesis to take a particular stance on this issue.

<sup>40</sup> Rickford & Rickford (2000: 104) provide the exact same three examples, while Pullum (1999: 51) also provides the same but also a few more, including *lef* for left, *respec* for respect, *stop* for stopped, and *ol* for old.

4. The *theta* sound in Standard English can be replaced by t/d or f/v depending on the environment, as in the following examples: ‘this’ and ‘that’ become ‘dis’ and ‘dat’ in AAVE, ‘bath’ and ‘month’ become ‘baf’ and ‘monf’, ‘bathe’ and ‘smooth’ become ‘bave’ and ‘smoove’ (Green, 2002: 118). This phenomenon is known as th-fronting, according to which voiceless /θ/ (as in ‘bath’ or ‘month’) can in effect be replaced by voiceless /f/ or /t/, while voiced /ð/ (as in bathe and smooth) can be replaced by voiced /d/ or /v/.<sup>41</sup>

5. The sound /ŋ/ in the –ing suffix is in most contexts realised as /n/, as in ‘runnin’, ‘thinkin’, and ‘walkin’ (‘running’, ‘thinking’ and ‘walking’) (Green, 2002: 122).<sup>42</sup>

6. Speakers of AAVE can have a monophthongal pronunciation of diphthongs (that is, two vowel sounds occurring in the same syllable are only pronounced as one vowel sound), as in ‘mah’ and ‘ah’, instead of ‘my’ and ‘I’ (Rickford & Rickford, 2000: 99). Again according to Rickford and Rickford (2000: 103), ‘these processes are found also in the speech of whites and other ethnic groups, but they tend to occur more often [in AAVE]’.

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<sup>41</sup> We should note here that neither of the two points mentioned above (devoicing and th-fronting) are specific to AAVE, and can occur in other varieties. On th-fronting, see also Rickford & Rickford (2000: 104).

<sup>42</sup> See also Rickford & Rickford (2000: 103).

7. Liquid consonant sounds like /l/ and /r/ can in some contexts be vocalised, which means that they will be pronounced more like vowels than like consonants, as in ‘he’p’, ‘afta’ and ‘yo’’ (for ‘help’, ‘after’ and ‘your’) (Rickford & Rickford, 2000: 103). In other words, liquid consonants, in a phonetic environment where they follow a vocalic sound can take on vowel-like qualities.<sup>43</sup>

8. Rickford and Rickford also give examples of variation of pronunciation of consonants in tense-aspect markers and auxiliary verbs, as in the following examples: ‘ah ’on’ know’, ‘he ain’t do it’ and ‘ah ma do it’ for ‘I don’t know’, ‘He didn’t do it’ and ‘I am going to (gonna) do it’, respectively. The sounds that are not pronounced in these examples are significant, as according to Rickford and Rickford (2000: 105-6), ‘voicing is relevant to another pronunciation feature [of AAVE], which shares with many English-based creoles a rule deleting *b*, *d*, or *g* (all voiced “stops” when any one of them is the first consonant in tense-aspect markers or auxiliary verbs)’. In the examples provided, this includes the *d* of don’t and didn’t respectively (ah ’on’ know, he ain’t do it) and the *g* of gonna (as in ‘ah ma do it’, where the *g* and in fact most of *gonna* are not pronounced).

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<sup>43</sup> Concerning the vocalisation of the sound /r/, Green explains that this particular feature is also found in Southern American English, which is sometimes described as being ‘r-less’ (Green, 2002: 120). While AAVE and Southern American English are ‘quite similar with respect to the vocalization of r and l [...] they may differ with respect to the actual vowel sounds of the vocalized element’ (Green, 2002: 120-1). In AAVE, the result is a vowel lengthening as a reflex of r-vocalisation, and therefore if a liquid (l or r) is not produced, then the vowel that is present may become longer.

## Suprasegmental features

Unlike the previous section, this section focuses on patterns affecting words, phrases and sentences. Most importantly, they give an insight into what is meant by ‘sounding black’. A study by Rickford (1972) shows that listeners who heard speech samples were able to identify a speaker’s ethnicity with a fairly high level of success. This study raised issues about what it means to ‘sound black’. The author then suggested that features such as stress patterns, pronunciation and tone could act as indicators of the ethnicity of a speaker.<sup>44</sup> A similar study by Labov *et al* (1968) drew different conclusions, and explained that listeners showed an ability to identify clear cases of varieties (such as AAVE) rather than speakers’ ethnic backgrounds.<sup>45</sup> General comments about the way speakers of AAVE talk are sometimes made in research on AAVE. Kochman (1972: 242) for instance describes them as having ‘a fluent and lively way of talking’, which is naturally a very problematic comment, but ethnographic studies have also provided some insight into why and when speakers of AAVE modify – whether consciously or not – their intonational patterns.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> This is also discussed in Green (2002: 124).

<sup>45</sup> See Labov *et al* (1968: 285). Wolfram & Fasold (1974: 147, also cited in Green, 2002: 124) explain that intonation ‘appears to be one of the main reasons why some standard-speaking blacks may be identified ethnically’, but Green (2002: 124) emphasises the fact that ‘it is not clear what type of evidence (e.g., experiments based on listener judgments) they have used’ in order to reach their conclusions.

<sup>46</sup> See Fordham (1996). The author provides a comment from an African American teenager about the way her own mother changes her intonational patterns when she is on the phone: ‘She just talks like that on the telephone, I’ll put it like that. When she talks, she puts on airs, you know, sounds White [...] so you can’t tell whether she’s White or Black. But when she’s around the house, she talks, you know, regular; but when she’s out around other people, anywhere out besides the house, she talks in a proper way’ (Fordham, 1996: 114). Of course, all these terms, although they give some insight into how speakers of different varieties perceive each other, or how one person changes the way they speak depending on the context, are aspects of AAVE that have been

A study by Tarone (1973) focusing on adolescents from Seattle provided a more formal description of the impressionistic statement about ‘sounding Black’, and found that the intonational features that most significantly characterised speakers of AAVE were:

A wider pitch range, extending into higher pitch levels than in white English [...] and often shifting into a falsetto register.  
More level and rising final pitch contours on all sentence types in an informal situation.  
Apparent greater use of falling final pitch contours with yes/no questions in formal, threatening situations, but level and rising final contours in informal, familiar situations.  
The use of nonfinal intonation contours, without the use of the lexical item *if*, to mark the dependent clause of some conditional sentences.  
(Tarone, 1973: 35)

Some of Tarone’s findings were later corroborated by a study by Green (1990) using pitch tracking devices.<sup>47</sup> However, more data would be required to give substance to the impressionistic observations of AAVE with greater scientific rigour.

Stress patterns within words have also been considered by researchers. Front-shifting is a phenomenon described by Smitherman (1977: 18) as the placing of the primary stress on the initial syllable of a word. She provides the following examples: ‘PO-lice’ and ‘DE-troit’. Baugh (1983: 63) suggests that this feature seems to be limited to two-syllable words. Other studies on AAVE mention front-shifting (Labov & Fasold (1974), Rickford & Rickford (2000)), and all of them provide the exact same sample of

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understudied, and a lot more research is necessary before a formal description of the ways of talking of speakers of AAVE can be provided.

<sup>47</sup> Green’s study focuses exclusively on yes/no questions and on wh- questions.

examples (PO-lice, HO-tel, JU-ly, DE-troit) which might indicate that the phenomenon is limited to a finite corpus of words.

To conclude on the phonology of AAVE, we have seen that there are features that are described in the literature as typical of AAVE both at the segmental and suprasegmental level, although the suprasegmental level remains very understudied. There is, however, evidence that some features like those mentioned above are – and perhaps more importantly are identified by listeners as being – typical of AAVE, and Rickford and Rickford (2000:106) underline the fact that ‘virtually all African Americans use some of the pronunciation features [identified above] at least some of the time, especially in their most informal moments’. Again, this type of stylistic variation follows patterns that are for the most part found in sociolinguistic studies. Specifically about the pronunciation of AAVE, Wolfram’s study, mentioned above, highlighted as early as 1969 that African Americans with predominantly African American social contacts used pronunciation features of AAVE more often than African Americans with predominantly white social contacts. It also suggested that teenagers use variants more than adults, and males more than females, a point which is relevant to the present study given that most characters portrayed in films from the corpus are African American male teenagers.

#### *Interactional features*

Specialists of AAVE agree that syntactic and phonological features alone are not enough to characterise AAVE sufficiently. So far, we have

provided examples that only reflect a part of the language use of speakers of AAVE. This section will look at additional ways in which language is used in AAVE, and will focus on AAVE speakers' use of swearwords and insults as well as on speech events such as 'playing the dozens' or 'rapping', and their rules of interaction. Language in interactions has been studied by ethnographers of communication such as John Gumperz and Dell Hymes, who have provided a useful framework for the analysis of what they refer to as speech acts, speech events, and speech situations. However, the first notion that ought to be defined here is that of speech community. Dell Hymes (1974: 51) argues that 'a speech community is defined [...] as a community sharing knowledge of rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech. Such sharing comprises knowledge of at least one form of speech, and knowledge also of its patterns of use. Both conditions are necessary'. This notion proves particularly important when examining practices such as 'playing the dozens', as we will see below. Within a speech community, some situations are associated with speech (or with its absence); these are defined by Hymes (1974: 51) as 'speech situations' which are 'activities which are in some recognizable way bounded or integral' (Hymes, 1974: 52). Speech situations can be fights, hunts, meals, lovemaking, ceremonies, fishing trips, etc, and may comprise verbal and non-verbal events, as well as verbal events of more than one type. Whereas speech situations are not themselves governed by rules, speech events are 'restricted to activities, or aspects of activities, that are directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech' (Hymes, 1974: 52). According to Hymes (1974: 52), the difference between a speech

situation and a speech event is one of magnitude: ‘a party (speech situation), a conversation during the party (speech event), a joke within the conversation (speech act)’. The speech act is therefore the smallest unit of the set, and may be analysed in terms of its syntactic and semantic structures, and Hymes (1974: 52) is careful to add that ‘much of the knowledge that speakers share about the status of utterances as acts is immediate and abstract, and having to do with features of interaction and context as well as grammar’. Because speech events are closely linked to the speech community (a group of people who share common speaking practices) that produces them in a given situation, speech events constitute very specific cultural phenomena. A fair amount had been written about speech events specifically in the context of AAVE as early as the 1930s,<sup>48</sup> and we provide here a general overview of the main strategies used by speakers of AAVE from an academic perspective.

First, swearing and verbal abuse are essential elements of African American Vernacular English, as spoken by both men and women (Smitherman, 1999: 267). Rap music with ‘its violence, its raw language, and its misogynistic lyrics’ (Smitherman, 1999: 271) is sometimes advocated as a source of inspiration for young people.<sup>49</sup> The extensive use of ‘bitch’ as a generic term to designate a woman is in fact often commented upon, sometimes even within the films under study themselves. Lepoutre quotes an interview that rapper Ice-T gave to the

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<sup>48</sup> See Dollard (1939).

<sup>49</sup> On this particular issue, see also Richardson & Scott (2002) and Sullivan (2003).



French newspaper *Libération*, in which he explains that there is more to this superficial vulgarity:

(Libération) Les « motherfucker » sont-ils toujours indispensables, ou le mot « bitch » chaque fois qu'apparaît une femme?

(Ice-T) Les « motherfucker » et assimilés appartiennent à notre parler. Ils expriment la rogne, ce sont des points d'exclamation. *Idem* avec *bitch* : le Noir a une disposition à débiter des insanités. Genre : « Mec, ma bite va rebondir sur trois murs et défoncer ta mère. » On n'y peut rien, c'est un langage – mais pas à prendre au pied de la lettre : « pute » désigne la femme qu'on aime, avec qui on a eu cinq gosses et qu'on ne quitterait pour rien au monde. Les mâles sont ainsi faits, notre sexisme est une réalité : mes raps sont destinés aux femmes averties qu'Ice-T « is just talking shit ». (Lepoutre, 1997: 165)

Ritual insults – particularly playing the dozens (a term that will be defined below) also play an important part in the construction of the identity of African Americans, as acknowledged by Green (2002: 135-9), Rickford & Rickford (2000: 25, 68-69), and Smitherman (1999: 21), among others. If African American individuals (but also their counterparts in films) do not necessarily swear more than others, they do so differently, and in a way that is frequently commented upon by linguists. An extensive use of swearwords has often been suggested by linguists as being one of the features of AAVE. Furthermore, various studies have shown that swearing within a group is worthy of interest from a sociolinguistic perspective, as these practices, as violent as they may appear to the external eye and ear, are a reflection of a social experience, and are used to support specific social relations in a structured and coherent manner.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> These studies include the seminal 'Rules for ritual insults' by Labov (1972). See also Abrahams (1962), Green (2002), Kochman (1983), Lepoutre (1997), and Rickford & Rickford (2000) for examples of studies of such cases. The range of pragmatic meanings of insults have been explored, whether in English or in French by, among others, Jay (2000), Larguèche (1983), or Stenström (2006).

To begin with, it should be said that insults and swearwords as categories or groups of words are difficult to label clearly (Grassi, 2003: 56). They are not generally considered to be a linguistic category, and have been neglected by academic research, as Gabriel reveals:

There are very few references to insults in the academic literature, and surprisingly, neither research on emotions nor research on narratives and discourse has addressed them. This neglect seems unjustified, as insults would appear to be an important feature of human behaviour and human experience. Insults are very common in mythology and literature, featuring in countless myths, fairy tales, novels and plays. They are also a cardinal feature of many people's personal histories. (Gabriel, 1998)<sup>51</sup>

This relative lack of interest is also denounced by researchers, such as Gabriel, and Mateo and Yus, who believe that this gap in research is not legitimate if one considers that insults have always existed: 'Human beings have insulted others since the wake of civilization, no sooner than they realized that they could hurt each other not only physically (with objects) but sometimes even more profoundly: with words' (Mateo & Yus, 2000). Insulting may therefore appear to be a universal practice, but is nonetheless culturally bound, as Mateo and Yus reveal:

Cultural constraints operate forcefully in the insulting paradigm of any language. That means that not all insults work with the same efficiency in two different languages. [...] The cognitive drive which impels people to insult one another is the same for everyone, but the tools employed differ (sometimes radically) from one language to another. (Mateo & Yus, 2000)

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<sup>51</sup> A study by Timothy Jay (1977: 234) suggests that 'one practical problem may involve the inability to publish or circulate the research, thus failing to stimulate widespread interest in the phenomenon'. This leads us to think that at the time, such research was either taboo, or deemed unworthy, although William Labov's paper 'Rules for ritual insults' is a noteworthy exception.

Most insults can be seen as communicative exchanges where a person uses language with the intention of psychologically hurting another person. However, insults can have other uses: they can be flattering and even show admiration, they can also ‘serve as phatic devices, which facilitate the communication’ (Stenström, 2006: 202) and may not have a manifest target, or they can indicate a level of camaraderie between two speakers or characters. This also serves to emphasise the fact that although similar words may be used in these different types of insults, translators may have to use words in the TL that are different, because of the differing communicative nature of these insults in the diegesis.<sup>52</sup>

Swearing,<sup>53</sup> by which is understood the use of profane or obscene expressions of surprise or anger, such as epithets or expletives, is also covered in this section. Naturally, there may be some lexical overlap (i.e., the same words may be used) between insulting and swearing, and a given word (for instance ‘fuck’) may have different communicative meaning (for instance, compare ‘fuck you!’ and ‘fuck it!’ – the former is an insult, the latter an expression of frustration) and therefore may need to be translated using different words in the TL.

In every language, there are preferred syntactical and lexical patterns when swearing. In the vast majority of cases, insults refer to topics that are not to be mentioned or talked about in public, and are therefore, to some extent,

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<sup>52</sup> This point is discussed in Chapter Four.

<sup>53</sup> Swearing is sometimes considered to have a ‘religious intention’ (Mateo & Yus, 2000), and to have more to do with blasphemy or sacrilegious references than cursing. For the purpose of this chapter, swearing and cursing will be treated as synonymous, and no moral or ethical distinction will be made between the two.

taboo.<sup>54</sup> Trudgill (2000: 18) writes that taboo ‘can be characterised as being concerned with behaviour which is believed to be supernaturally forbidden, or regarded as immoral or improper; it deals with behaviour which is prohibited or inhibited in an apparently irrational manner’. Naturally, taboo words differ – albeit not greatly – from one society to another, but tend to be concerned primarily with bodily functions, sex, and religion.<sup>55</sup> These taboo words are extensively used by some sections of the community as swearwords, ‘which is in turn because they are *powerful*’ (Trudgill, 2000: 19, emphasis in original). We will see in Chapter Four that if the themes of these swearwords are broadly similar in French and in English, there are, however, great differences in terms of the frequency of use of each word.

A speech event of AAVE closely associated with insults is called ‘playing the dozens’, and is a very common practice for speakers of AAVE. It is heavily documented in the literature, albeit under a variety of labels. Labov goes so far as to call it ‘an institution’ (Labov, 1972: 126). The term ‘dozens’ is believed to originate from the devaluing in the auction block of slaves who were aged or handicapped, and generally no longer capable of hard labour and that were sold by the dozen. An alternative etymology is suggested by John Leland, who claims that it is a relic of an English verb – to dozen – dating back to the fourteenth century, and meaning ‘to stun,

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<sup>54</sup> This taboo extends beyond the realms of mainstream society to academia as Mateo and Yus (2000) denounce: ‘Insults are described as dirty words, obscene talk, verbal abuse, etc. All these definitions include an ethical dimension, which should not interfere with language research. From a serious analytical approach, all forms of communication should deserve similar treatment. It is not scientific to skip this special use of language for moralistic reasons only’.

<sup>55</sup> Comparative studies by Fernandez (2006) and Stenström (2006) have shown that swearwords and taboo words are used similarly across cultural boundaries both in terms of their overall frequency and function. According to Stenström (2006: 197), most taboo words are borrowed from the fields of sexuality and scatology, regardless of the culture.

stupefy, daze [...] to make insensible, torpid, powerless’, arguing that the aim of the game is to overcome or stun your opponent through skillful speech. These practices are sometimes named dozen, dozens, putting someone in the dozens, dirty dozen, playing the dozens, signifying, dropping lugs, joaning, capping or sounding. Some linguists make small distinctions between them, whether in terms of geo-linguistic variation or in terms of the practices themselves.<sup>56</sup> Brown (1972: 205-6), for example, tells us that ‘the dozens is a mean game because what you try to do is actually destroy somebody else with words [...]. Signifying is more humane. Instead of coming down on somebody’s mother, you come down on them’. Smitherman (1977: 118) defines signifying as ‘the verbal art of insult with which a speaker humorously puts down, talks about, needles – that is, signifies on – the listener’ and writes that playing the dozens consists of ‘set responses in versified form, usually rhymed couplets. Some refer to various sexual acts committed with “yo mamma” – the mother of whoever is being addressed’ (Smitherman, 1977: 131-2). Green states that ‘signifying and playing the dozen [are] two types of disses (insulting or disrespectful statements) that are actually being unified under terms such as joining, capping and sounding’ (Green, 2002: 136). As Labov rightfully points out:

It seems to be the case everywhere that the super-ordinate terms that describe a verbal activity are quite variable and take on a wide range of meanings, while the verbal behaviour itself does not change very

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<sup>56</sup> For instance, Labov (1972: 128) points out that ‘the term *sounding* is by far the most common in New York, and is reported as the favoured term in Philadelphia by Abrahams. *Woofing* is common in Philadelphia and elsewhere, *joaning* [sic] in Washington, *signifying* in Chicago, *screaming* in Harrisburg, and on the West Coast, such general terms as *cutting*, *capping* or *chopping*. The great number of terms available suggests that there will be inevitably some specialization and shift of meaning in a particular area’ (emphases in original).

much from place to place. People talk much more than they talk about talk, there is more agreement in the activity than in the ways of describing it. (Labov, 1972: 128)

The origins of these practices are not entirely clear, but it is probably fair to say that they are numerous and old. As far as the dozens are concerned, David Lepoutre, a French linguist who specialises in street vernaculars, remarks that ‘il est difficile d’établir une source de diffusion unique. Aux États-Unis, la pratique des *dozens* s’est développée avec la formation des ghettos noirs dans les grandes villes, c’est-à-dire depuis le début du siècle’ (Lepoutre, 1997: 175). According to other sources, the dozens may even go back to African communities and slavery (Green, 2002: 137-8, Lepoutre, 1997: 175-6, Smitherman, 1995: 340). Although the dozens were already popular in the 1930s, Green (2002: 138) argues that they are just as popular today. In 1994, a collection of lines for playing the dozens, *Snaps*, was published. It was an anthology of the best lines used on the streets in the US, such as: ‘If ugliness were bricks, your mother would be a housing project’, or ‘if ugliness were an album, your mother would go platinum’. In the years that followed, the original *Snaps* was rapidly followed by *Double Snaps*, *Triple Snaps* and *Snaps 4*. Some fifteen years later, the books are constantly republished and stocks often run out. While the books suggest that each speech act can be abstracted away from its context of utterance – if only for readers to benefit from its comic aspect – Green (2001: 138) highlights that body movement and posture represent an important part of the game: ‘For example, the finger hook is used to add force to the verbal snap, and eye rolling on the part of the receiver conveys the message that the speaker delivered an unimpressive snap. Also, stares and leaning

stances can be used to intimidate the opponent'. As we will see in the next chapter, this is represented particularly well in *White Men Can't Jump*.

A quick review of the content of dozens given as examples in linguists' work on AAVE or represented in films confirms that 'a wide but fairly well-defined range of attributes is sounded on' (Labov, 1972: 142). The person him/herself, and his/her mother seem to be the main target of the dozens, although other family members, especially female ones, may well be mentioned for variety's sake. Age, weight, ugliness, personal hygiene, and poverty are the attributes that are most often commented upon in ritual insults. The more obscene they are, the better, as Labov states:

Many sounds *are* obscene in the full sense of the word. The speaker uses as many 'bad' words and images as possible – that is, subject to taboo and moral reprimand in adult middle-class society. The originator will search for images that would be considered as disgusting as possible: 'Your mother eats fried dick-heads'. With long familiarity the vividness of the image disappears, and one might say that it is *not* disgusting or obscene to the sounders. But the meaning of the sound and the activity would be entirely lost without reference to these middle-class norms. Many sounds are 'good' because they are 'bad'. (Labov, 1972: 143, emphases in original)

Vulgarity, as we can see, therefore plays an important role in these verbal jousts, and is almost one of their defining characteristics. Another important parameter to take into account is that these practices take place mostly within peer groups, and as a consequence, the evaluation of dozens by other members of the group is instant and unforgiving: 'One of the most important differences between sounding and other speech events is that most sounds are evaluated overtly and immediately by the audience' (Labov, 1972: 144). Linguists specify that 'besides the two players [the two people directly involved in playing the dozens], a third-person role is

necessary' (Labov, 1972: 160) in order for the players to be assessed. This was in fact observed by Dollard (1939: 13) in the 1930s: 'It is laughter, applause and the derision of the crowd which stirs the participants to ever renewed attempts to out-do the other in invective'. It is important to note here that playing the dozens can also be used to reassert peer group memberships of the participants: many linguists have pointed out that playing the dozens with someone who is not a member of the peer group can end in an actual fight.<sup>57</sup> It is paramount for the participants to share the same rules of interaction when playing the dozens: only people in peer groups and sharing the same cultural knowledge and also a certain complicity can play effectively together, thus performing this complicity and reasserting their membership to the group, and potentially excluding other people from the group by refusing to play with them.<sup>58</sup>

Another type of speech event, 'rapping' – which in this particular context has no direct links with rap music – is a term used to designate different types of casual talk, including 'exchanges between a male and a female, in which the male tries to win the favours of a female as he delivers a compliment (in his estimation) by using verbal expertise' (Green, 2002: 136). Smitherman (1977: 82) notes that rapping can be used to 'convey social and cultural information' or to 'conqu[er] foes and women'. Rapping is further characterised by rhymes and boasting statements, sometimes put to music. The ability to handle language proficiently is another leitmotiv in

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<sup>57</sup> See for example Abrahams (1962).

<sup>58</sup> Labov (1973: 321-2) demonstrated that some white peer groups may take part in a speech event similar to the dozen in interactional terms, but with minimal albeit significant differences in terms of the semantic content of each speech act.



descriptions of AAVE, and speakers of AAVE are often said to use various rhetorical devices such as rhyming patterns or play with sounds – which all fall under the umbrella of rapping – to impress members of the opposite sex or to tire out an opponent.

Finally, another speech event often described by specialists of AAVE, and usually associated with church services, is known as ‘call-and-response’. Call-and-response may find its origins in Africa, as suggested by Pitts’ (1993) study of African American Baptist ceremonies. Indeed, one of the aims of the author is to demonstrate that there is an ‘undeniable African presence in the folk worship of African Americans’ (Pitts, 1993: 6). In another study, Holt (1972: 146) argues that such practices were born out of necessity for African Americans who had to develop their own routines and structures for worship, and points out that although it may have started in religious environments, call-and-response has now transcended its initial context and is commonly used by African Americans in secular contexts: ‘this mode of communication has become an integral part of the language system of blacks [...] this communication behaviour is more prevalent in the nonreligious society of today’s blacks’. During a church service, the pastor would call and the congregation would respond (in rhythm – which is naturally problematic to reproduce in writing), as in the following example (copied from Green, 2002: 152):

Pastor: Put a little joy  
Congregation: Yeah!  
Pastor: in yo’ life!  
Congregation: Yeah!  
Pastor: Put a little happiness  
Congregation: Yes suh [sir]!

Pastor: in yo' life!  
 Congregation: Yes suh!  
 Pastor: Turn, turn, turn you aroun', place yo' feet on higher groun'.  
 The Lawd, the Lawd, Ohhhhh the Lawd, the Lawd!  
 Congregation: Oh, yes, He will! Yes Lawd! Oh yes He will!

Green emphasises that call-and-response is a collective and inclusive practice:

The interaction between the preacher and congregation serves as an example of the way in which certain parts of community and society are interdependent. After all is said and done, the preacher has preached to the congregation, and members have responded and ensured that they are all on one accord. The congregation have fulfilled their responsibility, talking back to the preacher thereby helping to create an environment in which everyone is involved in the sermon. (Green, 2002: 152)

Call-and-response, although initially taking place in a religious context, can be extended to the day-to-day interactions sometimes referred to as 'backchanneling' (Green, 2002: 154). In the context of speakers of AAVE, backchanneling occurs in the form of short verbal interventions from listeners, which are meant to encourage the main speaker in the group to carry on with his/her story, and show that the listeners are fully involved in the conversation, whilst generally approving of what the speaker is saying.<sup>59</sup> Green comments on backchanneling: 'The type of backchanneling that can be heard in everyday speech is often modeled in the media, in movies and situation comedies that are intended to represent some part of African American experience' (Green, 2002: 155). Whilst backchanneling

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<sup>59</sup> In general sociolinguistics, backchannels (or backchanneling cues) refer to a listener's responses to a speaker. The term backchanneling is designed to illustrate the fact that there are two channels of communication operating at the same time: the main channel is that of the speaker, and the second channel (or backchannel) that of the listener who provides continuers or assessment – in other words, feedback – and thus expresses understanding and interest (or lack thereof). Backchanneling cues can be verbal (words, phrases or even short sentences or demands of clarification or details) or non verbal (head movements for instance). In some speech events of AAVE, backchanneling can take a more substantial form and can consist in expressing approval emphatically or even repeat whole parts of a speaker's utterances.

cues *per se* are by no means specific to AAVE, the extent and the contexts in which they are used can make them a specific African American experience.

In some speech events, speakers will use a bragging or boasting tone. And in others they will use rhetorical repetitions and rhythmic patterns. Green (2002: 160) concludes that ‘these strategies are just as important as the syntactic, phonological and lexical properties of AAE’ and also reminds us that ‘the speaker, addresser, minister and rapper may not always use phonological, syntactic, morphological and lexical patterns of AAE, but their speech events reflect the use of different rhetorical strategies and expressive language’. Listener response and feedback is also crucial (as seen in call-and-response, both in religious and secular contexts).

### ***Conclusion***

The relationship of language and culture is one that has been established and discussed extensively by linguists, and this brief analysis of the main features of AAVE reveals that there appears to be a strong correlation between the use of certain linguistic variants and the constitution of a group identity. Certain features are also connected to age and gender as we have seen and the use of AAVE is a cultural expression (whether speakers are conscious of it or not) – insofar as listeners are capable of identifying and indexing the features of AAVE – and may incur a certain stigmatisation of its speakers. However, AAVE – like any other linguistic variety – follows rules of interaction and its use has deep social

ramifications. This has important implications when put in relation with the practice of translation, and of subtitling in particular. The connotations connected with AAVE certainly appear challenging to convey in a foreign language. They are so rooted in their geographical and socio-cultural environment that translating the connotations of AAVE presents itself as a contentious area, particularly in the context of a subtitled film. The images carry a number of references to the United States, to African America, or to the characters' socio-cultural background, and can therefore to some extent be relied upon by viewers for the indexation of characters, potentially overlapping with information conveyed in the dialogue of a film. In the following chapter, we examine how the features of AAVE described here are used – or not – in the dialogues of the films of the corpus, and we also investigate how variation is relied upon to portray speakers of AAVE. The handling of the French subtitles, particularly in their relationship to images is dealt with in Chapter Four of this thesis.

## **Chapter Three – On the Use of AAVE in the Corpus**

### ***Introduction***

Film language has been shown to be an entity that usually differs from the spontaneous discourse of everyday talk. Film language is not, or mostly not, spontaneous, depending of course on how much flexibility a film director permits his actors in terms of their expression. In his study on the neutralisation of linguistic variation in subtitles, Christopher Taylor (2006: 38) argues that ‘film language in itself can be said to display neutralising tendencies’ or, in other words, that real language would display more variation than its representation in films. Taylor (2006: 39) suggests that to some extent, lexis and expressions that are specific to a particular regional or social variety are generalised to guarantee that they are understood widely. In this chapter, and in the light both of Taylor’s statement and of the description of the different features of AAVE that we have provided above, we will analyse occurrences of AAVE in the films, and consider whether any features of AAVE are notably absent from film language, as well as which ones (if any) are used to a lesser or greater extent in the films of the corpus in order to see what particular features or what type of variation (lexical, syntactical, phonological, interactional) are more heavily relied upon to portray speakers of AAVE. We will also discuss how this portrayal of speakers of AAVE in films can inform its translation in the form of subtitles.

### *Systematicity vs Consistency*

We highlighted above that one of the most important issues in the study of AAVE is that it is systematic (i.e. it has a system of sounds, of word structure and relationship among words, of sentence structure), and is not merely a degraded version of English. By systematic, linguists do not necessarily mean that speakers of AAVE will use a particular feature of AAVE every single time the opportunity presents itself, but rather that if the opportunity presents itself, and they use a feature of AAVE, it will in the vast majority of cases be the same one. The use of a particular feature therefore always has a particular meaning and is not random. For instance, whilst the feature known as ‘invariant be’ may not be used by a given speaker at every single opportunity, when it is used it will always have the same meaning(s). This is what is meant here by the use of the word ‘systematic’. By ‘consistency’, on the other hand, we mean that a feature is used at a certain frequency. A feature used highly consistently is used at most available opportunities. For instance, multiple negations in films of the corpus are not only systematic, they are also very consistent: characters use them very often, and in linguistic contexts that appear to match those described in the literature on AAVE.

The systematicity of AAVE as it is represented in films is difficult to gauge with precision, because the corpus sometimes provides a high number of occurrences of a given feature (for instance multiple negations), but a very limited and finite number of occurrences for another (for instance some verbal markers such as BIN, bin, or dən). As a preliminary comment, we

can say that the use of features of AAVE in film dialogue correlates with the descriptions made of AAVE by specialists. The use of these features therefore seems generally systematic: when they are used, it is almost always in a way described by linguists as being specific to AAVE. Specialists of AAVE do not often provide information about the frequency of use – or consistency – of each feature that they describe. They claim that their use is systematic, but we have very little information about the consistency of use of each feature, although we know for a fact – thanks to Wolfram’s aforementioned study – that, as with any other variety, consistency can vary according to a number of criteria, including age, geography, sex, social background, social networks, or even topic of discussion.

### ***The language of films and the language of subtitles***

The language used in the films under analysis, while displaying some properties of AAVE, is problematic to classify as such. Careful analysis is required, in order to show what features are used to reveal the values of the portrayed speakers of AAVE. In addition, the actors chosen to portray speakers of AAVE may not necessarily be fluent in AAVE, or may have a certain preconceived idea of what AAVE is and should sound like. Film dialogues, however, aim at representing conventionalised forms of actual verbal interactions, with the difference that viewers can react to them, but not interact, which is something that greatly affects the way film dialogues are written. Language in films, then, consists of carefully crafted

representations of AAVE rather than naturally occurring AAVE. Marie-Noëlle Guillot argues that:

[les dialogues de film] ont en commun, pour la plupart, de représenter, comme les dialogues de romans, des formes stylisées, « conventionnalisées » d'interactions verbales, modulées, entre autres, par les contraintes du mode – contraintes de temps par exemple, mais celles aussi régissant pour les acteurs la production et la réception des messages, et pour l'auditoire leur réception sans participation – qui affectent de façon significative la forme et les caractéristiques des messages, et les démarquent de celles de l'expression spontanée en temps réel. (Guillot, 2007: 239)

According to Guillot, then, film dialogues are not oral but rather give the illusion of orality. While subtitles are often accused of displaying a loss of the orality of the original, the orality of the original itself is seldom questioned. Because they are spoken, film dialogues are imbued with orality, or have an oral quality to them. However, they have been learnt and rehearsed, and although some directors (Ken Loach, Mike Leigh or, famously, Claude Lelouch, among others) leave some room for improvisation, the topical elements of the represented conversation and the general direction of the exchange are all predetermined. Guillot makes two points about the emission and the reception of film dialogues:

Ils ne soumettent les acteurs/locuteurs à aucune des contraintes caractéristiques de l'oral spontané résultant de la construction, co-construction et négociation en temps réel des messages, et donc aux pressions cognitives associées à ces contraintes. Ils sont par ailleurs produits pour un auditoire qui, s'il est appelé à réagir à des signaux multiples, n'est cependant engagé que réceptivement, sans donc, là encore, être appelé à s'investir directement dans la construction et la co-construction des messages, et dont il s'agit de maintenir l'attention. (Guillot, 2007: 243)

A very simple experiment that consists in comparing the transcript of a spontaneous conversation with the transcript of an exchange taken from a film immediately shows striking differences: comparatively, film dialogues



present far fewer pauses, ellipses, elisions, repetitions, overlaps and interruptions, to mention but a few.<sup>1</sup>

This affects the framework of my study, as it should be borne in mind that characters do not speak like they would in spontaneous conversation, and may not display interactions that would be found in natural contexts. Rather, they use language in order to provide clues that will allow viewers to activate mental images, suspend their disbelief and suggest that what they are watching on the screen is indeed a spontaneous exchange between speakers of AAVE.<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon correlates with studies such as Lippi-Green's (1997) that have shown that the use of non-standard features in films is always meaningful and used for purposes of characterisation.

Guillot's study also provides some insight into the nature of the reception of subtitles – insight which may be counter-intuitive after what has been said about the written nature of subtitles and about diamesic variation in France and the level of prescriptivism imposed on the written language: subtitles, notably because of the constraint of reduction discussed in Chapter One and of the subsequent relative omission of a large amount of

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<sup>1</sup> See Guillot (2007: 244).

<sup>2</sup> Guillot (2007 : 240) further explains that 'l'expérience de l'oralité se fait dans l'esprit'. Viewers cannot interact, and film dialogues have no reason to display features such as pauses, ellipses, elisions, repetitions, overlap and interruptions – typical of spontaneous conversation – for purposes other than expressive, especially given that such features may well compromise viewers' understanding, if several characters speak at the same time, for instance. Guillot (2007 : 244) comments: '[les traits de l'oral spontané] n'ont pas de réelle raison d'être dans des messages déjà construits, revus et corrigés, que les acteurs qui les projettent à l'oral connaissent bien et qu'ils n'ont donc guère de raison de produire avec des hésitations, par exemple autrement qu'à des fins expressives, ou à reprendre, revoir ou nuancer, et dans des échanges dans lesquels la structure interactionnelle est prédéterminée, ce qui rend ces traits également redondants dans leurs fonctions interactionnelles (recours aux pauses remplies, allongements de syllabe pour conserver la parole, par exemple, ou la passer)'.

the items that do not carry any informative content, often end up being written using syntactic constructions that use fewer subordinate clauses (or with a limited level of interweaving), privileging coordination, and having a lower lexical density.<sup>3</sup> This implies that it is precisely – and paradoxically – because subtitles do not display certain properties of spoken discourse (hesitations, ellipses, pauses, etc.) that they end up being less ‘convoluted’ (in the way described above) in their syntactic structure, which according to Halliday (1985) and Gadet (2003) is a characteristic of spoken discourse. Guillot adds that the presentation of subtitles on screen in short bursts can also contribute to giving a sense of orality:

Là où chaque sous-titre correspond à un tour de parole, la présentation souligne la structure séquentielle, interactionnelle et temporelle du discours, *a fortiori* à l’écran où chaque sous-titre disparaît pour faire place à un autre, ce qui en affecte la forme pour d’autres raisons : sur l’écran, chaque sous-titre apparaît seul, dans un espace et pour une période de temps limitée, sans référence possible à ce qui précède ni à ce qui suit. Il est donc tenu d’être réduit à des unités d’information non seulement courtes, puisque confinées à un nombre maximum de caractères, mais encore sémantiquement et syntactiquement autonomes dans la mesure du possible (Guillot, 2007: 249)

To conclude, film language may be different from language produced in natural contexts but mimics it in a way that generally rids it of elements that may disturb viewers’ cognition and their reception of the dialogue. However, the opposite effect (a hindrance and complication of comprehension and meaning) can also be sought and achieved, as in the opening scene of French film *L’Esquive* (Kechiche, 2003), where a group

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<sup>3</sup> On the use of coordination rather than subordination in spoken discourse, see Gadet (2003: 38). On lexical density, see Halliday (1985). Halliday claims that a higher lexical density is (in general) used when writing than when speaking. Both authors claim that written and spoken language, in fact, display different forms of ‘complexity’. The notion of complexity is problematic because it reflects ideological preconceptions about language.

of French youths – all talking at the same time using fast-paced *banlieue* French – are having a conversation that is difficult to make out. This opening scene was commented on by film critic Ian Johnston (2005):

The film first promises a rough and dirty realist style. In the opening sequence the extreme close-ups and the rapid cutting have a nervy effect, which along with the staccato bursts of youth gang slang are in fine accord with the situation on-screen as a group of teen boys debate an obscure insult and promise a violent retaliation. But Kechiche doesn't develop this line of the narrative — instead, the scene is one of simply setting the tone.

As the critique states, the scene is merely used to set the tone, to confuse viewers and express that they do not belong to the group. In films, language can thus be used not only to express relationships between characters but also between characters and viewers.

The use of features of AAVE in film language is iconic – in the Barthesian sense of the term – and works polysemiotically with the images of the film to help viewers activate a culturally-conditioned mental image. This naturally requires a certain amount of prerequisite knowledge from viewers to identify the characters as speakers of AAVE.

### ***Lexical features***

Perhaps not surprisingly in the light of Taylor's comments that words that are specific to a regional or social variety tend to be neutralised in films, lexical variation of the type described in Chapter Two is very underused in films. In actual fact, there is not one example in the whole corpus of the use of any words that are described by specialists as specific to AAVE or that have a specific meaning in AAVE. Words such as 'kitchen', 'seddity'

and ‘get over’ are absent from the films. While we can only speculate about whether their absence is due to the fact that the films do not provide the right contexts for these words to be used in the dialogue, their absence correlates with Taylor’s idea: forms that might be considered cryptic and would not be recognised by a wide audience do not feature in film dialogue.

This is not to say, however, that the lexis used in the dialogue of the films in the corpus is completely neutralised: characters often use a lot of slang, either to talk about themselves or other people, or to talk about their everyday life. Cryptic lexical forms (that is, lexical items that are specific to speakers of AAVE) are notably absent from the dialogues of the film of the corpus.

In *Boyz n the Hood*, *New Jack City* and *Menace II Society* in particular, male characters often refer to female characters as ‘bitch’, ‘ho’ or ‘whore’, ‘hootchie’, ‘pussy’.<sup>4</sup> These terms are so frequent in the films that they appear to be the normal (albeit potentially disturbing) way of designating women in contexts where machismo and male toughness are the dominant framework. To add to the confusion, some of these words (bitch, ho, hootchie, or pussy) can also be used as insults, depending on the context. The table below presents a few examples from the corpus of words that are used to designate women:

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<sup>4</sup> This is not the case however in the films by Spike Lee and also in *White Men Can’t Jump* where more neutral words are used to talk about women, such as ‘woman’, ‘girl’, or ‘female’.

Dialogue
<p>1- <i>Gee Money</i>: Look, ah ‘on’ know about dat change de world shit, but what ah do know is dat dey be goin crazy over dis, ah’m tellin you. And de <b>bitches</b>? Oh, Lawd, de <b>bitches</b>! Yo dey’d do anythin for dis, man! (<i>New Jack City</i>)</p> <p>2- <i>Dook</i>: I want one of dem <b>hootchies</b> over dere.  <i>Doughboy</i>: Dookie you full o’ shit. No <b>bitch</b> gonna give yo’ ugly ass no pussy. (<i>Boyz n the Hood</i>)</p> <p>3- <i>Caine</i>: Hey, hey nigga, is it gonna be some <b>pussy</b> in dis mothafucka?  <i>O-Dog</i>: It’s gonna be a gang of <b>hos</b> up in this mothafucka, I did dis shit myself goddamit. (<i>Menace II Society</i>)</p> <p>4- <i>Woman #1</i>: Who is that, Shanice?  <i>Shanice</i>: That’s Tre, Ricky’s best friend. He used to be best friends with Doughboy when they was little. You know how they be tryin to act like they ø brothas and shit.  <i>Woman #1</i>: Girl, he is fine! I’d like to rush that. He go to Washington?  <i>Shanice</i>: Uh huh, he go to Crenshaw.  <i>Jamaica</i>: Girl I seen him before. He work at the Fox Hills Mall.  <i>Woman #1</i>: Mm, do he got a girlfriend?  <i>Brandi</i>: Yes. (Brandi leans forward defiantly)  <i>Woman #1</i>: (laughs) Jamaica, girl, I was scopin on this <b>ho</b>’s man. He ø fine anyway, you betta watch his ass, somebody might steal him. (<i>Boyz n the Hood</i>)</p>

Table 2 – Examples of the use of slang words to designate women<sup>5</sup>

In example 1, Gee Money refers to women as ‘bitches’, and says that they are crazy about this crack cocaine. In example 2, Dook is looking at a group of African American women and expresses his wish to have intercourse with one of them to his male friends by referring to them as ‘hootchies’. He is then brought back to reality by Doughboy who claims that no woman would want that, using the word ‘bitch’ to refer to women. In example 3, which is the opening line of *Menace II Society*, Caine wants

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<sup>5</sup> For the transcription of the extracts given as examples in the tables in this chapter and the following, we have relied on three types of sources: the scripts of the films, when they are available; intralingual subtitles; and our own hearing of the dialogue. The scripts are available for *Do the Right Thing*, *Jungle Fever*, *Clockers*, *Menace II Society*, *Boyz n the Hood*, *The Wood*, *White Men Can’t Jump*, and *New Jack City*, but not for *In Too Deep* and *Get on the Bus*. The conventions used in Chapter Two when describing AAVE have been used when appropriate in the examples cited from the films.

to know if there are going to be any women at a party that O-Dog is organising. He refers to them metonymically as 'pussy'. O-Dog replies in the affirmative, saying that there is going to be a number of 'hos'. In the first three examples, the 'bitches', 'hoochies' and 'hos' actually stand for 'women in general', and the use of those words does not seem to cause any tension, which leads viewers to believe that the use of such words is in fact quite routine. Example 4 is the only example in the corpus of a female character referring to another female character as a 'ho', without necessarily meaning to insult her. This example differs slightly from the previous three, in that the 'ho' is actually present and participating in the scene – but again, there are no signs that she has taken particular notice of the term 'ho' as being derogatory. This again indicates a certain familiarity between the characters, who are portrayed as sharing the same terms of reference. It should be noted at this stage that the word 'bitch' is also used extensively as an insult in all films, either with reference to women to associate them with sexual promiscuity, or with reference to men to emphasise a lack of toughness. Examples of such accusations against men are also extremely numerous in the corpus. In the four examples above, however, what appear to be somewhat derogatory terms to designate women are used amongst people of the same sex and serve in the films to reflect a form of social organisation. They contribute to the *mise-en-scène* of the peer groups by portraying a certain familiarity between the characters.

Speakers of AAVE in the films also use a number of words to talk about other black males. These include ‘cuz’, ‘nigga’, ‘brotha’, ‘fool’, ‘homey’, ‘dawg’. As with the word ‘bitch’, ‘nigga’ can be used neutrally or with negative connotations depending on context. In the films, words like ‘brotha’ and ‘nigga’ in particular are used extensively. The following table provides a few examples of the use of these words in the corpus.

Dialogue
1- <i>Man #1</i> : Man, fuck dat, man, dem <b>niggas</b> around de corna tripped out, man. ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )
2- <i>God</i> : See all these <b>niggas</b> out here? Strugglin to survive, man. ( <i>In Too Deep</i> )
3- <i>Vivian</i> : Don’t push me, <b>nigga</b> ! <i>Gator</i> : Don’t start no shit! <i>Vivian</i> : <b>Nigga</b> , don’t push me! ( <i>Jungle Fever</i> )
4- <i>Caine</i> : <b>Nigga</b> , hurry up! Come on, man, let’s raise up, damn! <i>O-Dog</i> : <b>Nigga</b> ah can’t believe dis! <b>Nigga</b> ah thought ah told you to open de damn register. How do you open dis shit? What de f... six mothafuckin dollars, <b>nigga</b> ? ( <i>Menace II Society</i> )
5- <i>Stacey</i> : Hey, y’all <b>niggas</b> want summin? <i>Slim</i> : Well, I was kinda thirsty. <i>Stacey</i> : Well, go on and get it <b>homey</b> . ( <i>The Wood</i> )
6- <i>A-Wax</i> : Where de bud at, <b>fools</b> ? Hey <b>nigga</b> , watch me break dese mothafuckas right here. ( <i>Menace II Society</i> )
7- <i>Buggin Out</i> : Yo Mook! Mookie! How come ain’t no <b>brothas</b> up on de wall? <i>Mookie</i> : Man, ask Sal, a’ight? <i>Buggin Out</i> : Eh eh, Sal, how come ain’t no <b>brothas</b> up on de wall? <i>Sal</i> : You want <b>brothas</b> up on the wall? Get your own place, you can do what you want with it. ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )

Table 3 – Examples of the use of slang words to designate males

This table is by no means exhaustive. There are countless instances of the use of these words in the corpus, although not all of them are used in every

film. ‘Cuz’, for instance, is only used in *Boyz n the Hood*, while ‘homey’ is only used in *Menace II Society* and *The Wood*. The word ‘nigga’, whilst it is used countless times in *Menace II Society*, *Boyz n the Hood* and *Clockers*, is hardly ever used in *White Men Can’t Jump*. Whether these differences of use are supposed to reflect a form of linguistic variation (whether geographical or diachronic), reflect particular trends of use at the time the films were shot or merely reflect the scriptwriters’ preferences is impossible to determine. The fact remains however that at least some of the terms mentioned by Green in the previous chapter are used in all the films of the corpus. In example 1, which is the opening line of *Boyz n the Hood*, ‘niggas’ is used to designate another group of African Americans. This is also the case in example 2. In examples 3, 4, 5 and 6, it is used as a term of address. ‘Fools’ in example 6 is also used as a term of address. ‘Brothas’, which is often used either as a term of address or to designate African Americans collectively, is used in the latter manner in example 7. Again, in all of these examples, the word ‘nigga’ is never interpreted as an insult. Rather, its extensive use, which sometimes punctuates some of the characters’ lines, portrays characters as belonging to the same group and as sharing speaking habits, thus staging a form of solidarity between them. All the words that we have mentioned can be correlated with Green’s list of words used by speakers of AAVE to designate females and males.<sup>6</sup>

As we have seen in tables 2 and 3, the characters in the corpus films sometimes use insulting terms in non-insulting ways (or rather, the

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter Two, section on lexical features.



potentially insulting terms are not interpreted by the addressee as being insulting). The boundaries of insults are sometimes difficult to establish clearly however, and it is interesting to note that there are a number of metalinguistic exchanges in the films that indicate that political correctness is very relative indeed, and that the insult is in fact in the ear of the listener, as in the examples in the table below:

Dialogue
<p>1- <i>Woman #1</i>: Well you tell me this, nigga? How you know God's a He? He could be a She, you don't know dat.</p> <p><i>Doughboy</i>: For one thing, you don't know what the fuck I be motherfuckin knowin. Ah read about dis shit when ah was in de pen. It was dis book, right, and it was tellin life in de perspective if God was a bitch. Said if God was a bitch, there wouldn't be no nuclear bombs, no wars, no shit like dat, because that ain't in a bitch's nature.</p> <p><i>Woman #1</i>: Why every time you talk about a female you gotta say bitch or whore or hootchie?</p> <p><i>Doughboy</i>: Because dat's what you are!</p> <p><i>Woman #1</i>: Nigga, fuck you. (<i>Boyz n he Hood</i>)</p> <p>2- <i>Stacy</i>: Why don't you come to Kansas wid us?</p> <p><i>Caine</i>: What, nigga?</p> <p><i>Sharif</i>: Hey men, y'all need to stop callin each other nigga, that's what y'all need to stop doin.</p> <p><i>Stacy</i>: Anyway, nigga, I say you should come to Kansas with us. (<i>Menace II Society</i>)</p> <p>3- <i>Evan Jr</i>: Yo dawg, ah ain't goin.</p> <p><i>Evan Sr</i>: Ah'm gettin on that bus. Now that means you are gettin on that bus.</p> <p><i>Evan Jr</i>: Look how stupid we look!</p> <p><i>Evan Sr</i>: Oh now you wanna be all embarrassed. Well you should've thought about that before.</p> <p><i>Evan Jr</i>: Yo, dawg, ah ain't goin.</p> <p><i>Evan Sr</i>: You call me dawg again and see if ah don't knock you flat on yo' ass. Now ah'm gettin on that bus and you are goin right along with me.</p> <p>[...]</p> <p><i>Evan Sr</i>: Hey.</p> <p><i>Evan Jr</i>: (removes his earphones) What's up, dawg?</p> <p><i>Evan Sr</i>: Ah dən told you about that dawg shit. Don't let me have to take care of you out here in front of these brothers, cos ah will do it, ok? Now turn that mess down. It's too loud, Junior.</p> <p><i>Evan Jr</i>: Let me as' you a question, you don't like to be called dawg, right?</p> <p><i>Evan Sr</i>: Well you know, dad, daddy, sir would be nice. Take yo' pick.</p> <p><i>Evan Jr</i>: Then ah should have a right not to be called Junior. (<i>Get on the Bus</i>)</p>

Table 4 – Metalinguistic comments on the use of slang in the films

In example 1, Doughboy is soliloquising about a book he read when he was in jail that explained what the world would be like if God was a woman. His use of 'bitch' is met with a rather interesting metalinguistic comment from his (female) friend, who seems to be asking why he only

ever uses derogatory terms ('bitch or whore or hootchie') when talking about women. Doughboy's reply ('Because that's what you are!') only blurs boundaries further as the use of the pronoun 'you' does not make entirely clear who Doughboy is referring to (only his friend or women in general), and whether he is being crass, or just trying to annoy his friend. It is equally significant that she should call him 'nigga' in her retort – whilst for Doughboy 'bitch' appears to have become the generic term for 'woman', the word 'nigga' seems to have replaced 'man' for Doughboy and his crew. Because of their history, however, the two words could also be interpreted as insults, and the lady in the extract is portrayed as picking up on Doughboy's use of the word 'bitch', but her retort (calling Doughboy 'nigga') proves ineffectual inasmuch as Doughboy does not react particularly strongly to it. In example 2, Sharif takes issue at the systematic use of the word 'nigga' by his friends. Sharif is often criticised by his friends throughout the film for being politically active and vocal about his opinions. Stacy shows no sign of stopping using 'nigga', as is demonstrated in the line following Sharif's, and this illustrates their different ideas of what is empowering or not. In example 3, Evan Jr calls his father 'dawg' repeatedly, and his father objects and explains he would rather be called 'dad', 'daddy' or 'sir'.<sup>7</sup> It is then particularly interesting when Evan Jr objects to being called 'Junior', and it illustrates that Evan Sr and Evan Jr have diverging ideas of what is acceptable as a term of address: calling each other 'dawg' may be acceptable or even encouraged in Evan Jr's peer groups of young adults, but Evan Sr does not want to be

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<sup>7</sup> These three examples show quite clearly that there is a certain level of awareness among the filmmakers and possibly also among the American audience of the uses of such slang.

associated with them, just as Evan Jr finds the nickname ‘Junior’ undermining. Earlier in the film, we learn that Evan Sr has custody of Evan Jr, and is supposed to look after him personally by court order (viewers are not told specifically what crime Evan Jr has committed); he and Evan Jr are attached together with handcuffs, so that Evan Jr cannot go away. Throughout the film then, Evan Sr is presented as a father figure, an upholder of the law, and as the incarnation of ‘traditional’ values – respecting laws and other people is very important to him. Evan Jr on the other hand has some kind of connection with gang members (the film does not give any details about this), and the clash between their beliefs and values materialises in this metalinguistic exchange. Examples of metalinguistic comments are quite significant as, on a number of occasions, some characters pick up on what they perceive to be self-deprecation. Such examples are particularly enlightening because they reflect the difference of assumptions about the offensive content of certain words between speakers and listeners: while the examples in table 3 suggest that the use of terms of address is restricted to speakers who are part of the same group, reveals a certain level of familiarity and is connected to the expression of power and solidarity, the examples in table 4 demonstrate that the use of some of those terms can divide characters, and the ambiguity of these words is made obvious to viewers through such metalinguistic comments.

To conclude, the study of the use of words specific to the lexicon of AAVE in film dialogue proves particularly informative: while the absence of words like ‘seddity’ and ‘kitchen’ can be explained quite simply by a lack

of opportunity to use them in the film dialogue, it should nonetheless be noted that their use might constitute an obstacle to comprehension. Terms of address on the other hand are not cryptic, but are particularly valuable because they provide important information about the relationships between characters, as well as about social and cultural values and beliefs, which will in turn inform translation. What is crucial here is that words that are described by specialists of AAVE as belonging specifically to the lexis of AAVE are not relied on in the dialogues of the corpus films to portray speakers of AAVE.

### ***Syntactic features***

The syntactic features of AAVE described by linguists are used extensively in film dialogue. Some, however, are used more consistently than others. Multiple negations are used very consistently throughout all films. The following table provides a few examples, and there are a great number in the corpus.

Dialogue
1- <i>Furious</i> : <b>I don't have to do nothin</b> around here, 'cept for pay de bills, put food on de table, and put clothes on yo' back, you understand? ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )
2- <i>Mike</i> : Come on Mama, <b>there ain't nobody</b> . ( <i>The Wood</i> )
3- <i>Caine</i> : <b>Ain't nothin gonna change</b> in Atlanta. ( <i>Menace II Society</i> )
4- <i>Mookie</i> : <b>I didn't hear Sal say nothin</b> . ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )
5- <i>Gator</i> : <b>Don't start no shit</b> . ( <i>Jungle Fever</i> )
6- <i>Sidney</i> : <b>Yo' motha ain't no astronaut, yo' fatha ain't no astronaut, ain't no astronaut got nothin to do with nothin a'ight?</b> ( <i>White Men Can't Jump</i> )
7- <i>God's wife</i> : <b>Don't call my baby no bitch</b> . ( <i>In Too Deep</i> )
8- <i>Errol</i> : That's why <b>ah don't give a shit about nobody</b> . And <b>ah don't wanna see your ass no mo'</b> . Cos <b>you ain't got no business out here fuckin wid dis shit</b> . ( <i>Clockers</i> )

Table 5 – Examples of use of multiple negation in film dialogue

All the examples above contain at least one multiple negation and occasionally several. Quantitatively, this is possibly the most important feature in the films, and it is used remarkably consistently.

Verbal markers of the type of BIN, bin, dən are used comparatively very little. In actual fact, BIN is never used at all while bin and dən are only used on three occasions each. Verbal markers are accorded considerable importance in works on AAVE, and have been analysed in great depth, as their use is highly systematic. More complex structures of the type described by Green (2002: 63-7) such as 'be dən' or 'BIN dən' are not used at all in films. There are various possible explanations for their absence: the most likely explanation is that these verbal markers are all used in the past tense (with the exception of 'be dən' which is occasionally used to

indicate a habitual or future resultant state), and characters in the films of the corpus spend very little time reminiscing about the past, and there are in fact few opportunities for characters' lines to include these features. It could also be argued that verbal markers can be a little cryptic for people who are not familiar with them. The following table provides some examples of the use of verbal markers in the films.

Dialogue
1- <i>Da Mayor</i> : Whatcha know 'bout me? Can't even pee straight. Whatcha know about anything? Unless you... unless you <b>dən</b> stood in the door and listened to your five hungry children crying for bread and you can't do a goddam thing about it. Yo' woman standing there, you can't even look her in the eye. Unless you <b>dən</b> done dat, you don't know me mah pain, mah hurt, mah feelings, you don't know shit. ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )
2- <i>Gator</i> : He <b>dən</b> stepped into the cash money thing! Mr Flip Man! Yo Babe bro, Cyrus, black men, successful and shit. ( <i>Jungle Fever</i> )
3- <i>Evan Sr</i> : I <b>dən</b> told you about that dawg shit. Don't let me have to take care of you out here in front of these brothers, cos ah will do it, ok? Now turn that mess down. It's too loud, Junior. ( <i>Get on the Bus</i> )
4- <i>Mookie</i> : You <b>bin</b> readin now? ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )
5- <i>Gator</i> : Dat's mah baby brotha Flipper, de one ah <b>bin</b> tellin you about. He ø a architek and shit. ( <i>Jungle Fever</i> )
6- <i>Punchy</i> : First of all, ah <b>bin</b> peein straight for years, know what ah'm sayin? ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )

Table 6 – Examples of use of verbal markers in film dialogue

In examples 1 through to 3, characters use the verbal marker 'dən' in a way that conforms to usage described in the literature. Examples 4 to 6 are instances of the use of unstressed form bin. 'Dən' is used exclusively by older characters in the films, while younger characters stick to the standard preterite form in the few instances where they use it. The literature on the

use of verbal markers in AAVE does not however mention correlations between the age of speakers and the use of verbal markers.

Throughout the corpus, there are also examples of the other features described in Chapter Two. Questions usually follow the patterns described by Green, ‘invariant be’ and ‘verbal –s’ are occasionally present in the first person and absent in the third. Zero copula and specific past morphology are also found in most films of the corpus. The table below provides a few examples of each feature.



Dialogue
1- <i>Woman #1</i> : Mm, <b>do he got</b> a girlfriend? ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> ) [question with auxiliary ‘do’]
2- <i>Stacey</i> : Hey, <b>y’all niggas want summin’</b> ? ( <i>The Wood</i> ) [question without auxiliary]
3- <i>Jamaica</i> : Girl I <b>seen</b> him before. ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> ) [use of past participle instead of preterite]
4- <i>ML</i> : Ok, but listen up, I’m going to break it down. <i>Sweet Dick Willie</i> : Let it be <b>broke</b> , mothafuck. ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> ) [use of preterite instead of past participle]
5- <i>Rodney</i> : Nigga wanna spend all his money like that gonna wake up broke everyday of his life. Why? Cos the nigga <b>don’t believe</b> in hisself. ( <i>Clockers</i> ) [neutralisation of verbal –s in 3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular]
6- <i>Shanice</i> : Uh huh, he <b>go</b> to Crenshaw. ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> ) [neutralisation of verbal –s in 3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular]
7- <i>Strike</i> : <b>I keeps</b> dis for all dem ill niggas out dere, like that one dude, Errol. ( <i>Clockers</i> ) [addition of verbal –s in 1 <sup>st</sup> person singular]
8- <i>Man #1</i> : Come on come on come on, yo yo yo, forget that shit man, <b>we gots</b> to be about business. ( <i>Clockers</i> ) [addition of verbal –s in 1 <sup>st</sup> person plural]
9- <i>Shanice</i> : You know how they <b>be</b> tryin to act like they <b>o</b> brothas and shit. ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> ) [invariant be, zero copula]
10- <i>Gee Money</i> : Look, I dunno about dat change de world shit, but what I do know is dat dey <b>be</b> goin crazy over dis, ah’m tellin you. ( <i>New Jack City</i> ) [invariant be]
11- <i>Punchy</i> : Oh, we <b>o</b> niggas now? We <b>o</b> niggas now. ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> ) [zero copula]
12- <i>Errol</i> : You <b>o</b> a lyin mothafucka. ( <i>Clockers</i> ) [zero copula]
13- <i>Caine</i> : Hey, hey nigga, is <b>it</b> gonna be some pussy in dis mothafucka? <i>O-Dog</i> : <b>It’s</b> gonna be a gang of hos up in dis mothafucka, ah did dis shit myself goddamit. ( <i>Menace II Society</i> ) [existential ‘it’]

Table 7 – Examples of syntactic features of AAVE in film dialogue

Examples 1 and 2 are instances of questions. Generally speaking in the corpus, questions follow the patterns described by specialists of AAVE.

Examples 3 and 4 are examples of the use of either the past participle form in a context where it would be standard to use the preterite (in example 3, ‘seen’ is used where ‘saw’ would be standard), or the preterite in a context where it would be standard to use the past participle (in example 4, ‘broke’ is used where ‘broken’ would be standard). This feature is again found across films and speakers, but not with all verbs: the use of ‘seen’ instead of ‘saw’ for instance appears to be particularly common in films. This lack of consistency across different verbs concurs with Green’s observations, which reveal that ‘the participle form is often used in the past or in past participle environments with the following verbs: *ring* (*rung*), *see* (*seen*), *sink* (*sunk*), and *sing* (*sung*) [...] For others verbs, it is the simple past form that is used in all contexts’ (Green, 2002: 95, emphasis in original). Examples 5 and 6 illustrate the fact that ‘number distinction between singular and plural verbs is neutralized’ (Green, 2002: 99), and therefore speakers sometimes produce sentences such as examples 5 and 6 in which a verb with a third person singular subject is not marked with a final –s. Conversely, as in examples 7 and 8, speakers sometimes add a final –s as a habitual marker or as a narrative present marker. Although these two features (neutralisation of verbal marker –s in the third person singular, or use of verbal marker –s in first persons) are not used an overwhelming amount of times, they are used across films. ‘Invariant be’ is again used quite often in most films with a fair degree of consistency, and examples 9 and 10 are but two instances of it. Zero copula, as per examples 11 and 12, is very frequent and found in all films. Finally, existential ‘it’ and ‘dey’ are

hardly used at all in film dialogue, with example 13 the only instance of it in the corpus.

To conclude, syntactic features are heavily relied upon in the films of the corpus to portray speakers of AAVE. While their use appears to be very consistent with the descriptions of AAVE provided by linguists, some features are more prominent than others in films, as discussed above. What remains certain, however, is that a large number of the features of AAVE described by linguists are to be found in film dialogue, sometimes with a remarkable level of density, and their use in dialogue matches descriptions by linguists. We noted above that syntactic variation is particularly important in that it conveys information about speakers. Because language is used to build – or confirm – the identity of characters in films, linguistic and more particularly syntactic variation is therefore a crucial element, often acting like a tool (sometimes concomitantly with other types of variation) to make a statement about a particular character's background for instance. While Rickford and Rickford (2000: 128) explain about AAVE that it can be deployed by speakers 'to delineate identity', a number of studies such as Wolfram's (1969, mentioned above) indicate that there is a correlation between the use of certain linguistic features and the expression of social proximity or distance. It is fair to say then that film scriptwriters and actors make use of variation to illustrate or reinforce group membership, and to give viewers a sense of community identity. We can only speculate as to why some of the features described in the literature on AAVE are absent from film dialogues: first, it is extremely problematic

to say how ‘up-to-date’ AAVE in films is in comparison with real life AAVE: language varieties, even those that have undergone a high level of codification, are very dynamic – words are created and can go in and out of fashion in a very short space of time, and new ways of speaking are constantly emerging. It is impossible to take a snapshot of a variety such as AAVE at a given time, and therefore a very difficult task, then, for scriptwriters to give an accurate representation of a particular variety. Secondly, what is striking in the films of the corpus is the relative absence of verbal markers. In the previous sub-section, the absence of lexical items specific of AAVE in film dialogues was explained by the possibility for viewers to misunderstand, or to not understand those items. The same can be said of verbal markers, as it is not entirely clear whether viewers who are not speakers of AAVE would understand precisely the meaning of sentences such as ‘you should’a BIN dən called me down there’ [you should have called me down there a long time ago] (Green, 2002: 67), even in context. To some extent, this is perhaps a case of accommodation, whereby scriptwriters and actors converge towards the standard in an attempt to cater for a wider audience without creating problems of comprehension, while still generating an identifiable community identity.

### ***Phonological features***

We have seen in Chapter Two that phonological variation is meaningful because certain sound patterns have been correlated with extralinguistic factors. While pronunciation is important, speakers of AAVE are often described as making a specific use of pitch and the ‘impressionistic’ view

that speakers of AAVE have a more colourful speech probably comes from the fact that they use a wider pitch range, as argued above. In the films of the corpus, characters make significant use of phonological variation: the number of examples of use of segmental features in the dialogue is virtually countless, and we only have space to provide a few here: one line from *Do the Right Thing*, and a short exchange from *New Jack City*, which illustrates the level of phonological variation used by characters.

Dialogue
<p>1- <i>Sweet Dick Willie</i>: You mothafuckas are always talkin <b>dat</b> old Keith Sweat shit '<b>ah</b>'m gonna do <b>dis</b>, <b>ah</b>'m gonna do <b>dat</b>'. You <b>ain't</b> gonna do a goddam thing, but sit yo' mucky ass on <b>dis</b> corna. ML, when you gonna get yo' business? Huh? Jus' like <b>ah</b> thought, you <b>ain't</b> gonna do a goddam thing but <b>ah</b>'ll tell you what <b>ah</b>'m gonna do, you hear me? <b>Ah</b>'m gonna go over <b>dere</b> give <b>dem</b> Koreans some mo' o' <b>mah</b> money. Fuck out of <b>mah</b> way, goddam it, it's Miller time mothafuckas. Old Moosehead fuckas tellin me what to do. Hey Coconut you got a lot o' damn nerves, you got off the boat too, hell, leave me alone, shit. Hey, Kung Fu! Gimme one of <b>dem</b> damn beers, dammit. (<i>Do the Right Thing</i>)</p> <p>2- <i>Gee Money</i>: A'ight at the clubs, right, some of <b>de</b> fellas step away from <b>de</b> blackjack tables or <b>de</b> bar to buy like a <b>fi'ty</b> or a hundred dollars worth o' sniff. <b>Ah</b> set 'em up in a backroom wid a hit o' base and yo, fifteen minutes after leaving <b>de</b> club, <b>dey</b> be back wid two or three people wid 'em.</p> <p><i>Nino</i>: So what?</p> <p><i>Gee Money</i>: Man, <b>dey ain't</b> come back for <b>de</b> cocaine, <b>dey</b> came back for base!</p> <p><i>Nino</i>: You sound like <b>dis</b> shit is <b>de</b> wheel or summin, like it's gonna change <b>de</b> world.</p> <p><i>Gee Money</i>: Look, <b>ah 'on' know</b> about <b>dat</b> change <b>de</b> world shit, but what ah do know is <b>dat</b> <b>dey</b> be goin crazy over <b>dis</b>, <b>ah</b>'m tellin you. And <b>de</b> bitches? Oh, Lawd, <b>de</b> bitches! Yo <b>dey'd</b> do anythin for <b>dis</b>, man! (<i>New Jack City</i>)</p>

Table 8 – Examples of the use of phonological features of AAVE (in bold) in the corpus films

These two extracts illustrate effectively the high density of phonological variation in the lines of certain characters, and give some idea (despite the

limitations of transcribing speech in writing) of the extent of the variation that certain characters use. The segmental features described in the previous chapter are omnipresent in the dialogue: there are numerous instances of th-fronting ('this' and 'that' becoming 'dis' and 'dat'), of consonant cluster reduction ('just' is pronounced 'jus'), of the sound /ŋ/ realised as /n/ ('talkin', 'comin'), of the monophthongal pronunciation of diphthongs ('ah' for 'I', 'mah' for 'my'), of the vocalisation of /r/ (as in 'yo'' and 'mo'', respectively for 'your' and 'more') and of the variation of pronunciation of tense aspect markers and auxiliaries that we described in the previous chapter ('dey ain't come' for 'they didn't come'; 'ah 'on' know' for 'I don't know'). In addition, Gee Money pronounces 'fi'ty' (for 'fifty'), as does Mookie at the end of *Do the Right Thing*, which Green describes as 'a common pronunciation of the word *fifty* for some AAE speakers' (Green, 2002: 208).

Suprasegmental features are also to be found:<sup>8</sup> Buggin Out in *Do the Right Thing* is the only character to use the word 'police' in the corpus (other characters usually prefer using 'cop(s)' or 'five-O' when talking about the police or police officers) and appears to put the primary stress on the initial syllable, PO-lice. We have mentioned in the previous chapter that this forestressing pattern is reported to be used in a relatively limited corpus of words by linguists, and no other examples show up in the corpus. Comments on the use of this particular feature in films are therefore limited. Green (2002: 208), in her chapter entitled 'AAE in media',

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that for this section, the researcher relied on his own hearing, as acoustic analysis using pitch tracks could not be conducted.

analyses a couple of lines from *Do the Right Thing*, including Buggin Out's intervention: 'Ain't gonna stand for dem fuckin PO-lice', and she concludes that while this feature (front-shifting) is 'relatively easy to identify [...] what is also notable is that there are not a significant number of sentences in which such features occur'. The films, it seems, do not depend heavily on this particular trait to portray speakers of AAVE.

As far as the wider pitch range is concerned, some characters do sometimes switch to a falsetto register: Buggin Out and Mister Señor Love Daddy in *Do the Right Thing*, Gator in *Jungle Fever*, Gee Money in *New Jack City*, and O-Dog in *Menace II Society* all display a pitch range that is very wide. Characters are also often portrayed in very emotional situations which seem to affect their pitch (or then again, maybe it is their use of pitch that makes viewers perceive a scene as emotional). All these elements do indeed contribute to giving an impressionistic idea of what 'sounding black' means. As highlighted in the previous chapter, further studies using pitch tracks such as Tarone's (1972, 1973) and Green's (1990) would be necessary in order to build up an important enough corpus that might permit the analysis of the specifics of the intonation of speakers of AAVE, and show their distinctiveness by comparing them with that of speakers of other varieties. This is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it seems fair to say that in the films of the corpus, a significant number of characters switch to a falsetto register, which seems to add credibility to the impressionistic comments that speakers of AAVE use a wider pitch range.

### *Interactional features*

We have seen that certain speech events are described as being an integral part of AAVE. In the films of the corpus, there are few but significant instances of representations of the speech events described above, so significant in fact that they are sometimes given as examples in works on AAVE, despite their fictional nature. One could argue that these speech events can be very private occurrences that are not easily captured in natural contexts, and that it is why their instances in films have been recycled by specialists of AAVE. In the films of the corpus, there are a few instances of rapping, and they are provided in the table below.

Dialogue
1- <i>Nino</i> : So see ya, and I wouldn' wanna be ya. ( <i>New Jack City</i> )
2- <i>Gator</i> : Ya mean to say mah little brotha got him an ofay that ain't got no money? ( <i>Jungle Fever</i> )
3- <i>Stacey</i> : Fuck you boy. You ain't gettin no zig zag, you ain't gettin no drig drag, punk. Dat shit rhyme, nigga, ah should be a mothafuckin rappa or summin. ( <i>The Wood</i> )
4- <i>Mister Señor Love Daddy</i> : I only plays da platters dat matter, da matters dat platter, and that's the truth, Ruth. Doin the ying and the yang, the hip and the hop, the stupid fresh thing, the flippity flop. ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )

*Table 9 – Possible examples of rapping in the films*

The examples in table 9 all show lines that could potentially fall under the umbrella of rapping. The importance is on sound and rhyming patterns, but their conciseness prevents us from being more categorical. Examples 1, 2 and 3 are all lines where sounds seem to play a particular importance in the dialogue and as far as characterisation is concerned: the characters using these lines are presented as eloquent and confident but also playful figures.



In example 1, 'see ya' is made to rhyme with 'be ya' (the actor in fact puts a particular emphasis on these words). In this scene, one of Nino's right-hand men, Duh Duh Man, is holding a man named Biff by his feet, threatening to drop him off a bridge. The viewers then learn that Biff has not paid Nino when he was supposed to. Nino expresses his disapproval by explaining to Biff that 'Money talks, bullshit runs the marathon', and then unleashes his rhyming couplets ('So see ya, and I wouldn' wanna be ya') somewhat theatrically just before Biff is dropped off the bridge. In example 2, 'ofay' (a slang word for a white person) rhymes with 'money'. Gator is visiting his brother Flipper in his new flat where he has just moved in with Angela. When he learns that Flipper did not get involved with Angela for the money, he expresses his surprise in rhymes, particularly accentuating each syllable in 'ofay' and 'money'. In example 3, Stacey and his friend have just held a shopkeeper at gunpoint because they needed cigarette paper (of which 'zig zag' is a brand). Whilst threatening the shopkeeper, Stacey recognises Mike, Roland and Slim who also happen to be in the shop at the time and offers to give them a ride to the dance, upon which they leave the shop, forgetting the cigarette paper they came in for in the first place. Stacey blames his friend for this and punishes him by keeping his joint to himself: 'no zig zag [...] no drig drag'. He then proceeds to congratulate himself for his rhyming couplet. In all these examples, the characters use their lines to take down an opponent (example 1), sometimes in a friendly or cheeky way (examples 2 and 3) and rapping plays an important part in characterisation, presenting characters as comfortable with words, and generally confident with handling foes, which

is in tune with specialists' descriptions of rapping. Example 4 is the only extended example of rapping in the films: Mister Señor Love Daddy, a radio DJ raps into a microphone. The function of his line is clearly poetic, and it even fails to make sense at times ('da matters dat platter'). The chiasmic structure of the initial sentence (platters [...] matter / matters [...] platter), the rhyme between 'truth' and 'Ruth', and then the repetition of sounds that are close (ying / yang; hip / hop; flippity flop) give to this line a sense of playfulness, whilst the meaning of the line is at least partially unclear (unlike examples 1, 2 and 3, which do provide some information). Mister Señor Love Daddy's proficiency with words and rhymes, and his work as a deejay in a radio station that seems to be at the centre of the estate, contribute to presenting him as a 'cool' and confident figure, embodying to some extent the predominantly African American neighbourhood of Bed-Stuy portrayed in the film. This scene is also very near the opening of the film, and as such also helps to set the African American context.

There is also one example of call-and-response in the corpus: in *Jungle Fever*, after Flipper's wife Drew finds out that Flipper was cheating on her with Angie, a white person, she and four other African American women are socialising at a friend's house and are discussing African American males, and their relationship with white women. The gathering is even referred to as a 'war council' in another scene by Cyrus, Flipper's friend, whose wife is a member of the group. This scene is discussed by Green:<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This scene is also discussed by Smitherman (1995).

During the moment in the living room scene when one woman has the floor, the listeners give her their undivided attention and are just as focused on her speech as the congregational members are focused on the preacher's sermon [...] Backchanneling cues [...] are delivered at the appropriate time in step with the rhythm the speaker has established. (Green, 2002: 155)

In this scene, the other women's cues show that they are 'united by the subject matter, have had similar experiences and are in tune with each other' (Green, 2002, 155). The dialogue of the scene in question is transcribed in the table below (the backchanneling cues are between brackets in the transcript of the dialogue – it is not always clear which character says the backchanneling cues, and they always overlap with what the woman who has the floor says):

Dialogue
<i>Drew</i> : A lot of this doesn't really have so much to do with the black men. I know it does and I know we want to blame 'em (Uhhmm) and it is their blame (Uhhmm). But part of it is that these white bitches throw themselves at black men. (Thank you) Do you see the way they look at 'em? You can't walk down the street with man without twenty-nine (Thank you) thousand white bitches comin' on to them, (Thank you) and they give up their pussy because their fathers tried to keep it from them all their lives, when they run eighteen and they leave home, (That's it) they're gonna get that black dick. They gonna get it, they gonna get it. And it can be yours, yours, yours, or mine, they want it, (I agree) and they're getting it. ( <i>Jungle Fever</i> )

*Table 10 – Example of call-and-response in Jungle Fever*

This scene is almost systematically singled out of the rest of the film by critics, and represents a look into the intimacy of the group of African American women. Diana Paulin commented on this particular scene:

Rather than conforming to dominant or static representations of blackness and black women, the members of the 'War Council' repeatedly articulate their positions in relation to issues, such as the destructive forces (misrepresentations, self-abusive behavior), threatening black communities. [...] Distinct from other scenes, this

all-female rap session [*sic*] appears ad-libbed and unrehearsed.  
(Paulin, 1997: 177)

In this scene, the women attempt to ‘deal with the black man’ and even recognise that there is a lot of self-hating going on ‘when he can’t deal with a sistah’. This scene is described as typical of African American life and experience by Green. Paulin goes further, arguing that the scene has a political significance that:

Their refusal to remain silent about skin color politics and interracial desire sets the tone for a self-critical discussion. By acknowledging the different perspectives and responses among black women to these issues, they destabilize any notion of an authentic black ideology.  
(Paulin, 1997: 177)

In the exchanges both preceding and following this extract, diverging opinions are expressed by other characters (particularly about whether or not there are some decent African American men, or whether African American women should date non-African American men) and the polyphony of voices is reunited by the very form that the exchange is taking: while these women embody the fact that not all African American women are or think alike, their voices are brought together in this scene. Although this is the only example of call-and-response in the corpus, it is rare enough – or problematic enough to record – for Green to mention it in her book on AAVE, which in effect gives credence to Spike Lee’s film as a realistic depiction of the experience of African Americans in the United States.

A number of representations of characters signifying, and one extended exchange between two characters, can be found in the corpus and are presented in the table below:

Dialogue
1- <i>Sweet Dick Willie</i> : You fool, you ø thirty cent away from havin a quarta. ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> ) <sup>10</sup>
2- <i>Doughboy</i> : Mothafucka ø so skinny enough he could hula-hoop through a Cheerio. ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )
3- <i>Mike</i> : Come on man, that was Junior High, I want bigger and better things now, man. <i>Slim</i> : Nigga, like what? <i>Mike</i> : Like your mama, nigga! ( <i>The Wood</i> )
4- <i>Ahmad</i> : You ø so old, you ø like a fossil. ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )
5- <i>Junior</i> : Ah seen yo' motha kickin a can down de street, ah said 'What you doin?', she said 'Movin'. <i>George</i> : Yo' mama ø so old she drove chariots to school. <i>Junior</i> : Yo' mama's so fat she broke her leg and gravy poured out. [...] <i>Junior</i> : Ah told yo' mama to act her age and the bitch dropped dead. <i>George</i> : Yo' motha got a leather wig with gray sideburns. <i>Junior</i> : Well, yo' mama's teeth ø so yellow, she can butter a whole loaf of bread. ( <i>White Men Can't Jump</i> )

Table 11 – Examples of signifying

In example 1, three characters, all middle-aged black men are sitting in the street, just outside a porch, and seem to be spending their time talking about the weather. In another case of sociolinguists using films as evidence, this particular line has been commented upon by Green (2002: 208) who describes what happens as 'one character signifies by commenting on his friend's limited intelligence'. In example 2, a character

<sup>10</sup> Labov (1972: 146) draws a distinction between 'ritual sounding' and 'applied sounding', the former being a case of sounding being done for its own sake, whereas the latter involves the use of sounds for a particular purpose, often in the middle of a conversation. Examples 1, 2, 3 and 4 are representations of applied sounding, example 5 is a representation of ritual sounding.

uses a line that has since become very popular to sound on another character by making an exaggerated statement about his size and weight. Example 3 is a typical example of the representation of a ritual insult between two friends, where Slim is set up by his good friend Mike, and is not expected to react violently, as Slim's reference to Mike's mama is 'just for fun', so to speak. In example 4, Ahmad signifies on Da Mayor, comparing him to a fossil on the grounds that he is an aged man. Example 5 is taken from *White Men Can't Jump* and is the only extended case of two characters playing the dozens. The film revolves around games of basketball, and around players' ability not only to play the sport but also to intimidate their opponents. This particular exchange takes place at the beginning of the film, and verbal skills are presented as crucial if one is going to thrive.<sup>11</sup>

The representations of these practices in films is one of the devices used to try to make a character or a scene seem more authentic. Such verbal jousts can well go beyond the merely verbal and may even lead to very real fights, and there is a thin line between ritual and actual insults. Labov (1972: 157-8) argues that, 'the danger of sounds being misinterpreted as personal remarks cannot be overstated. [...] Generally speaking, extended ritual sounding is an in-group process, and when sounding occurs across group lines, it is often intended to provoke a fight'. The following examples, all from films from the corpus, are interesting in that they give an account of where the characters situate the limit between ritual and

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<sup>11</sup> Insults play an important part in the films of the corpus, and their nature and translation will be examined in Chapter Four.

actual insults, and give credit to the idea that there is a symbolic distance between participants:

Dialogue
<p>1- <i>George</i>: Junior, if you could count, you'd be a fuckin astronaut.  <i>Sidney</i>: George, yo' motha's an astronaut.  <i>George's teammate 1</i>: He talked about yo' mama, man. He playin you for a punk.  <i>George's teammate 2</i>: Ah wouldn't take it, man.  <i>George</i>: Mah motha ain't no astronaut. Say it, say it.  <i>Sidney</i>: Yo' motha ain't no astronaut, yo' fatha ain't no astronaut, ain't no astronaut got nothin to do wid nothin, alright?  <i>George</i>: Yeah, well, mah momma ain't no astronaut, you understand me?  <i>George's teammate 1</i>: Jump his ass, man.  <i>Sidney</i>: Me sayin' that yo' motha is an astronaut is just anotha way of sayin that you're all fucked up.  <i>George</i>: Yeah, well, cool. Let's just get off mommas, cos I just got off yo's. Keep my momma out of dis brotha.  <i>Sidney</i>: She's out. She's out.  <i>George</i>: Cool, cool.  <i>Sidney</i>: She's out.  <i>George</i>: Cool.  <i>Sidney</i>: She's out. What time do you want me to bring the bitch back?  <i>George's teammates</i>: (laughter)</p> <p>2- <i>Junior</i>: Ah seen yo' motha kickin a can down de street, ah said 'What you doin?', she said 'movin'.  <i>George</i>: Yo' mama so old she drove chariots to school.  <i>Junior</i>: Yo' mama's so fat she broke her leg and gravy poured out.</p> <p>3- <i>George</i>: Ah told yo' mama to act her age and de bitch dropped dead.  <i>Junior</i>: Yo' motha got a leather wig with gray sideburns.  <i>George</i>: Well, yo' mama's teeth ø so yellow, she can butter a whole loaf of bread.</p>

Table 12 – Examples of exchanges of ritual insults in White Men Can't Jump

Example 1 is a striking case of the representation of a verbal exchange going sour over the mention of one of the protagonists' mothers. Our understanding of the situation is that, after a basket ball game lost by George and his team, Sidney's line 'George, yo' motha's an astronaut' is interpreted by George to be an actual insult. George's teammates are

making matters worse by suggesting that George should understand what Sidney is saying as an insult. After they have explained themselves to each other, Sidney retreats and they both agree to ‘get off [the topic of] mommas’. George then attempts to redefine the situation as a ritual one by playing on words: ‘I just got off yours’. If Sidney insisted on taking the situation seriously, it would surely lead to a fight, so he instead chooses to pretend to back down before dealing George the final blow: ‘She’s out. What time do you want to bring the bitch back?’ This time, laughter from George’s teammates gives George the possibility of interpreting Sidney’s statement as a ritual – as opposed to actual – insult. In addition, George’s reaction to Sidney’s apology ‘Me sayin dat yo’ motha is an astronaut is just anotha way of sayin that you’re all fucked up’, only emphasises further the importance of following certain rules when sounding on each other. The fact that George gives so much more importance to his mother being called an astronaut (whom we can only – but safely – assume is not an astronaut) than to himself being called ‘fucked up’ serves as a reminder of the importance of the figure of the mother and of its sacred status. A simple mention of the figure of the mother (‘astronaut’ can hardly be considered an insult, and as George’s teammates reactions show, it is not so much the content of Sidney’s utterance ‘Yo’ motha’s an astronaut’ that is the problem, but the very fact that he mentions George’s mother) is enough to trigger a full-blown fight. This scene is reminiscent of the opening scene of *Menace II Society* mentioned above, when the mention of the mother of one of the protagonists by the Korean shopkeeper (‘I feel sorry for your mother’) is enough to trigger a bloodbath. This serves to emphasise the



importance of the key role of the nature of the relationship between participants, as what is acceptable from a peer in a group may not be acceptable from an outsider.

Another short extract from *White Men Can't Jump* seems to indicate that playing the dozens is no easy task. Billy (Woody Harrelson) tries to play the dozens with his newfound good friend, Sidney (Wesley Snipes). Their conversation is as follows:

Dialogue
<i>Billy:</i> Your mama is so stupid. It takes her sixty, no it takes her two hours...
<i>Sidney:</i> Stop hurting yourself, man.
<i>Billy:</i> Hold on, I've got some funny stuff here, man.

*Table 13 – Extract from the final scene of White Men Can't Jump*

This short exchange is revealing in terms of plot and characterisation, and it is crucial for the viewers to understand the nature of the speech events in the subtitled version, otherwise this scene has a very limited meaning. Here, Billy wants to display a certain complicity with Sidney, but Billy is not very good at playing the dozens, as his hesitation shows. Sidney will not play along, and would rather put an end to it straight away, which serves as a reminder that these games are played within very specific contexts, and with very specific participants. This is the last scene of the film, which acts as a final reminder of the rules that govern ritual insults, and Billy ultimately acknowledges that it is all just some 'funny stuff'. This exchange is important in that, beyond the obvious denotative content, it shows that Billy has become closer to Sidney, so much so that he feels he

can sound on him without provoking a fight, even though he is not African American. Arguably, the audience may believe that Billy is not good at it precisely because he is not African American, and that somehow, it is an African American ‘thing’.<sup>12</sup>

Speech events such as rapping, playing the dozens or call-and-response play a key part in the expression of one’s identity as a speaker of AAVE. While they are not overwhelmingly relied on in films to portray speakers of AAVE, their use always reflects a form of social organisation and plays a crucial role in the characterisation process. Whilst instances of rapping convey information about the personality of a character, call-and-response and playing the dozens allow the portrayal of group dynamics, particularly solidarity, as well as ideas of symbolic distance between characters. From an ethnographic perspective, such representations allow a wide audience to access social practices that would otherwise be used in groups with specific social boundaries, in a relatively private way, not involving outsiders.

### ***Conclusion***

With regards to the use of language in films to characterise speakers as users of AAVE, language is but one of the devices that help to conjure up mental images for viewers. Not only is a certain idea of African America or blackness created in the process, connotations of socioeconomic status are also brought to the fore through a careful blending of the features that we have mentioned above. To conclude our survey of the use of AAVE

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, Labov (1972) also points out the differences between African American and White youths when sounding/playing the dozens, which adds substance to the idea that one has to be African American to sound properly.

features in film dialogue, Taylor's observation (mentioned in the opening paragraph of this section) that film language displays neutralising tendencies is borne out to a considerable extent with respect to lexical items, with the exception of slang and terms of address: the only element that could constitute a major obstacle to understanding is lexicon, and more particularly words that are specific to AAVE. In the films, there are few words and expressions that are typical of AAVE, and Taylor's claim is essentially confirmed by the present study, although it is also possible to rationalise the relative absence of words specific to AAVE because of the absence of situations propitious to their use. The point is that the words that are – according to specialists of AAVE – characteristically used by speakers of AAVE are not prominent in film dialogues. The small number of occurrences of verbal markers of AAVE in the films is also significant as they can potentially be difficult to understand for non-speakers of AAVE. While this corroborates the idea that the language used in films should be unambiguous as much as possible for viewers to understand what is going on, it is not necessarily detrimental to the portrayal of speakers of AAVE. Linguists readily acknowledge that although 'it is often easy to identify some of the vocabulary items that are used differently by African Americans' (Green, 2002: 12-3) and that 'for most casual commentators, what sets black talk apart is its distinctive word usage' (Rickford & Rickford, 2000: 91), there is more to AAVE: it is not merely the sum of its words, and whilst lexical variation is 'an important part of the characterization of AAE', it is 'by no means the only part' (Green,

2002: 12).<sup>13</sup> Filmmakers also rely on other channels and codes to relate scenes to aspects of African America. With respect to *Do the Right Thing*, Baker (1993: 171) highlights that:

The cultural codes of Black America make their way through the rap of Public Enemy, the dance of Rosie Perez, and the deejay work of Love Daddy [...] They also flow energetically through the signifying of the Black three-man chorus on the corner, the hybridity of leadership strategies seen in Smiley's double bill of Martin [Luther King Jr] and Malcolm [X], the "maxing out" and people-baiting of the Posse. (Baker, 1993: 171)

So whilst this chapter focuses on the representation of AAVE in the films of the corpus, it is important to bear in mind that because films are intricate objects, other auditory or visual cues can complement the dialogue.

The linguistic variation described in this chapter naturally presents subtitlers with a number of challenges: on the one hand they have to translate characters' lines into languages that do not readily bend to the very specific linguistic and cultural meanings implied by the very use of such variation, while on the other they can rely on visual or other auditory cues. In the next chapter, we examine how subtitlers have translated the films of the corpus into French.

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<sup>13</sup> Rickford and Rickford (2000: 91-2) even argue that the rules for pronouncing words and the grammar of AAVE (particularly 'the rules for modifying or combining words to express different meanings and to form larger phrases or sentences') are more important in the characterisation of AAVE.

## **Chapter Four – An Analysis of the French Subtitles of the Films of the Corpus**

### ***Introduction***

We are now going to examine in detail the French subtitles of the films in the corpus in order to analyse how AAVE is translated into French. With regard to the subtitling of linguistic variation, Díaz Cintas and Remael argue that speakers can display very different ways of using language in speech and that this diversity is often reflected in films:

The changeability of speech is [...] one of its riches and, volatile as it may be, it is anchored in the community that produces it. That makes it all the more interesting for films, especially those aiming to offer a realistic view of society. As a result, film language in its narrowly linguistic sense, often reflects this changeability. In other words, even though both fictional and non-fictional film dialogue are also shaped by film's other semiotic systems, they remain a reflection of society – if only a fictional one – since fiction is based on representations or interpretations of reality. And each society has not just one, but many 'languages'. (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007: 184-5)

Ideally, this multiplicity of languages should be reflected in the subtitles to convey the (social, geographical, ethnic) differences between characters. However, non-standard features, because of the way they are embedded in a particular social or regional context, can be very challenging to translate. Non-standard forms of a TL will rarely have the same connotations as the ones they replace in the SL. In this chapter, I will examine how translators have subtitled AAVE film dialogues in French, what strategies they have used, to what extent these are consistent across films and, where differences are found, possible explanations for these.

Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 191) make the rather impressionistic statement that ‘talented subtitlers [...] manage to “suggest” [...] language variation’, although the authors do not specify through what means this is possible. The study of lexicon is more straightforward because it is often possible, when comparing an original and its translation, to find a direct correspondence between lexical items. Therefore, it makes more sense to examine the translation of lexical items by comparing original and translation, whereas syntactical and phonological variation involve a more global approach to the TT, because translators have to be opportunistic, and will use features in the TT to portray variation when they can, rather than to mirror the use of a particular feature in the original. Naturally, the possibility of compensating one type of variation (whether lexical, syntactical or phonological) in the original with another in the translation always exists. The main issue is that there is not systematically a one-to-one correspondence between syntactical and phonological features in the dialogue and in the subtitles: a particular feature of AAVE cannot have a straightforward equivalent in the subtitles, and translators have to rely on domestic material, that is, features of the TL, in order to portray variation. Because of this, as far as syntactical and phonological features are concerned, it is often pointless to seek a strict parallelism between the ST and the TT. On a technical level, one of the main issues when analysing subtitles is that because of the reduction constraint mentioned in Chapter One, the translation of the dialogue that is provided in the subtitles can display significant differences with the original: information has had to be selected, elements have had to be omitted, the source text (henceforth ST)

condensed and reformulated at word, phrase or sentence level. In addition, because subtitles are written in French, and we have said in Chapter One that written French is fairly rigid, I will demonstrate that while there are possibilities for translators to portray variation using syntactical and phonological devices in the subtitles, those are very limited. I argue in this chapter that this is precisely what Díaz Cintas and Remael mean when they say that translators can ‘suggest’ linguistic variation: rather than look for one-to-one correspondence for syntactical and phonological features, translators use the possibilities of the TL to imbue the TT with a sense of informality or with specific connotations in order to constitute ST and TT ideologically along similar lines.

For these reasons, this chapter will not follow strictly the structures of Chapters Two and Three. Rather, I will examine the features that are used in the subtitles in order to reflect informality: first, translators have used a limited set of grammatical features to evoke informality in the subtitles, and I will also examine how slang and insults are dealt with in translation. Secondly, I will investigate the features reflecting specifically AAVE practices such as the translation of terms of address and of speech events. While a number of features are neutralised in the subtitles, some connotations of AAVE are sometimes reflected through lexicon in the translation. In addition, in some of the films, translators have used a feature of *banlieue* French known as *verlan* in the subtitles, and I will question the relevance and effectiveness of the use of such a feature.

In his study, which we mentioned in the previous chapter, Taylor also argues that:

Of the two major strategies for translating film, dubbing and subtitling, the latter moves ever further towards a standard language through its very nature as written, and therefore more formal, genre. [...] There is a shift from the more specific to the more generic, in that lexis, terminology and expressions specific to regional and social varieties need to be generalised in order to guarantee comprehension over wide geographical and social divides. (Taylor, 2006: 38-9)

We have demonstrated in Chapter Three that, as far as on-screen representations of AAVE are concerned, words specific to AAVE do not feature in the films of the corpus which may indicate that there is a certain level of neutralisation from real-life language to language as it is portrayed in films. In this chapter, I will provide an assessment of Taylor's claim that there is a dilution of language varieties, from specific to generic, in subtitles, in light of the films of the corpus.

### ***Reflection of informality***

In the first section of this chapter, I will demonstrate that informality is conveyed in the French subtitles mostly through lexicon, and also through a limited set of features meant to display spoken pronunciation in writing. It is important to note at this point that although the use of AAVE is associated with informal situations, speakers of AAVE do not have a monopoly on informality, and I will examine at the end of this section how the on-screen representations of other language varieties (although there are few in the corpus) are portrayed in the subtitles.



### Through lexicon

The close examination of a scene from *Boyz n the Hood* in the table below illustrates the extent to which translators can rely on word selection to convey particular information on the tenor of an exchange between characters. This scene takes place fairly early in the film. The protagonists are about 18 years old, and are gathered around a table at a party to welcome back Doughboy who has just served time in jail.

Dialogue	Subtitles
<i>Tre</i> : Wassup Dough?	<b>Salut</b> , Boul' ?
<i>Doughboy</i> : Oh shit! What up G? <i>Tre</i> , love in effect.	<b>Ben, merde !</b> Ça va, <b>vieux</b> ? Tre, mon grand <b>pote</b> .
<i>Chris</i> : What's up Tre?	<b>Ça gaze</b> ?
<i>Tre</i> : What's up Chris?	- <b>Salut</b> , Chris.
<i>Doughboy</i> : Heard you're like mister G Q Smooth now. Working over at the Fox Hills Mall?	- Paraît que t'es devenu un <b>minet</b> .
<i>Tre</i> : Yeah, ah get discounts on clothes and shit, you like?	- Tu <b>bosses</b> au centre commercial.
<i>Doughboy</i> : You look like you sellin rocks.	- J'ai des prix sur les <b>sapes</b> .
<i>Chris</i> : Tre, you be slingin dat shit?	T'as l'air d'un dealer.
<i>Tre</i> : No I don't be doin that shit.	- Tu <b>fourgues</b> cette <b>merde</b> ? - Non, pas du tout.
<i>Doughboy</i> : Couldn't anyway. Pops'd kick yo' ass. You know, ah'm out de pen now. Tryin to keep mah ass out dis time.	Tu pourrais pas. Ton papa t' <b>astiquerait</b> .
<i>Tre</i> : Well that's what we're here to celebrate, right, man?	Je sors de <b>taule</b> ...
<i>Doughboy</i> : Yeah.	et je compte pas y <b>refoutre les pieds</b> .
<i>Tre</i> : Damn brotha how'd you get so big?	- On fait la fête pour ça. - <b>Ouais</b> .
<i>Doughboy</i> : Pumpin iron and eatin	T'es <b>mastoc</b> ! Comment t'as fait ? C'est les haltères et la <b>bouffe</b> .

<p>man. Ain't nothin else to do in de mothafuckin pen. Three hots and a cot, know what ah'm sayin? Res' o' de time ah was readin and writin mah girl.</p> <p><i>Man #1:</i> Read?</p> <p><i>Doughboy:</i> Yeah, mothafucka. Ah ain't no criminal, ah can read, bitch.</p>	<p>Rien d'autre à <b>foutre</b>, en <b>taule</b>.</p> <p>Sauf <b>bouffer</b> et <b>pieuter</b>. <b>Tu vois le tableau ?</b></p> <p>A part ça, je lisais et j'écrivais à ma <b>nana</b>.</p> <p>- Tu lisais? - Et alors, <b>enfoiré</b> ?</p> <p>Je suis pas un criminel. Je sais lire, <b>connard</b>.</p>
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*Table 14 – Scene from Boyz n the Hood and subtitles*

We have highlighted in bold the words that indicate an informal register. The first remark that we can make is that there is a significant number of them, in fact most verbs, nouns and adjectives (verbs 'bosser', 'fourguer', 'astiquer', 'foutre', 'bouffer', 'pieuter', 'gazer' are all described in the Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales (CNRTL) dictionary as either 'populaire', 'familier' or 'argotique'; nouns 'sapes', 'bouffe', 'taule', 'nana' and 'minet' are described as 'familier' or 'argotique', while 'merde', 'enfoiré' and 'connard' are described as 'trivial'; adjective 'mastoc' is described as 'familier'). The informality is indicated straight away as characters greet each other using 'salut' rather than more formal alternatives such as 'bonjour' and use *tutoiement*. The greetings also illustrate the informality of the situation. 'G' in the original (which is short for 'Gangsta') is translated as 'vieux', which again shows the familiarity between Doughboy and Tre, while Doughboy's demonstration of brotherly love ('love in effect') is rendered as 'mon grand pote' ('pote' means 'friend' and is described in the CNRTL dictionary as 'argotique' and 'familier'). There are also some idioms ('foutre les pieds', 'voir le tableau')

that contribute to giving a spoken flavour to the scene, as well as markers of spoken discourse such as ‘ben’.

It is interesting to note however, that a low register word in the subtitles does not necessarily correspond to a low register word in the original dialogue. Consider the following four examples of the translation of the word ‘money’ into French in *New Jack City*:

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>Nino</i> : You don’t have my product, and you don’t have mah money.	T’as pas ma marchandise ni mon <b>blé</b> .
2- <i>Pookie</i> : Lemme see the money.	Fais voir la <b>maille</b> .
3- <i>Nino</i> : We wasn’t makin no money then, was we?	On se faisait pas de <b>fric</b> .
4- <i>Nino</i> : You bin makin money out the side of the family?	Tu fais du <b>blé</b> en dehors de la famille ?

*Table 15 – Examples of the translation of the word ‘money’ in French subtitles in New Jack City*

In these four examples, the word ‘money’ is used in the original dialogue. In the subtitles, ‘argent’ would be of an equivalent register but is not used, while lower register alternatives ‘blé’, ‘maille’ and ‘fric’ are preferred. In these contexts, these particular words appear to be used to maintain a register and a level of informality consistent with the characters and the situations that are portrayed on screen: in example 1, Nino and Duh Duh Man are about to drop a man who has not paid his debt from a bridge, while in example 2 Pookie (a drug dealer) asks Scotty (an undercover detective) to open a duffle bag so he can see the money. Examples 3 and 4

are taken from a conversation between Nino and Gee Money about selling crack rather than cocaine. What has been sought in these particular cases is clearly not a literal translation of the dialogue, but rather one that is faithful to the spirit of the original. Similar strategies can be observed in other films, and further examples of the translation of the word ‘money’ across the corpus are provided in the table below:

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>Sidney</i> : See the only problem I have now is figurin out how ah'ma pull de ball out o' yo' ass when I take yo' money. ( <i>White Men Can't Jump</i> )	J'aurai du mal à sortir la balle de ton cul...  quand je prendrai ton <b>fric</b> .
2- <i>Man #1</i> : Little Chris, tell dis fool ah ain't gonna take his ball. I got enough money to buy me a hundred balls. Shit. ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )	Chris, dis-lui que je le chourerai pas.  J'ai assez de <b>thunes</b> pour m'en acheter cent. Merde !
3- <i>Tat</i> : You owe me some money mothafucka? ( <i>Menace II Society</i> )	Tu me dois du <b>blé</b> ?
4- <i>Gator</i> : You see now me, personally, I woulda opted for some money and shit. ( <i>Jungle Fever</i> )	Tu vois, moi, personnellement, j'aurais opté pour le <b>fric</b> , tout ça.
5- <i>ML</i> : Ah swear to God. Ah will be de first in line to spen' what little money I got. ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )	Je le jure. Je serai le premier à y dépenser le peu de <b>fric</b> que j'ai.
6- <i>Stacey</i> : Hey motherfucka, gimme de money! ( <i>The Wood</i> )	File-moi le <b>fric</b> !

Table 16 – Examples of the translation of the word ‘money’ in other films<sup>1</sup>

The word ‘money’ is found in most films, and acts as a convenient barometer because there are many words that can be used in French to

<sup>1</sup> Further examples of the subtitling of the word ‘money’ can be found in appendix table A7.

translate it. Again, we can see here that although the rather neutral word ‘money’ is used in the original dialogue, it is translated using low register words in the subtitles. In comparison, it is also remarkable that when characters like Sal, the Italian American pizzeria owner (*Do the Right Thing*) and Flipper, the architect and his wife Drew (*Jungle Fever*) use the word ‘money’, it is systematically subtitled as ‘argent’. It seems therefore that characters who are not African Americans (Sal) or who do not use a lot of features of AAVE (Flipper and Drew) are in this instance portrayed through the use of more formal register forms in the subtitles.

Vulgarity also plays an important role in the representation of informality and intimacy. As mentioned in the previous two chapters, the use of insults and swearwords is culturally bound and, as such, the means available in the TL may not always be compatible with the restitution of other factors such as the frequency of use of a particular word in the original. This has often been observed, most commonly with the translation into various languages of the word ‘fuck’, which is very often used by native English speakers, but will often be translated in a number of different ways, using a range of different words in different target languages. This tendency is also borne out in the subtitles of the corpus films, as outlined in the section below.

The case of the subtitling of ‘fuck’ and its derivatives

The opening scene from *Menace II Society* is particularly interesting in that it contains a very high density but also a wide range of insults and swearwords, used as expletives or epithets. This scene is reproduced in full

as it is significant for characterisation purposes (it is the opening scene of the film) and also because it gives a good idea of the density of swearwords used throughout the majority of the films.

Dialogue	Subtitles
<i>Caine</i> : Hey hey, nigga, do you think there's gonna be some pussy at dis mothafucka?	Tu crois qu'il y aura des meufs à cette soirée ?
<i>O-Dog</i> : It's gonna be a gang of hos up in dis mothafucka, ah did dis shit myself goddamit.	Il y aura plein de meufs, mec. C'est moi qui organise.
<i>Old man</i> : Y'all brothers spare some change?	Une petite pièce, les jeunes ?
<i>O-Dog</i> : Hey get de fuck out of mah face, fool!	Casse-toi, ducon !
<i>Caine</i> : Fuck what he say. Hey, remember that one bitch?	Tu te souviens de cette meuf ?
<i>O-Dog</i> : Hell yeah, nigga. That bitch was cryin like a mothafucka. Hell no, man. Keisha? She gonna be at the mothafuckin party, nigga.	Ouais, elle arrêta pas de chialer.  Keisha sera à la teuf.
<i>Caine</i> : Ah want mah baby. Hear me though. She got body, man.	- Elle est bonne. - Tu l'as dit.
<i>O-Dog</i> : Shit, ah'm about to get woodded up. Let's see what's up in dis mothafucka. You ain't gotta be creepin. Ah don't know why you tryin and act like you cleanin up. Damn. Always think we gonna steal summin.	Je vais essayer de la serrer.  Qu'est-ce qu'ils ont à boire ?  Pas la peine de me suivre.  Vous faites semblant de faire le ménage.  On va rien piquer, merde !
<i>Caine</i> : What you want, Dog?	Tu veux boire quoi ?
<i>O-Dog</i> : Go and give me that O. E.	Prends-moi une Old E.
<i>Caine</i> : Ah'm gonna fuck wid some of dis Ides.	Comment tu peux boire ça ?
<i>O-Dog</i> : Oh no wait, oh man, ah'm from an old school, brotha.	Je suis de la vieille école.
<i>Shopkeeper</i> : You not drink beer in store.	Pas boire dans magasin.

<p><i>O-Dog</i>: Hey, man, I ma pay you. Hey, look bitch, stop followin me around as a mothafucka, you gettin on mah nerves.</p> <p><i>Shopkeeper's wife</i>: Hurry up and buy.</p> <p><i>O-Dog</i>: Shut de fuck up, man.</p> <p><i>Shopkeeper</i>: Just pay and leave.</p> <p><i>O-Dog</i>: Hey, man, ah said ah ma pay you, why don't you calm yo' mothafuckin nerves? Damn.</p> <p><i>Shopkeeper</i>: Hurry up and go.</p> <p><i>O-Dog</i>: Hey, man, why don't you go ahead and get it.</p> <p><i>Caine</i>: Ah got yo' back. Why don't you get my change?</p> <p><i>O-Dog</i>: Hey, why don't you give mah homeboy his change?</p> <p><i>Shopkeeper</i>: I don't want any trouble, just get out.</p> <p><i>O-Dog</i>: Can't stand y'all.</p> <p><i>Shopkeeper</i>: I feel sorry for your mother.</p> <p><i>O-Dog</i>: Whatcha say about mah mama? You feel sorry for who?</p> <p><i>Shopkeeper</i>: I don't want any trouble, just get out.</p> <p><i>O-Dog</i>: De fuck you say about mah mama?</p> <p><i>Shopkeeper</i>: I don't want any trouble, just get out.</p> <p><i>O-Dog</i>: Every time ah come in dis mothafucka, you got summin to say. Hey, where de mothafuckin videotape? Give me de mothafuckin video. Stop, bring yo' tape right now. Hey, nigga, clean de cash register. Shut up. Shut de fuck up, ah ain't playin.</p>	<p>J'ai de quoi payer.</p> <p>Arrête de me suivre comme ça, tu me gaves !</p> <p>Dépêchez d'acheter</p> <p>Putain...</p> <p>Vous payer et partir.</p> <p>J'ai dit que j'allais te payer, alors calmos.</p> <p>Dépêchez et partez.</p> <p>Je paye la tienne.</p> <p>Je paye les deux.</p> <p>Récupère la monnaie.</p> <p>File-lui sa monnaie.</p> <p>Je veux pas d'ennuis. Sortez.</p> <p>Vous êtes trop cons.</p> <p>Je plains votre mère.</p> <p>T'as dit quoi, là ?</p> <p>- Tu plains qui ?</p> <p>- Je veux pas d'ennuis. Sortez.</p> <p>- Répète ce que t'as dit.</p> <p>- Allez vous-en.</p> <p>Chaque fois que je viens ici, tu ouvres ta gueule.</p> <p>File-moi la bande vidéo, toi !</p> <p>File-moi la vidéo tout de suite.</p> <p>Vide le tiroir-caisse.</p> <p>Ta gueule !</p>
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<p><i>Caine:</i> Shit. What de fuck did you do, man?</p> <p><i>O-Dog:</i> Ah said eject it. Bitch if you don't eject it ah'm gonna smoke yo' fuckin ass. Bitch, do it right now, ah'll shoot yo' stupid ass.</p> <p><i>Caine:</i> Nigga, hurry up. Come on, man, let's raise up, man, damn!</p> <p><i>O-Dog:</i> Nigga ah can't believe dis! Nigga, ah thought ah told you to open de damn register. How do you open it? Shit. What de f... six mothafuckin dollars, nigga? Ah know y'all got some money in dis mothafucka.</p> <p><i>Caine:</i> This don't make sense, let's just go, man!</p> <p><i>O-Dog:</i> Goddam ready tella.</p> <p><i>Caine:</i> Dog!</p> <p><i>O-Dog:</i> Ah'm keepin yo' shit, too. Jackpot. Here we go, got to get dis money. So you ain't talkin shit now! Where all de money at, man? Fuck dat.</p> <p><i>Caine:</i> Fuck, let's go.</p> <p><i>O-Dog:</i> Goddam.</p>	<p>T'as déconné !</p> <p>Ejecte la cassette ou je te fume.</p> <p>Donne-la-moi, putain ! Tu vas fermer ta gueule ?</p> <p>Grouille-toi !</p> <p>Allez, on se casse.</p> <p>Putain, j'y crois pas !</p> <p>Je t'ai dit de vider la caisse.</p> <p>- Dépêche ! - Ça s'ouvre comment ?</p> <p>Putain, y a que 6 dollars là-dedans.</p> <p>Je sais qu'ils ont de la thune ici.</p> <p>- Tu délirés, faut y aller. - C'est trop facile.</p> <p>Dog !</p> <p>Je vais lui faire les poches.</p> <p>C'est le jackpot.</p> <p>Tu dis plus rien, hein ?</p> <p>Où est le reste de la thune ?</p> <p>Moi je me tire !</p>
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*Table 17 – Opening scene of Menace II Society – Original dialogue and French subtitles*

It is generally acknowledged in works on subtitles that 'taboo words, swearwords and interjections are often toned down in subtitles or even



deleted if space is limited' (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007: 195).<sup>2</sup> This tendency is neither positive nor negative, in that it may not always reflect a moral decision by translators. It is likely that it is due in large part to a potential shortage of space in subtitles. Furthermore, as critics such as Ian Roffe argue, the use of taboo words is often considered even less acceptable in writing than in speech.<sup>3</sup> However, this is not to say that this tendency should be merely accepted as a side effect of subtitling. The systematic toning down of swearwords in subtitles (or in dubbing for that matter) can be seen as problematic, especially when taboo words and swearwords 'fulfill specific functions in the dialogic interaction and, by extension, in the film story' (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007: 196). Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 196) further emphasise that 'deleting them is certainly not the only or the best option available'. For instance, in the television series *Dexter* (2006), the female protagonist, Dexter's sister Debra, swears frequently, which is not only part of her characterisation, but also an emancipatory tactic. This makes it all the more important to acknowledge her idiosyncratic use of swearwords in the subtitles, so that the viewers in the TL can reach the same conclusions as the viewers in the SL. Admittedly, with a language as widely spoken as English, there is always a chance that French viewers may be able to hear the word 'fuck' in the original soundtrack, but such an assessment is difficult to make and very unreliable from viewer to viewer, and in the cases where swearwords and insults inform characterisation, conveying them in subtitles seems like the desirable option.

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<sup>2</sup> See also Taylor (2006).

<sup>3</sup> 'The audience will be more offended by written crudeness than by actual oral usage'. See Roffe (1995).

The tendency for swearwords to be toned down, however, is clearly confirmed in the extract from *Menace II Society* given above, and is particularly evident in the first couple of lines:

Dialogue	Subtitles
<i>Caine</i> : Hey hey, nigga, do you think there's gonna be some pussy at dis mothafucka?	Tu crois qu'il y aura des meufs à cette soirée ?
<i>O-Dog</i> : It's gonna be a gang of hos up in dis mothafucka, ah did dis shit myself goddamit.	Il y aura plein de meufs, mec. C'est moi qui organise.

*Table 18 – Examples of toning down in subtitles in the opening lines of Menace II Society*

In these two lines, the word ‘motherfucker’ is used twice, and is translated once as ‘soirée’, while it is not translated at all the second time. ‘Shit’ and ‘goddamit’ did not make the cut, as the translator replaced ‘I did this shit myself, goddamit’ by a more neutral ‘c’est moi qui organise’ [I’m the one organising]. Although this clarifies the meaning of the original dialogue, and while no literal translation would be satisfactory, it is not completely faithful to the dialogue in terms of register and tone, and displays a syntactical structure that is arguably a little too polished. ‘C’est moi qu’organise’, ‘c’est moi que j’organise’, ‘c’est moi j’organise’ would all have been options where a more spoken syntax would have partially compensated for the swearwords in the original, without necessarily taking up much more space.

The above extract is taken from the opening scene of the film and, as such, sets the mood and characterises the two main characters. The two young

African American protagonists do not exactly come across as average teenagers: they are extremely violent, verbally and physically, they carry guns, and do not hesitate to shoot people who disrespect them. They also use some features of AAVE, and their use of swearwords and insults is remarkable, both in terms of frequency and also in that they seem to use swearwords regardless of whom they are talking to. In the whole of the first scene, the word ‘fuck’ is translated in very different ways depending on the context in which it is used. Since ‘fuck’ (and its derivatives) is the most used swearword in American films and has a strong symbolic value, it is important to emphasise at this stage that there is no word in French that offers such combinational flexibility or grammatical versatility. As a consequence there is no ideal unique equivalent that can be substituted for every single occurrence of ‘fuck’ in the French subtitles.

A preliminary reading of the extract reveals the word ‘fuck’ and its derivatives are used twenty-one times throughout the scene. One-to-one correspondence can be difficult to establish, but on two occasions, the vulgarity of the term is conveyed through the interjection ‘putain’:

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>O-Dog</i> : Shut de fuck up, man.	Putain...
2- <i>O-Dog</i> : What de fu... six mothafuckin dollars, nigga?	Putain, y a que 6 dollars là dedans.

*Table 19 – Cases of subtitling ‘fuck’ using ‘putain’ in the opening scene of Menace II Society*

While ‘putain’ in French is not as strong as ‘fuck’, it is, in these cases, functionally accurate: in example 1, the translators have emphasised the

irritation of O-Dog with the shopkeeper and his wife rather than the denotational meaning of his line, which is more an expression of frustration at the couple harassing him, rather than a demand for them to be quiet. In example 2, the use of ‘putain’ again reflects O-Dog’s agitation and irritation after finding only six dollars in the cash register.

On a further three occasions, the vulgarity of the protagonists can be said to be conveyed to some extent in the subtitles through a careful use of low register words, albeit not necessarily insults or swearwords:

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>O-Dog</i> : Hey, get de fuck out of mah face, fool!	Casse-toi, ducon !
2- <i>O-Dog</i> : Hey, man, ah said ah ma pay you. Why don’t you calm yo’ mothafuckin nerves?	J’ai dit que j’allais te payer, alors calmos.
3- <i>Caine</i> : What de fuck did you do, man?	T’as déconné !

*Table 20 – Cases of subtitling ‘fuck’ using register in the opening scene of Menace II Society*

As can be observed, a number of solutions has been used in the subtitles to give a sense of the vulgarity of the original, whether it is ‘fuck’ or one of its derivatives that is used in the dialogue. In example 1, ‘get de fuck out of mah face’ is subtitled as ‘casse-toi’, which, although denotationally accurate is considerably milder in French. The use of ‘calmos’ in example 2 (old-fashioned slang meaning ‘du calme’) which whilst not exactly vulgar, hints at the informality of the line in the original dialogue ‘why don’t you calm yo’ mothafuckin nerves’. Finally, in example 3, the use of

the verb ‘déconner’ in the subtitles is not a literal translation, but conveys the function (Caine’s rhetorical question gives a sense of urgency and blames O-Dog for shooting the shopkeeper) and also hints at the low register of the original. As we can see, the use of a low register throughout the scene in the subtitles is revealed predominantly through the choice of lexicon (‘casse-toi’, ‘meufs’, ‘ducon’, ‘chialer’, ‘piquer’, ‘calmos’, where respectively ‘va-t-en’ [go away], ‘femmes’ [women], ‘idiot’ [idiot], ‘pleurer’ [to cry], ‘voler’ [to steal], and ‘calmez-vous’ [calm down] would be more standard) and also through the use of certain syntactical devices (‘tu as’ becomes ‘t’as’, ‘y a’ instead of ‘il y a’), which are discussed in a later section of this chapter. Swearwords are therefore clearly toned down in this extract, and this is not obviously due to the constraint of reduction, as for instance, O-Dog’s line halfway through the scene (*O-Dog*: Every time ah come in dis mothafucka, you got summin to say. Hey, where de mothafuckin videotape? Give me de mothafuckin video. Stop, bring yo’ tape right now. Hey, nigga, clean de cash register. Shut up. Shut de fuck up, ah ain’t playin) spans over twenty-four seconds, potentially allowing for four two-liners of up to seventy-six characters each spanning a maximum of six seconds each, leaving plenty of time for the three instances of ‘mothafucka’ to be translated in the subtitles.

‘Mothafuckin’ or ‘mothafucka’ is used eleven times in the opening scene of *Menace II Society* which is significant, and illustrates that the characters who use it are not afraid of violating taboos anymore, and in fact do so routinely. With regard to the word ‘motherfucker’, Sagarin argues that:

When preceded by the word mother, a combination with fucker is made that is unique in its ability to incite aggressive anger even among people who have developed a defensive armor against the insults derived from obscenity. Perhaps mankind's overwhelming fear of incest is challenged when the word mother-fucker is heard; or perhaps the image of the mother as pure and inviolate is damaged when the tabooed sounds are spoken. Although an example of a term that is both sexually descriptive and figuratively insulting, mother-fucker seems to touch off such a sensitive area, even in the speaker and insulter, that it has not passed into the general language of taboos that are violated at the rate of several per minute.' (Sagarin, 1968: 139-40)

The significance of the use of such words as far as characterisation is concerned should be borne in mind, and according to Trudgill (2000: 18) 'for those who do use taboo words [...], breaking the rules may have connotations of strength or freedom which they find desirable'. Taboo words are as much a linguistic as well as a sociological fact that provoke 'violent reactions' that are nonetheless 'irrational' also according to Trudgill (2000: 19). The French subtitles do not hint at the language in the original as being literally punctuated by one word, and it is however very difficult to assess whether French viewers would be able to hear the pattern, and what they would make of it if they could.<sup>4</sup>

In all but two (*Boyz n the Hood* and *New Jack City*) of the films from the corpus that portray African American characters who use a lot of swearwords, the subtitles have been toned down in such a way.<sup>5</sup> However,

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<sup>4</sup> When shown a subtitled version of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, a mixed audience of French speakers did not reveal any patterns, but rather a collection of idiosyncratic practices, with some people relying almost exclusively on the subtitles, others being able to hear certain recurring patterns of words in the dialogue (depending on their level of English, some were even able to identify the presence of the word 'fuck', which is also repeated a number of times in *Do the Right Thing*), and others who were able to relate the subtitles to the dialogue, and who would display a certain irritation if the subtitles were not to their liking, for one reason or another.

<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, this is not only true for subtitles into French. Studies on dubbing for various languages have shown comparable results. In a study of the translation of regional variety

it is important to point out at this stage that some films in the corpus do attempt to reproduce the level of vulgarity of the original, and do so effectively. *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) is one such case:

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>Youth</i> : Man, fuck that! Dem niggas around the corner tripped out, man. Fuck dat shit, man!	Putain, mec !  Les keublas du coin de la rue m'ont baisé.  Fait chier !
2- <i>Doughboy</i> : This fool got more comics than a mothafucka.	Il a plus de B.D. que n'importe quel con.
3- <i>Monster</i> : Taken off the mothafuckin set. <i>Doughboy</i> : Hey, yo, monster man, don't be cussin so mothafuckin loud. Mah moms don't like dat shit.	- Oblitéré du putain d'écran. - Arrête, Monster !  Jure moins fort, putain ! Ça fait gueuler ma mère.

Table 21 – Examples of the translation of swearwords in *Boyz n the Hood*

In the first example, which is in fact the opening lines of the film, ‘fuck’ is translated as ‘putain’, and later ‘fuck that shit’ is translated as ‘fait chier’, which also expresses the frustration of the character and accounts for the vulgarity of the original dialogue, whilst also establishing the tone and mood of this early exchange, and as a matter of fact of the film as a whole. In comparison with the opening scene of *Menace II Society*, there are significantly more swearwords in the subtitles of *Boyz n the Hood*. These swearwords help establish more firmly the spirit of the exchange, not to mention that they are more faithful to the original. The second example in

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in films, Christopher Taylor (2006: 46) notes about the dubbing in Italian of Spike Lee’s film *Do the Right Thing* that ‘a statistical analysis of Spike Lee’s New York based film *Do the Right Thing* which at the time of its release held the dubious record of containing the largest number of so-called “taboo words” in a circuit movie, showed that [...] out of 65 occurrences of the word ‘fuck’, 27 were neutralised’.

table 21 makes it even more obvious that the translator has deliberately stuck to the original as closely as possible, not only in terms of register, but even in terms of sentence structure. While something like ‘ce connard a un max de B.D.’ would have been suitable in terms of register and overall meaning, ‘il a plus de B.D. que n’importe quel con’ displays an effort to translate the vulgarity inherent in the original, whilst preserving the syntax. In the third example, we are confronted with a somewhat ironic instance of a person swearing in a plea to ask his friend to stop swearing. In this particular case, translating both ‘mothafuckin’ is vital: indeed, translating the first one (‘taken off the mothafuckin set’) is necessary for the next line to mean anything, otherwise the request for not swearing does not make sense, and translating the second one (‘don’t be cussin so mothafuckin loud’) is necessary for the irony to emerge. These two lines are an interesting case of a metalinguistic comment on vulgarity from one character in the film literally forcing the translator to make sure that the swearwords also appear in the subtitles. What these examples show is that subtitling swearwords is certainly not impossible, and that translators are not bound to leave them out.

#### Tentative explanations for toning down swearwords in subtitles

We have seen that different films may display subtitles where swearwords are given more or less importance. These various ‘strategies’ (strategies because they imply that more emphasis may be given to one particular element of the original to the detriment of others) have various consequences for viewers, and we could briefly, but tentatively try to



establish why different sets of French subtitles display such different tendencies when it comes to translating swearwords. The first explanation that can be put forward is the lack of space available to translators for a given title. It seems that many swearwords and expletives may not make the cut because they are not absolutely necessary in order to understand what is going on in the film, and the progression of the plot. It is not entirely surprising therefore to note that ‘mothafuckin’ and ‘mothafucka’ are systematically neutralised in the opening scene of *Menace II Society*: ‘mothafuckin’ is always used as an epithet, and its meaning is obviously more pragmatic than denotative, while ‘mothafucka’ is often used in comparisons, which, again, bring more to characterisation than they do to the plot. They are therefore logical candidates for omission from the subtitles as the number of characters per line and per title being limited, elements that are not syntactically compulsory are the first to be reduced. As argued above, however, space constraints are not always relevant, and cannot therefore always be used to explain such toning down.

Another tentative explanation for the neutralisation of swearwords is that subtitling, in comparison with dubbing, suffers from the added constraint that the “‘written to be spoken as if not written” language is transformed again to the written mode and cannot totally extricate itself from the canons of written language’ (Taylor, 2006: 48-9). Taboo words are restricted to a certain set of situations, and are mostly spoken. It is one thing to utter these words, and yet another one to put them in writing. Subtitling, it appears, at least in the context of the corpus of the thesis, tends to censor itself.

We have seen that some – in fact most – films portraying African American characters make an extensive use of the word ‘fuck’. Unfortunately, as we can see from the subtitles, and from translation practice in general, the word ‘fuck’ offers a flexibility that is unrivalled by any one French word, as argued above. Any attempt to systematically translate ‘fuck’ by either using one word in French such as ‘merde’ or ‘putain’ (which both enjoy a great popularity in France) would prove to be as pointless as unsuccessful, as such translations would not always be fluent in the TL, and/or would not have the same effect on French viewers, and as such, would not make valid subtitles. Consequently, one of the properties of the language portrayed in films – the impression that ‘fuck’ punctuates every line of dialogue – inevitably becomes diluted in the translation. In the end, there is a tension inherent in the translation of the word ‘fuck’: while it is tempting to translate it using always the same word in French in order to convey the omnipresence of one particular word and simulate the prosodic quality of its repeated use by characters on screen, the possibilities offered by the TL and the absence of a word that offers an equivalent combinational flexibility means that a range of different solutions have to be relied on that take into account the changing contexts and social functions fulfilled by the use of ‘fuck’.

As far as audiovisual translation is concerned, using a variety of solutions appears to be the preferable (and usually preferred) option. This does not have to involve a process of toning down, however: alternative translation

solutions such as the ones presented below would facilitate the communication of vulgarity, and as such are more faithful to the characterisation made in the original.

Subtitles	Suggested subtitles
Tu crois qu'il y aura des meufs à cette soirée ? (47)	Tu crois qu'il y aura de la meuf à ce bordel ? (47)
Il y aura plein de meufs, mec. C'est moi qui organise. (53)	Y aura de la pouf, j'organise ce bordel, putain. (48)

*Table 22 – Original and suggested subtitles for the opening lines of Menace II Society (the number of characters is indicated in brackets)*

In the suggested subtitles, which focus more on register than the existing subtitles, the most important changes in terms of lexicon are the use of 'bordel' in the opening line to translate 'mothafucka' and the use of the derogatory 'pouf' in the second subtitle which brings some variety (pussy/hos; meuf/pouf) and are both examples of slang. The use of 'de la' instead of 'des' in both lines also indicates that women are objectified, as do in the original the metonymical use of 'pussy' and 'gang'. In the second line, the syntactical structure has been modified, and is closer to the original dialogue (the emphatic structure 'c'est moi qui' is replaced by the simple 'j'), which still allows viewers to make the logical connection between the two premises 'I'm organising it' therefore 'there will be some girls at the party'. The added 'putain' at the end conveys the mild disappointment of the character who is upset that his friend should think that he would organise a party where there would be no girls, and contributes to translating more faithfully the overall vulgarity of the original dialogue.

The examples from *Boyz n the Hood* (table 21) as well as this short re-translation reveals that what appears to be a form of reluctance to translate insults and swearwords in subtitles can be evaded, at least in some cases, without necessarily taking up more space.

#### *Through syntax/phonology*

Informality is also hinted at in the French subtitles through the use of syntactical or phonological features. Naturally, the subtitles are written, and the use of the term ‘phonological’ may not seem appropriate in this context. However, as we will see below, some features used in the subtitles are meant to imitate pronunciation, and as such have a certain phonological power.

As a preliminary remark, it is important to note that a particular syntactical or phonological feature in the SL does not necessarily have a straightforward equivalent feature in the TL: there is not one single way to translate a multiple negation into French, and multiple negations do not exist in French, and they are not a resource that the translators can use. We discussed in the previous chapter that phonological and syntactical features carry information about the social, cultural and geographical background of speakers. In this section, we will see that translators use a number of strategies to suggest the informality of the dialogues in the subtitles. In the first chapter of this thesis, I argued that one of the issues with the representation of non-standard features in writing is that writing is

essentially an inadequate way to transcribe spoken interactions (or their representations). However, the use of some non-standard features in subtitles is possible and can serve, albeit to a limited extent, just like variation in the original dialogue, as a trigger to bring to the fore certain ideas about the characters, without resorting to complex transcription techniques that would affect readability.

A number of strategies are used in the subtitles throughout the corpus to hint at the informality of the exchanges that take place: first, the negative preverbal particle ‘ne’ is often omitted; secondly, the indefinite clitic pronoun ‘il’ is often omitted; thirdly, a case of vocalic simplification through the elision of /y/ in the word ‘tu’ where ‘tu’ is followed by a word starting with a vowel is also found in a number of specific cases. Finally, there are also a limited number of cases where weak phonemes in rapid connected speech are dropped: the dropping of the sound /l/ in ‘il y a’ can be found in several of the films, whilst throughout the corpus, one example of /R/ dropping, and one of schwa dropping are also found. Looking at written subtitles, it is difficult to say whether one particular non-standard feature is syntactical (and illustrates non-standard grammar) or phonological (in that it might reflect the way a word or phrase is pronounced), which is why the two are grouped under the same heading. The tables below provide examples of all these features:

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>Youth</i> : What what? Nigga get de fuck outta here, Chuck D ain't shit. <sup>6</sup> ( <i>Clockers</i> )	Déconne pas. Chuck D est pas si mal.
2- <i>Cyrus</i> : I don't say nothin to nobody. ( <i>Jungle Fever</i> )	Je dis rien à personne.
3- <i>Sidney</i> : Yo' motha ain't no astronaut. ( <i>White Men Can't Jump</i> )	Ta mère est pas astronaute
4- <i>God's wife</i> : Don't be callin mah baby no bitch! ( <i>In Too Deep</i> )	La traite pas de mule.
5- <i>Gee Money</i> : Man, dey ain't comin back for de cocaine, dey came back for base! ( <i>New Jack City</i> )	Ils sont pas revenus pour la cocaïne. Mais pour cette dope.
6- <i>Doughboy</i> : Ah ain't no criminal. ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )	Je suis pas un criminel.
7- <i>Mookie</i> : Da Mayor ain't no azu pep. ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )	Le Maire est pas un azu pep.
8- <i>Mike</i> : Y'all don't mind Slim. ( <i>The Wood</i> )	Faites pas gaffe à Slim.
9- <i>O-Dog</i> : Nigga I can't believe dis. ( <i>Menace II Society</i> )	J'y crois pas.
10- <i>Evan Jr.</i> : Yo dawg, ah ain't goin'. ( <i>Get on the Bus</i> )	Mon pote, j'y vais pas.

Table 23 – Examples of omission of negative preverbal particle 'ne' in the French subtitles

<sup>6</sup> Incidentally in this example, the translator seems to have misunderstood the dialogue: the speaker is reacting to one of his friends who just said that 'Chuck D is a bomb' (which is meant as a positive statement about Chuck D). In our example, the speaker actually disagrees with this, and far from meaning that Chuck D 'est pas si mal', he really means that Chuck D is rubbish.

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>Youth</i> : You gotta be hard nowadays, come on! ( <i>Clockers</i> )	Faut être un dur de nos jours !
2- <i>Latique</i> : You gots to earn yo' stripes, baby. ( <i>In Too Deep</i> )	Faut que tu les gagnes, tes gallons.
3- <i>Gee Money</i> : If I make dis, you gonna have to come out yo' pockets. ( <i>New Jack City</i> )	Si j'y arrive, va falloir racler vos poches.
4- <i>Doughboy</i> : Heard you're like mister G Q Smooth now. ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )	Paraît que t'es devenu un minet.
5- <i>ML</i> : Man, do I have to spell it out? ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )	Faut te faire un dessin ?
6- <i>Slim</i> : If he didn't wanna get married, he shouldn't have asked. ( <i>The Wood</i> )	Si Roland ne voulait pas se marier, fallait pas lui demander.
7- <i>Sidney</i> : Ho look at dat, it's late, I gotta go. Can't be late for de office. ( <i>White Men Can't Jump</i> )	Faut que je retourne au bureau.
8- <i>Wendell</i> : Gee, niggas, you mus' be crazy. ( <i>Get on the Bus</i> )	Faudrait être fou !
9- <i>O-Dog</i> : Ah want some money for dis Caine. ( <i>Menace II Society</i> )	Faudra me payer pour ça, Caine.

Table 24 – Examples of omission of indefinite clitic pronoun 'il' in the French subtitles

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>Strike</i> : You ain't supposed to be over here. Get yo' ass over dere. You're supposed to be on the lookout. ( <i>Clockers</i> )	T'es pas censé être ici.  Bouge ton cul. T'es censé faire le guet.
2- <i>Sidney</i> : You ø like all de white boys ah ever met. ( <i>White Men Can't Jump</i> )	T'es comme tous les Blancs.
3- <i>Man #1</i> : You got the good thing goin bro. ( <i>In Too Deep</i> )	T'as la belle vie, quand même.
4- <i>Scotty</i> : When you're ready to bring your sideline ass on the frontline, let me know, brotha. ( <i>New Jack City</i> )	Quand t'es prêt à risquer tes fesses de planqué, fais-moi signe !
6- <i>Sweet Dick Willie</i> : You dumb simple ass mothafucka, now where you read dat shit eh? ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )	Espèce de grand débile, où t'as lu ces conneries.
7- <i>Roland</i> : You ø crazy? ( <i>The Wood</i> )	T'es cinglé ?
8- <i>O-Dog</i> : Whatcha say 'bout mah mama? ( <i>Menace II Society</i> )	T'as dit quoi, là ?
9- <i>Evan Jr</i> : You don't like to be called dawg, right? ( <i>Get on the Bus</i> )	T'aime pas qu'on t'appelle 'mon pote' ?
10- <i>Doughboy</i> : Man, you ø stupid, don't have no sense. ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )	Ce que t'es con ! T'es vraiment nul.

Table 25 – Examples of elision of /y/ in subject pronoun) 'tu' (vocalic simplification) in the French subtitles



Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>Woman #1</i> : Ain't no good black men out there. ( <i>Jungle Fever</i> )	Y a plus de noirs qui soient bons.
2- <i>Walter</i> : You fouled me. ( <i>White Men Can't Jump</i> )	Y a faute.
3- <i>O-Dog</i> : What de fu... six mothafuckin dollars, nigga? ( <i>Menace II Society</i> )	Putain, y a que 6 dollars là-dedans.
4- <i>Kyle</i> : I ain't gon stand too many mo' o' yo' faggots. ( <i>Get on the Bus</i> )	Y en a marre de tes 'pédales'.

Table 26 – Examples of /l/ dropping in impersonal construction 'il y a' in the French subtitles

Dialogue	Subtitles
<i>Doughboy</i> : Dooky, you full o' shit. ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )	Pauv' cave.

Table 27 – Example of /R/ dropping in the French subtitles

Dialogue	Subtitles
<i>Gator</i> : Yo, babe bro! Cyrus! ( <i>Jungle Fever</i> )	Yo, p'tit frère ! Cyrus !

Table 28 – Example of schwa dropping in the French subtitles

The first three of these features are the ones that are found the most frequently in the subtitles of the films in the corpus.<sup>7</sup> They illustrate the fact that speech can be evoked through the use of written forms. A study by Pohl (1975) shows that there is a correlation between the use of preverbal particle 'ne' and formal vs informal language, the use of 'ne' being often associated to a lesser or greater extent with formal speech situations.<sup>8</sup> The

<sup>7</sup> More examples of these three features can be found in the appendix section, tables A4, A5 and A6.

<sup>8</sup> A number of studies (Armstrong (2002), Armstrong & Smith (2002), Ashby (1976, 1981, 2001), Coveney (1998), Dewaele (2004), Hansen & Malderez (2004), Moreau (1986), Sankoff & Vincent (1977) and van Compernelle (2008a)) have demonstrated that the use of two-particle verbal negation has lost ground to single-particle negation (using only 'pas' and deleting 'ne') in conversational French. Other studies also reveal that the retention or omission of 'ne' is affected by other criteria such as socio-stylistic distribution (Armstrong (2002)) while patterns of use may differ for speakers of French as a foreign

omissions of the indefinite clitic pronoun ‘il’ in constructions like ‘il y a’ is also very common, as illustrated in various studies including van Compernelle & Williams (2007) and van Compernelle (2008a). While the correlation between informality of situation and omission of ‘il’ is strongly established in these two studies, the authors also note that this phenomenon is also common in ‘electronic French’ such as online chat. As far as vocalic simplification is concerned, the elision of the sound /y/ in the subject pronoun ‘tu’ before a verb starting with a vowel is very common, both in spoken speech and in electronic environments (van Compernelle, 2008b). More marginally, as can be seen in tables 26, 27 and 28, the dropping of weak sounds can also be illustrated in writing, but are much rarer, with only one case of /R/ dropping (in *Boyz n the Hood*) and one case of schwa dropping (in *Jungle Fever*). In both cases, the weak sounds in ‘pauvre’ and ‘petit’ are replaced by an apostrophe, which is rather conventional. In comparison, spelling in electronic French is much freer.

The three main features are used in the subtitles of each film, with the exception of *Jungle Fever* where the subtitles do not feature omissions of indefinite clitic pronoun ‘il’. The table below recaps the situation (‘X’ means that the feature is used consistently throughout a particular film; ‘o’ means that the feature can be found in a particular film but the standard form can also be found, whilst U means that the feature is not used in a particular film).

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language (Dewaele & Regan (2002)). Both studies show that there is some level of correlation between the retention/omission of ‘ne’ and familiarity/formality.

<b>Films</b>	<b>Omission of 'ne'</b>	<b>Omission of 'il'</b>	<b>Vocalic simplification with 'tu'</b>
<i>Do the Right Thing</i>	o	X	X
<i>New Jack City</i>	X	X	X
<i>Jungle Fever</i>	X	U	X
<i>Boyz n the Hood</i>	X	X	X
<i>White Men Can't Jump</i>	X	X	X
<i>Menace II Society</i>	X	X	X
<i>Clockers</i>	X	X	X
<i>Get on the Bus</i>	o	o	X
<i>In Too Deep</i>	X	X	X
<i>The Wood</i>	o	o	o

Table 29 – The use of three features in the subtitles of films of the corpus

Occasionally, and throughout the corpus, the structure of questions is affected in the subtitles, and there is no inversion of the subject and verb. Again, this indicates a certain informality. What the above tables (23 through to 28) indicate is that there are actually some strategies that can be and have been used consistently in the French subtitles to portray in writing a spoken sentence construction or to reflect the informality of the exchanges in the films of the corpus. A comparison between the subtitles and the dialogues reveal that as far as table 23 is concerned, the omission of 'ne' in the subtitles does not actually correspond to one particular feature in the original. The same is true of tables 24 to 28, and no direct correspondence can be established between the use of a feature in the subtitles and the use of one particular feature in the dialogue.

One of the first things that these tables reveal is that translators have relied on a very finite set of features to portray informality in the subtitles. This is a direct consequence of the high level of diamesic variation in French, discussed in Chapter One, whereby the written form in French has become

so different to the spoken one that its power to portray features of oral speech is limited. In fact, the features used by the translators are often used in writing in French, and actually, the fact that they are used in writing indicates that they are common and recognisable. For instance, omissions (of ‘ne’ or ‘il’) are easy enough to put in writing, while the vocalic simplification of ‘tu’, represented in writing as a ‘t’ followed by an apostrophe has become very conventional. On the other hand, the dropping of weak sounds can be more problematic – and it is perhaps why it is also used in subtitles to far lesser extent. In the subtitles, it takes the form of an apostrophe that takes the place of a letter or cluster of letters, as in ‘p’tit’ or ‘pauv’’. In rapid (spoken) speech, this phenomenon is very frequent, to the point that some forms – such as ‘p’tit’ and ‘pauv’’ – have become widely used even in writing. The adjective ‘petit’ spelt ‘p’tit’ is used by several famous brands: among others, ‘P’tit Louis’ is a brand of cheese (marketed for children) and ‘P’tit Loup’ is the name of a magazine for children. ‘Pauv’’ has also been used in various contexts, including (in)famously in 2008 by French President Nicolas Sarkozy who said ‘Casse-toi, pauv’ con!’ to a man who refused to shake his hand. His outburst was widely reported in printed media with the spelling ‘pauv’’ (occasionally ‘pov’’), to the point that it now has its very own wikipedia page.<sup>9</sup> The case of /l/ dropping is slightly different: in rapid speech, ‘il y a’ and ‘il y en a’ are often pronounced [i:ja], [ija] or even simply [ja], rather than [ilija]. The written form used in the subtitles of all the films of the corpus ‘y a’ shows that it is conventional enough for all translators to use it in the same way

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<sup>9</sup> [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casse-toi,\\_pauv%27\\_con\\_](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casse-toi,_pauv%27_con_)! [accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2011].

(essentially by omitting impersonal pronoun 'il' in writing). All these forms are cases of eye dialect, which was discussed in the first chapter of this thesis: while they mean nothing phonetically, they act like visual signals to readers. In conclusion then, the portrayal of informality in the French subtitles is based on forms that are in fact quite commonly found in writing. Far from pushing the boundaries of writing, the translators play with whatever little leeway the French language allows them. While translators can indeed evoke informality with the forms described above, it should be noted that this is only possible insofar as these forms already exist in writing. The portrayal of informality then relies exclusively – and perhaps paradoxically – in the French subtitles on forms that have been codified in writing, forms that are recognisable enough not to pose problems of readability. The analysis I have made of the portrayal of informality in subtitles suggests that the boundaries between spoken and written French can certainly be blurred, at least to some extent. A growing number of studies on electronic French are also bridging the gap by illustrating the permeability between spoken and written French.

However, acceptability and prescription are still a big deterrent to using a larger number of forms evocative of spoken speech in subtitles. The French linguist Jacques Anis makes a very pertinent point about the status of published texts and argues that it is difficult to establish whether 'oralité' in writing (in electronic French) is due to contagion ('contamination', *sic*) or to the deliberate implementation of oral features in writing:

Il faut sans doute se méfier de la vue étroite et idéalisée que l'on a en général de l'écrit, identifié au texte publié, élaboré dans la durée et

corrigé par des professionnels. Il est sans doute difficile de trancher entre une influence de l'oral sur l'écrit et un rapprochement déterminé par l'élargissement du domaine d'usage de l'écrit. De plus, le partage entre la contamination spontanée et le recours intentionnel à des effets d'oralité est pratiquement impossible à effectuer. (Anis, 1999:55)

Subtitles are indeed published and checked by professionals, and the status of the written variety, widely governed by prescriptivism, appears to be largely upheld. As electronic French develops and becomes more widespread, it will be interesting to see whether it becomes codified in writing in the future, and if some of its features start being used in subtitles, potentially reshaping diamesic variation in France.

#### *Informality and other language varieties*

While the features mentioned above are first and foremost hinting at the familiarity or informality of the AAVE exchanges, in some of the films of the corpus, other language varieties are occasionally portrayed. American Italians feature prominently in *Do the Right Thing*, *New Jack City* and *Jungle Fever*, and police officers (usually white, and using a lot of police slang) also play important parts in *New Jack City*, *Clockers* and *In Too Deep*. Finally, in *White Men Can't Jump*, Billy, a white character, speaks very informally. In the corpus, there are also characters who speak with relatively few non-standard features, and it is interesting, for the sake of comparison and cultural relativism, to look at the way other language varieties are subtitled.

In *Do the Right Thing*, the pizzeria which is the rallying point of the neighbourhood is owned by Sal, an American Italian and his two sons,

Vito and Pino. The three characters speak with an Italian accent, and occasionally use Italian words, and this is illustrated in the French subtitles through the use of the features mentioned above: omission of preverbal particle 'ne', of clitic pronoun 'il', and vocalic simplification of 'tu + verb beginning with a vowel'. This is also the case in *Jungle Fever*, in which Angela's brothers and father live in Bensonhurst, a Brooklyn neighbourhood sometimes referred to as 'Little Italy' and also speak with an Italian accent. Finally, in *New Jack City*, the local mafia, which is competing against Nino and his crew for the control of the city, consists of a group of American Italians who also speak with Italian accents and occasionally use Italian words. They do not have many lines in the film, but when they do, the preverbal particle 'ne' is omitted in the French subtitles.

Police officers, throughout the corpus, also speak very informally amongst themselves as well as to other characters, and make occasional use of police jargon. Their informality is reflected in the subtitles by the fact that they use 'tu' as opposed to 'vous' whenever they address each other or other characters whilst on the job. In *Clockers* and *In Too Deep*, in the subtitles for the police officers and detectives, preverbal particles 'ne' are also omitted, and there are also cases of vocalic simplifications with 'tu', which reflect their informality.

Finally, in *White Men Can't Jump*, Billy also speaks very informally, and is often the one bragging, boasting, and insulting other players on the court

or shouting at them. This is again reflected in the subtitles, as the three features – omission of preverbal particle ‘ne’, omission of clitic pronoun ‘il’ and vocalic simplification with ‘tu’ – are all used consistently.

In some of the films, there are also characters (whether African American or not) who speak using relatively standard pronunciation and syntax. While these characters are comparatively very few, their case is worth mentioning here briefly: in *Do the Right Thing*, Jade (Mookie’s sister) speaks a relatively neutral form of English, and the preverbal particle ‘ne’ is not omitted in the subtitles, except in one scene when she has an argument with Mookie and during which all preverbal particles ‘ne’ are omitted.<sup>10</sup> The same can be observed in *Jungle Fever*, where Gator and Flipper’s parents are portrayed as devout Christians and are always very formal. They do not use features of AAVE, and this is reflected in the subtitles by formal lexicon and formal syntax, and the preverbal particle ‘ne’ is never omitted in the French subtitles. In a scene from *Menace II Society*, A-Wax, an African American young adult from Caine and O-Dog’s crew, is portrayed talking on his doorstep to Nick, a white male who has come to see A-Wax to ask him to find a particular car for him and steal it. A-Wax is very aggressive with him, and does not display any signs that he is accommodating his way of speaking to Nick, while Nick, on the contrary, looks rather scared of A-Wax and is extremely respectful: he only

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<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, she is also one of the only peaceful characters, and voices her concern for the neighbourhood and for the African American community. She refuses to boycott Sal’s pizzeria, and instead tells Buggin Out he should ‘concentrate [his] energy on something more positive for the community’. The other features, omission of clitic pronoun ‘il’ and vocalic simplification are not discussed because they are not used in the French subtitles by this particular character.



speaks when prompted to by A-Wax, and keeps his head low throughout the whole scene, only looking at A-Wax very occasionally. This is again reflected in the subtitles beyond the lexical level: in the French subtitles, ‘ne’ are systematically omitted for A-Wax and never for Nick, and the vocalic simplification of ‘tu + verb beginning with a vowel’ is used to subtitle A-Wax, but not Nick.

Important conclusions can be drawn from these observations: first, in the vast majority of cases, swearwords and insults are toned down, or even are not translated. This impacts on characterisation, the extreme vulgarity of some lines being often omitted to privilege the denotative meaning of the dialogue. French viewers therefore do not benefit from the same input as the viewers in the SL, unless they are capable of grasping some of the original dialogue, whilst reading the subtitles. However, we have also seen that translators can convey vulgarity effectively, as in some passages of *Boyz n the Hood*, or *New Jack City*. The consistency of such strategies appears difficult to maintain however, and we can only assume that this is due to the pressure of the conventions of writing, which may prevent the use of more ‘spoken’ or ‘vernacular’ features in subtitles, as well as the reduction constraint. Considering that swearwords and insults are such an important feature of the way of speaking of some African American characters portrayed in films, the level of toning down is certainly not desirable, and can sometimes be superseded. Translations which convey the register and the broad implications of vulgarity depend on a close understanding of the functions of insults.

Regarding syntactical and phonological features, it seems fair to say that the features I have described in the above section are used in the subtitles to reflect informality, more than anything else. Their use is not restricted to speakers of AAVE, and, following from this, the use of these features alone in the subtitles is not sufficient to distinguish between speakers of AAVE and general informality. While they certainly contribute to conveying the tone of the exchanges portrayed on screen, their use in the translation of the lines of speakers of AAVE, police officers and Italian Americans alike means that they do not convey specific connotations beyond indicating informality. Therefore, there is a homogenisation of variation in the subtitles: linguistically speaking, from the point of view of syntax and phonology, nothing distinguishes speakers of different varieties in the subtitles. While the presence/absence of the features described above appears to be a good indication of whether a speaker uses informal/formal language, it by no means gives information related to speakers' social and ethnic backgrounds. Naturally, informality is not a prerogative of AAVE, and this means that translators have to rely on other devices if specific information about speakers is to be conveyed via the subtitles.

### ***Reflection of AAVE-specific practices***

It is therefore interesting to look at the way practices that are specific to AAVE are translated in the French subtitles. First, I will provide an analysis of the subtitles of terms of address and reference. Then, I will

examine how insults, whether actual or ritual are dealt with in the subtitles, and finally, I will explore the use of *verlan* in the corpus.

### *Niggas, Brothas and Bitches*

The examination of the translation of items of lexicon which African American characters use in a specific way, such as ‘nigga’, ‘brotha’ or other terms of reference as well as insults, is particularly revealing. Such terms are predominantly used in the films by African American characters to address one another or to talk about other African Americans, and they are dealt with in very different ways in the subtitles. In the vast majority of cases, they are quite simply not translated. The example of the use of ‘nigga’ in *Menace II Society* is particularly striking, both with regard to omissions and to variety of translation solutions, as illustrated in the table below.

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>Caine</i> : Hey hey nigga, is it gonna be some pussy at dis motherfucka?	Tu crois qu'il y aura des meufs à cette soirée ?
[...]	[...]
<i>Caine</i> : Nigga hurry up! Come on man, let's raise up man, damn!	Allez, on se casse.
<i>O-Dog</i> : Nigga, I can't believe dis! Nigga, ah thought ah told you to open de cash regista? How do you open dis shit? What de fu... six mothafuckin dollars, nigga?	Putain, j'y crois pas ! Je t'ai dit de vider la caisse.
2- <i>Poker player</i> : I ain't yo' bitch, nigga.	Putain, y a que 6 dollars là dedans.
3- <i>A-Wax</i> : Hey nigga, watch me break dese mothafuckas right here.	Je suis pas ta gonzesse.
4- <i>O-Dog</i> : Man, you gettin down, nigga.	Regarde bien, je vais tous les plumer.
5- <i>O-Dog</i> : Hey you know what nigga? You actin like a little bitch right now.	Tu assures, mon pote.
6- <i>A-Wax</i> : Punk ass nigga! Come on niggas!	Tu sais quoi ? Tu paniques comme une fiotte.
7- <i>Stacy</i> : Why don't you come to Kansas wid us?	Pauvre con ! Allez, les gars !
<i>Caine</i> : What, nigga?	Tu veux venir au Kansas avec nous ?
<i>Sharif</i> : Hey man, y'all need to stop callin each other nigga, that's what y'all need to stop doin.	Quoi, bâtard ?
<i>Stacy</i> : Anyway, nigga, I say you should come to Kansas wid us.	Arrêtez de vous insulter. Je vous jure, faut arrêter.
	Allez, bâtard, viens avec nous au Kansas.

*Table 30 – Examples of the use of the word 'nigga' in Menace II Society (examples are presented in chronological order of appearance in the film)*

As these examples show, the word 'nigga' is not translated literally (using 'nègre' or 'négro' for instance): either it is not translated at all, or it is

translated as a term of reference depending on context. It is used five times throughout example 1 (which are the opening lines of the film, already cited in a previous section) and finds no direct equivalent in the subtitles. This is also the case in examples 2, 3 and 5. In example 4, O-Dog is telling Caine that he is happy that Caine has agreed to punish the people who killed his cousin Harold in the previous scene, and demonstrates his approval by telling Caine that he is 'gettin down'. In this example, 'nigga' appears to be translated as 'mon pote'. Example 6 is also very striking in that 'nigga' is used once positively and once negatively (qualified by the derogatory 'punk ass'), and this is reflected in the translation, although it means that 'nigga' has to be translated using different words: 'punk ass nigga' is translated as 'pauvre con', before 'niggas' is translated as 'les gars'. Part of the problem stems from the fact that 'nigga' can mean very different things and be used in a variety of contexts. What could be construed as a lack of consistency from the translators may even be preferable, and each translation of the word 'nigga' has to be assessed in its own right. In examples 1 through to 6, 'nigga' is used as a term of address, and it is clear from the subtitles that when translated, the expressive function of 'nigga' – whether it expresses positive or negative feelings – has been the focus of the translators. Finally, example 7 raises an interesting issue: for Sharif's metalinguistic comment to make sense, 'nigga' has to be translated. Rather than translating 'nigga' literally as 'nègre' or 'négro' (the closest lexical and historical equivalent), the translators operate a shift of meaning in the translation: 'you need to stop callin each other nigga' becomes 'arrêtez de vous insulter' in the subtitles.

This is problematic insofar as we have shown above that ‘nigga’ is not necessarily used as an insult. Sharif is the most politically involved of the group – he is often talking about Farrakhan and the way African Americans are treated in the United States, and in his line, he calls for the end of the insidious self-deprecation through the use of the word ‘nigga’ which he may consider derogatory or dated, although he does not explicitly say so.<sup>11</sup> The translation reflects the deprecatory element of the original, but does not reflect the politically contentious meaning that the use of the word ‘nigga’ involves. The other problem is that throughout this particular scene, ‘nigga’ is translated consistently (which as we have seen is not the case before) as ‘bâtard’. In the subtitles, the protagonists have not been insulting each other before this scene, as ‘nigga’ is mostly not translated, or else is translated in positive terms, and Sharif’s line in French does not benefit from as much build-up as it does in the original dialogue. His political statement about what was primarily a racial slur that has been recycled by some African Americans is neutralised in the subtitles.<sup>12</sup>

The case of *Menace II Society* is not isolated: in all the films where the word ‘nigga’ is used extensively (*Boyz n the Hood*, *The Wood*, *Clockers*), the word is either not translated at all, or when it is translated the

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<sup>11</sup> Incidentally, in the film *Crash* (2004), one of the characters played by rapper Ludacris, who is a small-time crook, reflects on the fact that African Americans often call each other ‘nigga’, and points out the oddness of such a practice, especially in rap music: ‘Listen to it! “nigga-dis, nigga-dat”. You think white people walk around calling each other honkies? “Hey honky, how’s business?” “Doing great, cracker, we’re diversifying”’. This is also very ironic, as being a rapper himself off screen, Ludacris never fails to use the word in the lyrics of his songs. As a matter of fact, the character he impersonates in *Crash* uses that word extensively as well.

<sup>12</sup> Randall Kennedy’s monograph *Nigger: the Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* provides in-depth insight unto the history of the word ‘nigger’ and the meanings it has taken today.

translation reflects the relationship between two characters, or the mood of the speaker, but not the self-deprecatory potential that was evoked by Sharif in example 7 in the previous table. Further examples of these types of translation solution are given in the table below.

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>Man #1</i> : Oh fuck dat, we shoulda let dese niggas have it.	Putain ! On aurait dû les assaisonner.
<i>Man #2</i> : Jus' pull up, jus' pull up. <i>Man #1</i> : Get yo' shit ready, nigga.	- Arrête-toi, arrête. - Sors ton flingue.
<i>Man #2</i> : Damn!	Merde !
<i>Man #1</i> : Dese niggas right here? All right, hold on, get ready, get ready.	Eux, là ? Attends. Tiens-toi prêt.
<i>Man #2</i> : Look out nigga! ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )	Fait gaffe, mec ! Alors, pédé ?
2- <i>Doughboy</i> : Move, nigga, move, punk! ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )	Pousse-toi, mec Allez dégage, pédé.
3- <i>Woman #1</i> : Nigga, fuck you! ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )	Va te faire foutre.
4- <i>Slim</i> : So where de fuck is dat nigga? ( <i>The Wood</i> )	Où est passé cet enfoiré ?
5- <i>Stacey</i> : You mus' be goin to dat dance, uh? Nigga, I remember dem mothafuckin dance. ( <i>The Wood</i> )	Vous devez aller à cette teuf, non ? Je me rappelle de ces teufs.
6- <i>Stacey</i> : You niggas is wastin time, come on! ( <i>The Wood</i> )	Vous perdez du temps. Venez !
7- <i>Errol</i> : Don't be lookin at me in the eye, nigga, or yo' ass will be on dis mural too. ( <i>Clockers</i> )	Me regarde pas comme ça. Ou t'auras le cul peint sur le mur.
8- <i>Rodney</i> : Nigga look bad, boy. ( <i>Clockers</i> )	Il a l'air méchant, ce black.
9- <i>Strike</i> : I keeps dis for all dem ill	Je le garde contre

niggas out dere. ( <i>Clockers</i> )	tous les malades du quartier.
10- <i>Youth</i> : First of all, first of all, ah know niggas who ain't slappin bitches up. They definitely ain't takin no pussy. Niggas don't be shootin shit up, niggas ain't never been in jail for murder, how de fuck dem niggas hard? ( <i>Clockers</i> )	Je connais des blacks qui cognent pas leur gonzesse et qui baisent pas.  Des Blacks qui se shootent pas, qui ont pas fait de taule.  Peuvent pas être des durs.
11- <i>Youth</i> : Dem niggers around de corna tripped out man. ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )	Les keublas du coin de la rue m'ont baisé.

Table 31 – Further examples of the subtitling of the word 'nigga' into French

In all the above examples, 'nigga' is either not translated or is translated using a pronoun (the first three times in example 1, and in examples 3, 5, 6, 7 and 9). Twice it is translated as 'mec' (last occurrence in example 1 and in example 3), which is a fairly neutral albeit informal term, and once as 'black' (examples 8 and 10).<sup>13</sup> This confirms the idea that the emphasis for the translator was on the expressive function or referential function of the original dialogue, with the result that the political outcome and the complexity of the use of 'nigga' in the context of African America undergoes a dilution in the process of translation.

To some extent, this dilution can be argued to be inevitable, since there is no word in French that carries the same historical and political implications as 'nigga'. 'Nègre' and 'négro', the closest etymological equivalent, have different connotations in French, and have strong colonial undertones. whilst the use of 'nègre' can, in some very limited contexts, be considered

<sup>13</sup> In example 11, translators have used 'keublas' which is *verlan* for 'black'. *Verlan* and the implications of its use in translation are discussed at the end of this chapter.



socially acceptable ('art nègre', 'nègre en chemise'), it is generally considered offensive. People in their 70s or over might consider the use of 'nègre' neutral, and 'un nègre' is also commonly used to refer to a ghost writer. According to the CNRTL, 'actuellement, *nègre* semble en voie de perdre [son] caractère péjoratif, probablement en raison de la valorisation des cultures du monde noir'.<sup>14</sup> 'Négro' however is generally considered obsolete and very offensive although in an interesting twist, and whilst this has not been discussed on an academic level to my knowledge, it is documented in forums on language that some people of African descent in France have started using the word 'négro' as a term of address, when talking to other people of African descent. Whilst such a use would bring the French word 'négro' closer to 'nigger' in terms of contexts of use (and might in fact be inspired by it), more investigation ought to be carried out before further conclusions can be drawn.

In the corpus, the word 'nigga' is only interpreted twice as a racial slur throughout the corpus, in addition to Sharif's metalinguistic comment quoted above. The reason why it is so rarely interpreted as insulting or derogatory is because it is mostly used by African Americans among themselves. In these two cases, 'nigga' is translated more literally, as in the table below:

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.cnrtl.fr> [accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2011].

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>Sal</i> : You black cock-sucker! I'll fucking tear you a fucking nigger ass! <i>Punchy</i> : Oh, we ø niggas now? We ø niggas now. ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )	Enculé de Noir ! Je vais te défoncer Ton cul de nègre !  On est des nègres, maintenant ? On est des nègres.
2- <i>Police officer</i> : Be one less nigga out here we have to worry about. ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )	Ça nous ferait un négro de moins à contrôler.

*Table 32 – Examples of the use of the word ‘nigga’ as an insult and French subtitles*

Throughout the corpus, non-African Americans do not use the word ‘nigger’, with the exception of example 1. Sal has been angered by Radio Raheem who walked into Sal’s pizzeria playing loud music on his stereo, and Sal called him a nigger, thus triggering a very strong reaction from other African Americans who were eating in the pizzeria, including Punchy. In example 2, an African American police officer demonstrates that he is essentially a hater of African Americans, and later assaults the main protagonist, Tre. It is not particularly clear why translators have used ‘nègre’ in one case and ‘négro’ in another. This lack of consistency probably reflects that different people can display slightly different attitudes to the two words.

Even more interesting is the case of *Get on the Bus*. In the film, only one character uses the word ‘nigga’. The bus is on a journey from California to Washington DC, and during a stop in Memphis, the group picks up an African American car dealer named Wendell. As soon as he is on the bus, Wendell, who wears a suit and smokes cigars and wants to go to Washington, explains that he believes that any African American person

(to whom he consistently refers as ‘niggas’) who does not succeed in today’s United States is just lazy. His use of the word ‘nigga’ is later questioned by Jeremiah, the elder of the bus passengers: ‘When you use that word that way, are you talking about you too, or just about the rest of us? Seems like that’s the only word you know.’ After apologising, Wendell starts a soliloquy, which is presented in the table below:

Dialogue	Subtitles
<p><i>Wendell:</i> <b>Niggas</b> love to talk ‘bout what they gon do. Ah ma do dis, ah ma do dat. <b>Niggas</b> ain’t gonna do a goddam thing.</p> <p>[...]</p> <p><b>Niggas</b> and cars, cars and <b>niggas</b>, <b>niggas</b> need cars like cars need <b>niggas</b>, I gotta make me some money, you think ah ma miss out on all that networkin? Gee <b>nigga</b> you mus’ be crazy. I got a joke for you <b>nigga</b>: what do you get when you cross a million lesbians and the Million Men March? Two million mothafuckas who don’t do dick. (he laughs) You <b>niggas</b> are summin else. (he points at other passengers) <b>nigga, nigga, nigga, nigga, nigga</b>, all you <b>niggas</b>.</p>	<p>Les négros adorent parler de leurs projets.</p> <p>‘Je vais faire ci...’</p> <p>Mais ils en foutent pas une.</p> <p>[...]</p> <p>Le négro et la voiture...</p> <p>L’un ne va pas sans l’autre.</p> <p>Si je veux gagner du fric, je peux pas rater ça.</p> <p>Faudrait être fou !</p> <p>J’en ai une bonne.</p> <p>Qu’obtient-on en croisant Un million de lesbiennes</p> <p>Et la Marche D’un Million d’Hommes ?</p> <p>Deux millions d’entubés qui se sont pas fait mettre !</p> <p>Vous êtes incroyables !</p> <p>Négro, négro, négro ! Tous des négros !</p>

*Table 33 – Wendell’s soliloquy and subtitles*

Someone on the bus then asks: ‘Hey Wendell, ah got a joke fo’ you! What they call a black man with a Lexus dealership? Nigga!’ Then there is a cut, and viewers can see Wendell being thrown out of the bus. Throughout the scene, the word ‘nigga’ is either not subtitled or it is subtitled ‘négro’. It appears that because it is construed as a derogatory comment on African Americans, presenting them as lazy loudmouths, the use of ‘négro’ in the subtitles is justified. In other words, the referential function of the word ‘nigga’ as it is used here by Wendell is central: Wendell is referring to all the African Americans on the bus. Whilst ‘noir’ would have been denotationally correct in the subtitles, the associations that Wendell makes with negative stereotypes of laziness, and passivity (‘Ah ma do dis, ah ma do dat. Niggas ain’t gonna do a goddam thing’)<sup>15</sup> validates the use of ‘négro’ in this context.

To sum up, then, the use of ‘nigga’ in film dialogue is neutralised in an overwhelming majority of cases. Only when used as a racial slur is it translated literally as ‘négro’ or ‘nègre’. However, Sharif’s comment in *Menace II Society* and the strong reaction against Wendell in *Get on the Bus* indicate clearly that the use of this word by African Americans cannot be apolitical. The examination of the subtitles demonstrates that the function of ‘nigga’ and its contexts of use tend to correlate with the way it is translated: when used as a term of address in an African American peer group, ‘nigga’ is sometimes translated using terms with positive connotations. However, when it stands for African Americans collectively,

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<sup>15</sup> We note in passing that this line is almost the exact same line as Sweet Dick Willy’s in *Do the Right Thing*: ‘Ah gon do dis, ah gon do dat. You ain’t gon do a goddam thing but sit yo’ mucky ass on dat corna’.

it is usually translated as ‘nègre’ or ‘négro’ only when deemed to have deprecatory undertones. If deemed to be referring to African Americans in a neutral way, more generic terms such as ‘Black’ or ‘noir’ are preferred. The meaning of the word ‘nigga’ is so context-related and so fluid that it prevents the use of one single term in the TL such as ‘négro’ or ‘nègre’. The different functions of the word ‘nigga’ when used by African Americans mean that a variety of words have to be used by translators. To conclude, the strategies used to translate ‘nigga’ are appropriate to individual instances of language use (translating as ‘négro’ or ‘nègre’ more consistently would be problematic since these two words do not have the same historical and political connotations) but there is nevertheless a dilution of AAVE linguistic variety portrayal, since in the vast majority of cases, ‘nigga’ is not translated. Further examples of the translation of ‘nigga’ can be found in table A1 in the appendix of the thesis and corroborate the findings presented in this section.

In the films, characters portrayed as speakers of AAVE also use the word ‘brotha’ as a term of address or reference, or, as for ‘nigga’, as a way to refer to the African American community. Interestingly, the word ‘brotha’ meets a somewhat similar fate in translation in all the films of the corpus, and its translation is in the vast majority of cases driven by its function in each particular line, as can be seen in the table below.

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>Furious</i> : Ah'd just be contributin to killin anotha brotha. ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )	J'aurais tué un des nôtres.
2- <i>Buggin Out</i> : Yo Mook! Mookie! How come ain't no brothas up on de wall? ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )	Mookie ! Y a pas de Noirs sur le mur ?
3- <i>Mike</i> : See see, you wouldn't even know anythin 'bout that since all the brothas ask you. ( <i>The Wood</i> )	Toi, tout le monde t'invite...
4- <i>Sharif</i> : It's cold out here, brotha. ( <i>Menace II Society</i> )	Ça caille dehors, mon gars.
5- <i>Strike</i> : De brotha is bad peoples. ( <i>Clockers</i> )	Ce type, c'est un vicieux.
6- <i>Sidney</i> : You have to give me a brotha. ( <i>White Men Can't Jump</i> )	Je veux un Black.
7- <i>Man #1</i> : It mus' be pretty important, right? Stoppin a brotha from gettin his heat on. ( <i>In Too Deep</i> )	Pour interrompre un mec en plein repas...

Table 34 – Examples of the subtitling of the word 'brotha'

The sample provided here, which is by no means exhaustive, reflects the fact that in the overwhelming majority of cases (the exception here is again *Get on the Bus*, where 'brotha' is consistently translated as 'frère'), the word 'brotha' is often neutralised, and subtitled in French using a more general term. More examples that corroborate this are provided in appendix table A2. Given that the word 'brotha' is used by African Americans to talk specifically about African Americans, the use of 'Noir' or 'Black' in the subtitles arguably constitutes a case of the translation of the denotative meaning of 'brotha', but does not quite capture its restrictions of use, as is the case in examples 2 and 6. In example 1, 'anotha brotha' is translated as 'un des nôtres' and it is fairly clear from the context that it means 'another

African American’, since in a preceding scene, Furious explained to Tre that African Americans should support – and not shoot – each other. In example 3, the translation ‘tout le monde’ is not denotationally accurate (‘brothas’ in the original stands for ‘all the African Americans’ rather than just ‘everybody’), and again the restrictive meaning of ‘brotha’ is not conveyed. In examples 4, 5 and 7, generic solutions have been found using ‘gars’, ‘type’ and ‘mec’. They could be backtranslated in English as ‘guy’ or ‘bloke’, and do not carry any sense of ethnicity in the way ‘brotha’ does. A scene from *Boyz n the Hood* epitomises the issue at stake here: there has just been a burglary in Tre’s father’s house. Tre’s father, Furious, who is African American, heard the burglar (also African American) and fired two shots towards him, but the burglar got away unharmed. Tre’s father then called the police, who took an hour to get there, while Tre and his father waited outside the house. Of the two policemen, one is white and seems very cooperative and helpful, while the other is African American and obnoxious. Because nothing was taken during the burglary, the latter is happy that there is ‘no need to make out a report’. He also complains that Tre’s father missed the burglar when he shot, and the conversation goes as follows:

Dialogue	Subtitles
<p><i>Police officer:</i> You know it's too bad you didn't get him. Be one less nigga out in de street we have to worry about. Hey little man, how you doin?</p> <p><i>Furious:</i> Go on in the house, Tre, go on.</p> <p><i>Police officer:</i> Summin wrong?</p> <p><i>Furious:</i> Summin wrong? Yeah. It's jus' too bad you don't know what it is... brotha.</p>	<p>Dommage que tu l'aies loupé.</p> <p>Ça nous ferait un négro de moins à contrôler.</p> <p>Salut, petit. Ça va ?</p> <p>Rentre à la maison, allez.</p> <p>- Y a un problème ?</p> <p>- Un problème ? Oui.</p> <p>Malheureusement, t'as pas idée... mon pote.</p>

*Table 35 – Scene from Boyz n the Hood and subtitles*

The African American policeman's use of the word 'nigga' is clearly very derogatory in this context ('Be one less nigga out in the streets we have to worry about', already mentioned in table 32).<sup>16</sup> This comes right after a scene in which Furious explains to Tre that black people should not kill other black people, so the policeman is essentially contradicting him when he says that it is 'too bad you missed him'. Furious' expression reveals that he does not like the policeman and he reacts to the policeman greeting Tre by asking Tre to get back inside the house. The scene ends with Furious calling the police officer 'brotha', thus ironically reminding the police officer that he himself is a black man and that they both belong to the same category of people, in spite of the police officer's behaviour and opinion of black-on-black crime. The use of 'mon pote' in the French translation, although capturing the irony of the original, does not send the strong message that 'brotha' does. If anything, a French audience might believe

<sup>16</sup> He puts a certain emphasis on the word 'nigga' as he mouths it, indicating a certain contempt for African Americans, and seemingly complaining that they are trouble-makers.



that calling a policeman ‘pal’ (loose backtranslation of ‘pote’) could get one in trouble.

Finally, as already explained in Chapter Three, the most common word used by characters in films to insult women – or designate them in an insulting way – is ‘bitch’. Again, as for ‘nigga’, ‘bitch’ can have many different meanings and/or connotations, as can be seen from the examples below.

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>Junior</i> : (trading ritual insults with another male basket ball player) Ah told your mama to act her age and de bitch dropped dead ( <i>White Men Can't Jump</i> )	Si on lui parle de son âge, elle clamse.
2- <i>Youth</i> : (to his male friends, talking about women) First of all, first of all, ah know niggas who ain't slappin bitches up. They definitely ain't takin no pussy. ( <i>Clockers</i> )	Je connais des blacks qui cognent pas leur gonzesse et qui baisent pas.
3- <i>Doughboy</i> : (to Dook, talking about a hypothetical woman) Dooky, you full o' shit. No bitch gonna give yo' ugly ass no pussy. ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )	Pauv' cave. Pas une meuf te filerait sa chatte.
4- <i>Doughboy</i> : (to a male friend who is questioning his reading ability) Ah ain't no criminal, ah can read, bitch. ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )	Je suis pas un criminel. Je sais lire, connard.
5- <i>Sheryl</i> : (inquiring to Doughboy in front of a group of other African American characters, male and female) Why every time you talk about a female, you gotta say bitch or whore or hootchie? ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )	Pourquoi t'appelles les femmes gonzesses, putes, salopes ?

6- <i>Gee Money</i> : (to Nino and Duh Duh Man) And de bitches? Oh Lawd, dem bitches! Yo they'd do anythin for dis, man! ( <i>New Jack City</i> )	Et les pouffes...
7- <i>O-Dog</i> : (to his male friends) Scared like some bitches. ( <i>Menace II Society</i> )	Bon Dieu, les pouffes, elles feraient n'importe quoi !
8- <i>O-Dog</i> : (to Caine) Hey you know what, nigga? You actin like a little bitch right now. ( <i>Menace II Society</i> )	Vous êtes des tapettes.
9- <i>O-Dog</i> : (to his male friends, talking about a girl) Man, leave dat bitch alone. ( <i>Menace II Society</i> )	Tu sais quoi ? Tu paniques comme une fiotte.
	Laisse-la tranquille cette meuf.

*Table 36 – Examples of the use of 'bitch' in films*

We have said 'bitch' seems to be used in films in three different ways: either it is used as a generic word for 'woman', albeit derogatory (examples 1, 2, 3, 6, 9), or it is used as an insult against another male or female to convey general disapproval (example 4),<sup>17</sup> or finally it is used against other males as an attack on their virility (examples 7, 8). The word is systematically used in either of these three ways, and is used consistently in the films of the corpus, although the use of 'whore' (or alternately 'ho') or 'hootchie' may be preferred on occasions. These words bear specific connotations of prostitution, which the word 'bitch' very rarely carries. The translations used in the French subtitles reflect the function: when 'bitch' refers to women in general, it is translated with derogatory terms such as 'gonzesse', 'meuf' or 'pouffe'. When it is used as a generic insult, it is

<sup>17</sup> In this line, we note in passing the correlation made by the character between crime and a certain lack of education: according to him, he can read and therefore is not a criminal, which paves the way to the possibility that someone who cannot read surely is one.

translated as ‘connard’ (also a generic insult in French), and when it is an attack on another male character’s virility, words with similar connotations (‘tapette’ and ‘fiotte’) are used in the subtitles.

In example 5 (which was already cited in the previous chapter), a female character asks whether the use of such terminology is indeed necessary (‘Why every time you talk about a female, you gotta say bitch or whore or hootchie?’). All she gets for an answer (from Doughboy) is a somewhat cheeky ‘Because that’s what you are’. But her question remains essentially unanswered. What such meta-linguistic comments indicate is first of all a certain awareness of the problematic use of such a word. And although a literal translation of the word may prove difficult, such comments in the dialogue also provide a platform for the translator to make it obvious to the French viewers that characters are using language in a very specific way and that words may not always have the denotational or connotational meanings that French viewers may readily associate with a word-for-word translation. What is striking in the above examples is the variety of words used by translators in different films to translate ‘bitch’ when it stands as a derogatory term to designate a woman: ‘gonzesse’, ‘ salope’, ‘pute’, ‘meuf’, but also ‘morue’, or ‘pouffe’.<sup>18</sup> It seems that any word with negative connotations will do. One might argue that ‘gonzesse’ and ‘meuf’ in particular, although they are of a lower register, do not carry such negative connotations as ‘ salope’ or ‘pute’, and ‘bitch’ for that matter. The problem is indeed that ‘bitch’ does not always mean what it seems at first, as

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<sup>18</sup> Further examples of the use of the word ‘bitch’ and of its translation in French subtitles can be found in appendix table A3.

emphasised by the response that Ice-T gave *Libération*, and it may be hard to believe for people who do not live in Ice-T's world that 'bitch' (and for that matter 'pute' or ' salope') 'désigne la femme qu'on aime'.<sup>19</sup> The translator has to deal with a word that occurs repeatedly in the dialogue, and for which, like 'nigga', there is no ready-made one-on-one equivalent: the dictionary translation 'chienne' has a much more limited scope in the TL and cannot be a successful translation for 'bitch' in every single context, as it does not convey the same connotations, and is not as flexible. Among the translations cited above, 'meuf', 'morue', 'pouffe' and 'meuf' do not have connotations of sexual promiscuity the way 'bitch' does, and 'tapette' and 'fiotte', unlike 'bitch', will always be aimed at men. The main difference between words like 'nigga' and 'brotha' on the one hand, and 'bitch' on the other, is that 'bitch' appears to be more consistently translated in the subtitles, and not omitted quite as much. Like 'nigga' and 'brotha' though, the translation of 'bitch' follows a functionalist logic.

#### *The subtitling of sounds and playing the dozens*

The following examples of applied sounding, which all target either the addressee or his mother, have already been discussed in Chapter Three. They are presented again here alongside their translation:

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<sup>19</sup> See page 105 in this thesis.

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>Sweet Dick Willy</i> : You fool, you thirty cent away from havin a quarta. ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )	T'as pas un rond.
2- <i>Ahmad</i> : You ø so old, you ø like a fossil. ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )	T'as l'air d'un fossile !
3- <i>Doughboy</i> : Mothafucka ø so skinny he could hula-hoop through a Cheerio. ( <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> )	Tu pourrais jouer au cerceau avec un bracelet.
4- <i>Mike</i> : Come on man, that was Junior High, I want bigga and betta things now, man. <i>Roland</i> : Nigga, like what? <i>Mike</i> : Like yo' mama, nigga! ( <i>The Wood</i> )	C'était le collège ! Je vise plus haut maintenant. - C'est-à-dire ? - Ta mère !

*Table 37 – Examples of sounding in the corpus and subtitles*

As far as the subtitles are concerned, sounding is translated quite effectively. Example 1 is more neutral in the translation than in the original. While the subtitles do retain a certain level of colloquialism, it is not clear from the translation that Sweet Dick Willy's comment is as much about his friend ML being poor as it is a remark on his low intelligence. In example 2, the subtitles, like the original dialogue, comment on Da Mayor's old age, comparing him to a fossil. The word 'fossile' has broadly the same meaning in French and can be used as a familiar and pejorative term to designate an old person, and the translation is therefore fairly straightforward. The subtitles for example 3 manage to convey the somewhat hyperbolic meaning of the insult. Although Cheerio cereals can also be bought in supermarkets in France, they are not as popular as they are in the US and the use of 'bracelet' in the subtitles makes the insult more explicit and more directly accessible for viewers in the TL. In example 4, 'bigger' is not translated in the first line where only the idea of

‘better’ has been retained with the use of ‘je vise plus haut’. Another possibility would have been ‘Je veux du lourd’ instead, and the punch line ‘Ta mère’ would have made more sense, as in the original it is clearly an attack on the weight of Roland’s mother. Arguably, the use of ‘C’est-à-dire ?’ for ‘Nigga, like what?’ is quite formal, and something like ‘Comme quoi ?’ would have been more coherent in terms of register.

An extended example of ritual sounding also involving mothers can be found in *White Men Can’t Jump*. It was also presented in Chapter Three, and is reproduced here again alongside the French subtitles. They are all taken from *White Men Can’t Jump*:

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>George</i> : Junior, if you could count, you’d be a fuckin astronaut.	Si tu savais compter tu serais astronaute.
<i>Sidney</i> : George, yo’ motha’s an astronaut.	George, ta mère est astronaute.
<i>George’s teammate 1</i> : He talked about yo’ mama, man. He playin’ you for a punk.	Il parle de ta mère. Il te prend pour un con.
<i>George’s teammate 2</i> : Ah wouldn’t take it, man.	Il vous insulte, elle et toi.
<i>George</i> : Mah motha ain’t no astronaut. Say it, say it.	Ma mère est pas astronaute ! Vas-y, dis-le !
<i>Sidney</i> : Yo’ motha ain’t no astronaut, yo’ fatha ain’t no astronaut, ain’t no astronaut got nothin to do wid nothin, alright?	Ta mère est pas astronaute, ton père non plus. T’es content ?
<i>George</i> : Yeah, well, mah momma ain’t no astronaut, you understand me?	Ma mère est pas astronaute. Vu ?
<i>George’s teammate 1</i> : Jump his ass, man.	
<i>Sidney</i> : Me sayin’ that yo’ motha is an astronaut is just anotha way of sayin that you’re all fucked up.	Ta mère est astronaute, ça veut dire...

<p><i>George:</i> Yeah, well, cool. Let's just get off mommas, cos I just got off yo's. Keep my momma out of dis brotha.</p> <p><i>Sidney:</i> She's out. She's out.</p> <p><i>George:</i> Cool, cool.</p> <p><i>Sidney:</i> She's out.</p> <p><i>George:</i> Cool.</p> <p><i>Sidney:</i> She's out. What time do you want me to bring the bitch back?</p> <p><i>George's teammates:</i> (laughter)</p> <p>2- <i>Junior:</i> Ah seen yo' motha kickin a can down de street, ah said 'What you doin?', she said 'movin'.</p> <p><i>George:</i> Yo' mama so old she drove chariots to school.</p> <p><i>Junior:</i> Yo' mama's so fat she broke her leg and gravy poured out.</p> <p>3- <i>George:</i> Ah told yo' mama to act her age and de bitch dropped dead.</p> <p><i>Junior:</i> Yo' motha got a leather wig with gray sideburns.</p> <p><i>George:</i> Well, yo' mama's teeth ø so yellow, she can butter a whole loaf of bread.</p>	<p>que ça tourne pas rond là-haut.</p> <p>Laissons les mères en dehors de ça, la tienne m'attend.</p> <p>Mêle pas ma mère à ça.</p> <p>D'accord, j'arrête.</p> <p>- Je laisse tomber. - Cool.</p> <p>Je la mêle pas à ça.</p> <p>Cool !</p> <p>A quelle heure je te la ramène ?</p> <p>J'ai vu ta mère porter des poubelles.</p> <p>Elle déménageait ?</p> <p>La tienne est si vieille, elle allait au lycée en char.</p> <p>La tienne est si grosse, qu'elle pisse de la graisse.</p> <p>Si on lui parle de son âge, elle clamse.</p> <p>La tienne est déplumée du caillou.</p> <p>La tienne se brosse les dents avec du jaune d'œuf.</p>
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*Table 38 – Examples of exchanges of ritual insults from White Men Can't Jump and subtitles*

As far as the subtitles are concerned, the first noticeable point is the omission of most swearwords: whilst 'you'd be a fuckin astronaut' becomes 'tu serais astronaute' ('fuckin' is not translated, either literally or

through a compensatory device), ‘punk’ is relatively toned down and becomes ‘con’, and ‘you’re all fucked up’ is turned into a surprising ‘ça tourne pas rond là-haut’ which is faithful in terms of denotational meaning but certainly not in terms of register. ‘Bitch’ in the last sentence of the extract finds no equivalent in the subtitles either. This again echoes what was said earlier in this chapter. Arguably, the two puns on ‘getting off’ and ‘being out’ don’t make quite the same impact in the subtitles, although it is admittedly very difficult to find a satisfactory translation for these two lines, one that would convey the double meanings of ‘getting off’ and ‘being out’, and also the snappiness of the exchange. This impacts severely on characterisation, as Sidney, one of the two main characters of the film, does not appear in the French subtitles to be quite the wordsmith he is in the original. Also, while the actual insult at the beginning of the extract is made clear by the interventions of George’s teammates in the subtitles too, the ritual insults hardly make sense, because they come completely out of the blue and are not motivated by a pun or play on words. Examples 2 and 3 are two instances of exchanges of ritual insults, in the form of dozens. In example 2, the translator has had to condense the original quite a lot, and the reported speech makes it quite difficult to subtitle. Arguably here, the translator manages to convey the spirit of the exchange quite well: in the original, one of the characters throws a ritual insult at another, suggesting that his mother’s only possession is ‘a can’, thus commenting on his mother’s poverty, and this is well reflected in the subtitles with ‘porter des poubelles’, which aptly makes an analogy between the mother and a tramp. The original dialogue follows syntactical patterns that have been described



by Labov (1972: 130-8), ‘your mother is –’, ‘your mother got –’, ‘your mother so – she –’, or take a more anecdotal form as in ‘I told your mother –’. The French subtitles are not a literal translation, and make use of pronouns such ‘la tienne’ [yours], in what seems to be an attempt to avoid repeating ‘ta mère’ [your mother] again and again.

Translating the *dozens* into French should be relatively unproblematic given the existence of a cultural equivalent in France. Similar exchanges, using similar syntactical patterns, and where the symbolic distance between participants was as important were taking place during the 1990s, as observed by Lepoutre in *Cœur de Banlieue* (1997), and go back to the immigration wave from North Africa in the 1960s. It is only in 1995, with the release of a book entitled *Ta mère* authored by the famous TV presenter Arthur that this type of exchange left its local cultural context – that of French *grands ensembles* [poor housing estates] – to become a nationwide phenomenon. This book is inspired by – and is almost like a literal translation of – *Snaps*, mentioned above, and which was published the previous year. This influence is acknowledged in the introduction of *Ta mère*, and just as for *Snaps*, several sequels followed shortly after: *Ta mère 2: la réponse*, *Ta mère 3: la revanche*, and *Les Interdits de ta mère*. On this phenomenon, Lepoutre states:

En fait, les vannes de la culture des rues sont tout à fait comparables aux *dozens* – ou *dirty dozens* – observées et décrites par les linguistes américains dans les ghettos noirs des grandes villes étatsuniennes. Le terme *dozen* désigne à la fois les insultes rituelles et le jeu même de ces insultes. *Dozen* suggère bien l’idée de série et donc le caractère d’échange. (Lepoutre, 1997: 176)

In fact, the ‘vannes de la culture des rues’ are so comparable to the American dozens, that they follow the same syntactic structures, and the same interactional rules. These practices are therefore known by a large part of the French public, not only teenagers, but also their parents who would buy the *Ta mère* books for them and come across TV commercials. Therefore, the use of pronouns in the French subtitles in the above examples such as ‘la tienne’ is fairly counter-intuitive, as the French audience would relate more easily to a known structure that would use ‘ta mère’ repeatedly. When the possibility of using an equivalent speech event in the subtitles arises, it is a little surprising not to make use of it, especially when space is not at stake (‘ta mère’ takes up two fewer characters per line than ‘la tienne’). In addition, the use of ‘la tienne’ is very formal, when a more popular way of speaking would consist in saying ‘ta mère, elle...’ [your mother, she...] with a pronominalisation of the subject.

To conclude, practices comparable to the dozens exist in the TL, and a close cultural assessment is necessary to establish compatibility between the source and target cultures.<sup>20</sup> Whilst translating the dozens works in this context, it may not be quite as straightforward with other languages.

#### *Subtitling of other speech events*

While we have established that the dozens have a cultural equivalent in France, the other speech events of AAVE described in Chapter Two and that are represented in the films do not. The examples of rapping in the

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<sup>20</sup> This particular issue will be addressed in the final chapter of this thesis.

corpus are dealt with in the subtitles in very different ways. The table below provides the list of those examples (already cited in Chapter Three) alongside the French subtitles.

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>Nino</i> : So see ya, and I wouldn' wanna be ya. ( <i>New Jack City</i> )	A plus, et j'aimerais pas être dans tes pompes.
2- <i>Gator</i> : Ya mean to say mah little brotha got him an ofay that ain't got no money? ( <i>Jungle Fever</i> )	Tu veux dire que mon frère se fait une Blanche qui n'a pas de fric ?
3- <i>Stacey</i> : Fuck you boy. You ain't gettin no zig zag, you ain't gettin no drig drag, punk. Dat shit rhyme, nigga, ah should be a mothafuckin rappa or summin. ( <i>The Wood</i> )	Va te faire foutre. T'as pas de quoi rouler, tu peux pas fumer.  Ça rime. Je devrais faire du rap.
4- <i>Mister Señor Love Daddy</i> : I only plays da platters dat matter, da matters dat platter, and that's the truth, Ruth. [...] Doin the ying and the yang, the hip and the hop, the stupid fresh thing, the flippity flop. ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )	Je passe les disques qui comptent,  ce qui comptent sur les disques. C'est la vérité, beauté.  Le yin et le yang, Le hip et le hop !  Le dernier truc débile, Le flip qui fait flop !

Table 39 – Examples of rapping and subtitles

In examples 1 and 2, the rhyming patterns have not been reproduced in the subtitles. In example 3 and 4, however, there has been an effort made to convey the verbosity of the characters. Whilst it is arguably very difficult to convey in the subtitles the African Americanness of those lines, the play on sounds are important from the perspective of characterisation. In example 3, having a rhyming couplet in the subtitles was crucial in order

for the next line to make sense. In example 4, Mister Señor Love Daddy plays with sounds and this is rather well conveyed in the subtitles, where ‘vérité’ rhymes with ‘beauté’, and ‘flip [...] flop’ echoes ‘hip [...] hop’. We note in passing that while in the original dialogue, some of what Mister Señor Love Daddy says hardly makes sense (‘da matters dat platter’), the subtitles do make a lot of sense, and the chiasmic structure of the original (‘platters [...] matter, [...] matters [...] platter’) has been preserved in the translation. The analysis of these four examples reveals a somewhat mixed approach of translators to play on sounds and rhyming patterns. Arguably, examples 3 and 4 convey to some extent the verbosity of the characters, and can give viewers some idea of the importance of having a good grasp of the language. Whilst it is difficult to convey merely through rhyming patterns in the translation that rapping is a specifically African American practice (or one that is given more prominence by speakers of AAVE), the subtitles for examples 3 and 4 provide more insight into the importance given to eloquence.

The one example of call-and-response in the corpus is the extended scene from *Jungle Fever* on which I commented in Chapter Three. The subtitles of this scene are interesting because the backchanneling cues have not been translated. Only Drew’s long intervention is translated, as shown in the table below:

Dialogue	Subtitles
<p><i>Drew</i>: A lot of this doesn't really have so much to do with the black men. I know it does and I know we want to blame 'em (Uhhmm) and it is their blame (Uhhmm). But part of it is that these white bitches throw themselves at black men. (Thank you) Do you see the way they look at 'em? You can't walk down the street with man without twenty-nine (Thank you) thousand white bitches comin' on to them, (Thank you) and they give up their pussy because their fathers tried to keep it from them all their lives, when they run eighteen and they leave home, (That's it) they're gonna get that black dick. They gonna get it, they gonna get it. And it can be yours, yours, yours, or mine, they want it, (I agree) and they're getting it. (<i>Jungle Fever</i>)</p>	<p>Ça n'est pas vraiment dû aux hommes noirs.</p> <p>On veut les accuser et c'est de leur faute.</p> <p>Mais c'est aussi dû à ces garces de Blanches qui se jettent sur eux.</p> <p>Vous les avez vu les regarder ?</p> <p>On peut pas marcher avec son homme sans que ces garces ne l'abordent.</p> <p>Et elles offrent leur chatte car leur père la leur avait confisquée.</p> <p>A 18 ans, elles quittent la maison à la recherche de la bite noire.</p> <p>Et elles la trouveront.</p> <p>Ça peut être la tienne, la mienne.</p> <p>Elles la trouvent.</p>

*Table 40 – Example of call-and-response and translation*

Throughout this scene, Drew speaks quite fast and without pauses. The backchanneling cues are clearly audible but it is difficult to say whether French viewers would identify them. The fact that Drew is uninterrupted perhaps makes the case that the backchanneling cues are supportive rather than dissenting voices. The backchanneling cues are not translated in the subtitles, and this is most likely due to a shortage of space. As with the examples of rapping, conveying the essentially African American character of this scene is very problematic. Whilst the denotative content of the subtitles is accurate, the form of the exchange that might, for African American viewers, trigger associations with church services, remains for French viewers quite ordinary.

### *The use of verlan in the subtitles*

A particularly noticeable feature used in the subtitles of some of the films is *verlan*, which is often referred to by French linguists as a feature of *banlieue* French. The term *banlieue* French is used here to refer to the variety of French spoken mostly by teenagers and that developed initially in poor suburban areas of Paris before spreading to other urban areas. This variety of French has been described and discussed by several French sociolinguists, who have generally emphasised the link between its spatial and social dimensions (Armstrong & Jamin (2002), Gadet (1998), Jamin *et al* (2006), Lepoutre (1997), Liogier (2002), Trimaille (2004), Trimaille & Billiez (2006)). Sociolinguists have given different names to this variety, each emphasising a particular characteristic: it has been referred to as ‘parler véhiculaire interethnique’ (Offord, 1996: 109), ‘langage des jeunes des cités de banlieue’ (Lepoutre, 1997: 153), ‘argot contemporain des cités’, ‘parlers jeunes urbains’, ‘sociolecte urbain générationnel’, ‘français contemporain des cités’ (all found in Trimaille & Billiez, 2007), ‘langage des jeunes’ or ‘français des cités’ (both in Liogier, 2002). This diversity echoes the various labels used to designate AAVE, and accounts for a certain heterogeneity of practices as well. Variables such as age, ethnic origins and social networks have all been shown to be important criteria in the definition of *banlieue* French. Although there is an abundant literature on the subject, the terminological fuzziness also illustrates that *banlieue* French, as a variety, is particularly difficult to circumscribe. Gadet, for example, suggests that this variety is difficult to link primordially to a social environment (‘populaire’), to age (‘jeunes’) or to geographical areas

(‘cités’ or ‘banlieues’): ‘Y a-t-il lieu d’opposer au français populaire traditionnel une “langue des jeunes”, objet difficile à nommer (langue des cités, des banlieues)?’ (Gadet, 2003: 85)<sup>21</sup> However, David Lepoutre, an ethnographer and sociolinguist, describes what he refers to as ‘le langage des jeunes des cités de banlieue’ (Lepoutre, 1997: 153) in his book *Cœur de banlieue*, and explains that some of its features are particularly distinctive.

One of these features is called *verlan*, a type of slang (*argot*) that consists in inverting the sounds or syllables of a word or short phrase when speaking in order to create a new one. *Verlan* has been discussed in a vast number of studies.<sup>22</sup> As the lack of space does not allow us to go into great detail of everything that is known about *verlan*, we will limit ourselves here to a list of its more general principles. The word *verlan* usually describes both the process – the inversion of sounds or syllables – and also the end product: the new word created is ‘un mot de verlan’ or ‘un mot en verlan’. In the words or sometimes phrases that undergo this process, two sounds or two syllables are usually inverted, although it has to be said that the rules vary greatly depending on the original word (which may have one, two, or more syllables – *verlan* is not restricted to two-syllable words). The word *verlan* itself comes from ‘l’envers’: the two syllables are

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<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that the use of ‘jeunes’ in those labels is metonymic as well as euphemistic, ‘jeunes’ referring to a socially stigmatised category rather than to an age group. The same is true about the use of ‘quartiers’, which often means ‘quartiers défavorisés’ ou ‘quartiers sensibles’, and about ‘banlieues’ which does not designate all *banlieues*, but rather poor neighbourhoods of the type sometime referred to as ‘grands ensembles’.

<sup>22</sup> See among others Bachmann & Basier (1984), Bagemihl (1988, 1989), Cheneau (1992), Kerleroux (1982), Lefkowitz (1987, 1989, 1991), Lefkowitz & Weinberger (1991), Mela (1988, 1991), Paul (1985), Plénat (1992, 1995) Villoing (1992), Walter (1984), Weinberger & Lefkowitz (1991).

inverted and form a new word, *verlan*. Plénat (1995) provides a large number of examples of words that undergone this process, among which:

Fou [fu] becomes [uf] in *verlan*

Froid [fʁwa] becomes [wafr]

Pourri [puʁi] becomes [ʁipu]

Mystique [mistik] becomes [stikmi]

*Verlan*, according to Lepoutre (1997: 155-6), has a cryptic function: ‘Le *verlan*, comme tous les argots, est également un langage de fermeture, une langue du secret. Cette fonction criptyque du langage des rues s’exerce dans le cadre de l’école et plus largement dans les rapports avec les adultes’. Gadet (2003: 88) points out that *verlan* has ‘un renouvellement rapide’, and that some words or expressions can be re-encrypted again and again, for instance ‘comme ça’ [kɔmsa] can become [sakɔm] and then [kɔmas] and even [askɔm] or [asmɔk]. Certain words in *verlan* have spread to other layers of the population or have become widely understood in France because of its widespread representation in the media (in particular for the purpose of caricaturing the young people who live in the *banlieues*) as early as the 1990s.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, some words such as ‘meuf’ (femme), ‘teuf’ (fête), or ‘keuf’ (flic) have lost their cryptic values, and can all be found in the Larousse dictionary.

Lepoutre argues that *verlan* also has an ‘identity’ function:

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<sup>23</sup> The opening line of *C’est ton destin* (1990), a song by French comedians *Les Inconnus* is still often heard today: ‘Eh les keufs, et les meufs, dans le RER, la banlieue, c’est pas rose, la banlieue c’est morose’.



La fonction identitaire prend une nouvelle dimension dans le contexte social et culturel des grands ensembles de banlieue: la juxtaposition des migrations, la communauté de situation entre Français et étrangers, dans l'exclusion comme dans la révolte, tout cela concourt à une recherche d'identité que marque le langage'. (Lepoutre, 1997: 157)

What this means is that *verlan* is still very stigmatised today and yet prized by those who use it. Although some words have made it into mainstream French dictionaries, it still bears strong links with *banlieue* youths.

This feature is of particular interest to us here because some words of *verlan* are used, to a lesser or greater extent, in the subtitles of some films of the corpus. 'Keuf' for instance is used only once in the subtitles of *In Too Deep*, and 'meuf' is used on a number of occasions in *White Men Can't Jump*, but these are the only examples of *verlan* in the two films. Three films in the corpus, *Boyz n the Hood*, *Menace II Society*, and *New Jack City* present significantly more instances of *verlan* in the French subtitles. In *Boyz n the Hood*, 'meuf' is used ten times, 'keum' (mec) and 'keuf' are both used once. More interestingly from the perspective of a film, the word 'keubla' (*verlan* for 'black') is used in the opening line of the film. In *Menace II Society*, 'meuf' is used eight times, 'tassepé' (pétasse) is used three times, and 'teuf' and 'keuf' are used twice each. 'Beuh' (herbe), 'chelou' (louche), 'renoi' (noir), 'pécho' (choper) are all used once. Again, 'meuf' and 'teuf' appear in the subtitles of the very opening exchanges of the film. Finally, in *New Jack City*, 'refré' (frère) is used five times, while 'feuj' (juif), 'kepa' (paquet) and 'keuf' are used once.

The use of *verlan*, naturally, is far from being unproblematic, because it is so deeply connected to *banlieue* French and to images of French *cités*, that its use in subtitles runs the risk of making a strong and perhaps unjustified association between speakers of AAVE and speakers of *banlieue* French. However, authors like Hervé Vieillard-Baron or Lepoutre have shown that connections exist between the American and the French street cultures, and between the young people in particular who live in the *cités* (and who might be considered the primary speakers of *banlieue* French, and the main users and innovators of *verlan*) and their African American counterparts. Of course, the conditions of life are different in the American inner cities and in the French *cités*, as Lepoutre highlights:

Si l'on ne peut parler, comme dans les quartiers noirs des métropoles étatsuniennes, généralement composées de plus de 90 % d'Afro-Américains, d'«hyperségrégation» raciale, ni même de véritable homogénéité culturelle, puisque des populations d'origines très différentes cohabitent dans le grand ensemble. Du moins la forte proportion de population d'origine étrangère d'une part, la nette domination arabe et plus largement musulmane d'autre part, donnent au quartier une indéniable dimension ethnique et religieuse et, partant, un caractère marqué de ghetto contemporain.' (Lepoutre, 1997: 84)

Vieillard-Baron (1996: 46) also states that 'depuis trente ans, la ville de Chicago occupe une place mythique dans l'imaginaire des jeunes de banlieue. Elle exprime à la fois le rêve américain, l'exotisme, la relégation des ghettos et le grand banditisme avec Al Capone'. French youths draw their inspiration from their American counterparts for music, fashion, and also a certain idea of ghettoisation as highlighted by the two quotations above.

There is therefore a fairly strong overlap between the two cultures, and the translators are clearly trying to take advantage of it. By using certain salient features of *banlieue* French in the subtitles, they can trigger certain associations with a particular socio-economic background, as well as possibly give a sense of counter-culture through linguistic rebellion. *Verlan* words might thus also be considered to be cultural metonymies, devices that are commonly used in fiction and consist of using a particular element associated with a cultural group in order to evoke the cultural group itself and other features that may usually be associated with it. In the words of Maria Tymoczko:

A piece of literature customarily evokes its culture through consequential and telling signals or details, typically parts or aspects of the culture that are saturated with semiotic significance and emblematic of the culture as a whole, both in terms of objective structure and subjective experience [...] In this regard, such cultural elements within a literary work are metonymic evocations of the culture as a whole, including its material culture, history, economy, law, customs, values, and so on. (Tymoczko, 1999: 45)

Although Tymoczko here describes the relationship between text and culture as a metonymic one, the same is arguably true of films and culture, as Monaco illustrates:

Because metonymical devices yield themselves so well to cinematic exploitation, cinema can be more efficient in this regard than literature can. Associated details can be compressed within the limits of the frame to present a statement of extraordinary richness. Metonymy is a kind of cinematic shorthand. (Monaco, 2000: 167-8)

Metonymy is widely used in films, and is a particularly useful rhetorical device, as viewers are given ‘comparatively limited time to identify and understand what is represented on screen’ (Di Giovanni, 2007: 96), and culturally salient features (whether visual or verbal) are used for their

intrinsic metonymic value. If we apply Monaco's statement, then visual or verbal on-screen representations can be treated as metonymic evocations of a culture. In the corpus, there are recurring elements, features and themes which appear to be used to represent a certain idea of African America in the films: loose-fitting clothes, baseball caps, sports, crime, violence and AAVE are so many elements that contribute to creating or recreating stereotypical representations easily associated with African Americans. The subtitles, also presented 'within the limits of the frame' can yield the same power, as the words used in the translation can serve a metonymic purpose as well and can evoke a particular group in the target culture. And if a translation takes place between two cultures that share some contact or familiarity – as is the case in the films with American and French street cultures – then two assumptions can be made: first, that the cultural metonymies of the original may be accessible to viewers of the translated film, and secondly, that the cultural metonymies used in the subtitles may well exploit this familiarity and 'bridge the gap' between the two cultures for the viewers in the TL. The use of *verlan* in the subtitles suggests that translators perceive possible links between the source and the target culture and that because of the overlap between the two, which is also complemented by the other elements of the film (whether visual or acoustic), the use of a salient feature of the target culture such as *verlan* can help complement viewers' understanding of a film.

*Verlan* is the only feature of *banlieue* French that is used in the subtitles, but it is a very salient one, and most importantly, one that is possible to put

into writing. It would therefore be wrong to say that the subtitles are written in *banlieue* French, and more accurate to say that translators are relying on a particular feature, and on the associations that are stereotypically made with it, to trigger from viewers a certain indexing of characters.

This indexing is social, related to age, geography, and to a certain extent, ethnicity. Armstrong and Jamin (2002: 130) point out that *banlieue* French ‘is essentially a young working-class phenomenon’. By definition, *banlieue* French is also a (sub)urban variety. In the corpus, *verlan* is exclusively used to subtitle the lines of characters who are young and from poor social backgrounds. In the films, only urban contexts are represented, and the level of social and ethnic relegation is always very important, both visually (the characters live in all-African American neighbourhoods) but also thematically (this relegation is often referred to by characters). Armstrong and Jamin (2002: 129), in their study of La Courneuve, highlight that ‘the majority of [*banlieue* French] features could not be allocated to any specific ethnic group, contrasting with the case of African American Vernacular English (AAVE)’, but although *banlieue* French is not specifically associated with black people, the social and ethnic relegation of the population who live in the French *banlieues* causes the variety to have strong associations with ethnic minorities.

The link between *banlieue* French and AAVE, because of these similarities and of the cultural overlap discussed above, is therefore very pertinent and

is discussed from a theoretical perspective in the next and final chapter of the thesis: while the parallel between AAVE and *banlieue* French can be attractive, it is not unproblematic since one always runs the risk of making undesirable associations between the two and turning the subtitled films into hybrid objects.

### ***Conclusion***

Reflecting back on Taylor's claim that neutralisation is the dominant force when it comes to the subtitling of non-standard features, it is clear that some governing dynamics have emerged through the analysis of the corpus. First, we have seen that through the use of certain devices, it was possible to portray in writing in the subtitles a certain orality and informality of the dialogues, an impression which is also greatly reinforced by the extensive use of low register words. These devices are used across the corpus. However, the analysis of the translation of terms of address and reference has revealed that some items in particular are neutralised in the subtitles under certain circumstances. The words 'nigga' and 'brotha' are often not subtitled or are subtitled using a variety of words that do not always convey the political implications, and are dealt with in very different ways in different films. Because of the nature of subtitling and of the reduction constraint, terms of address, which from a syntactical and mechanical perspective are easy to discard, are often omitted in the subtitles.

What is of particular interest in terms of the solutions adopted by subtitlers to convey AAVE (whether simply its informality or its specificity as a variety of English) is that whereas we demonstrated in Chapter Three that films do not rely on lexical features traditionally associated with AAVE to portray variation but rather on syntactical, phonological and interactional features, we have observed that in the subtitles the informality of the exchanges portrayed relies primarily on the use of lexical items, and on a limited number of syntactical features such as the omission of negative preverbal particle ‘ne’, the omission of clitic pronoun ‘il’, vocalic simplification, and a few others used very marginally in the corpus. While the use of these features and of a wide variety of low register words (as illustrated by the translation of the word ‘money’ as well as the omnipresence of insults) certainly give a flavour of orality to the subtitles, they are all generic in the sense that they indicate informality rather than specific sociolinguistic connotations. The use of *verlan* in the subtitles of some films, on the other hand, reflects the sort of assumptions that translators make about the social and ethnic values of AAVE as it is portrayed in the original dialogue. The use of *verlan* in the subtitles clearly does not constitute a case of neutralisation, but rather a deliberate attempt by translators to portray the non-standardness of the speech of characters in the original. Taylor’s (2006: 39) claim that ‘neutralisation [...] has frequently been found to predominate in film translation, particularly in subtitling’, is not verified in the corpus where a feature like *verlan*, rather than neutralising, carries out a shift which appears, at first sight, to be quite domesticating. The main issue now is to question how successful such a

strategy (the use of *verlan* in the context of films portraying speakers of AAVE) can be, whether a cultural metonymy can in fact work cross-culturally, and whether *verlan* can successfully be used in subtitles to trigger the same indexing from viewers in the TL as AAVE does for viewers in the SL. In the following chapter, I will examine the usefulness of the concepts of domestication and foreignisation for discussing the translation of features such as *verlan*.



## **Chapter Five – Domestication/Foreignisation: A Valid Framework for the Study of Subtitled Films?**

### ***Introduction***

As the notions of domestication and foreignisation have become one of the dominant shibboleths of an increasing number of translation specialists, it is perhaps surprising that audiovisual translation, and specifically subtitled films, has somewhat seldom been discussed in the light of these two concepts brought to the fore of Translation Studies by Lawrence Venuti. It was observed in the opening chapter of this thesis that subtitled films are semiotically very rich objects, and that viewers are permanently reminded of their foreignness, both visually and auditorily: visually because of the text they have to read at the bottom of the screen when they are watching a subtitled film, and auditorily because of the foreign dialogue. The polysemiotic nature of subtitled films, whereby textual information (the subtitles) combines with other audiovisual cues (the images and the film's soundtrack) makes them a very vulnerable form of translation, as well as a peculiar one, to say the least: a peculiarity of subtitling is that both the original (or ST) and the translation (TT) are presented simultaneously to viewers. The possibility of clashes between source and target texts is therefore very great, as is often commented upon by translation specialists who point out the incoherence resulting from the juxtaposition of visual referents from the SL cultural sphere with textual referents from that of the TL. For instance, the use of features of AAVE to translate *banlieue* French in Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* and the systematic transposition of

cultural references from the source culture to the target culture (which saw ‘Kronenbourg’ beer become ‘Bud’, ‘five francs’ become ‘two bits’, and characters’ names ‘Astérix’ and ‘Darty’ translated respectively as ‘Snoopy’ and ‘Walmart’) were commented on by a number of film critics who attributed the commercial failure of the film in the United States in part to poor subtitling: ‘a sloppy pastiche of black American slang hinders rather than helps an understanding [...] of the film’ (an anonymous film critic, cited in Jäckel, 2001: 227). The juxtaposition of a depiction of the daily lives of a trio of black-blanc-beur youths with American cultural references is indeed odd.<sup>1</sup> In other words, because of the use of features of AAVE in the subtitles and of the systematic transposition of cultural references for the target (American) audience, American viewers were presumably led to believe that African American youths shared important similarities with youths from the French *banlieues*, only to be brought back to reality when particular themes in the films made it all the more conspicuous that the action was indeed foreign. There are specific elements of the narrative that make American viewers aware of the foreign nature of the film: as a critic points out, ‘the media hysteria about a stray revolver in a housing project might appear touching to a society in which prepubescents tote Uzis, but not to American youths for whom the young men’s inability to drive would be “quaint”’ (Jäckel, 2001: 233). Besides making an argument in favour of

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<sup>1</sup> The use of American references in the subtitles is also potentially misleading for American viewers who might believe that French *banlieue* youths actually share all those cultural references with American youths (i.e. the use of ‘beer’ in the subtitles instead of ‘bud’ might at least have prevented American viewers from thinking that French youths actually drink Budweiser). The possibility of such ‘mismatches’, whereby there are discrepancies for viewers that are a direct product of the juxtaposition of the different channels of the film, may incidentally be one of the reasons why interlingual subtitles display a tendency to neutralise non standard features and cultural references.

an extremely cautious use of cultural substitutions – that is when a cultural reference in the ST is replaced by another one in the TL – in subtitles, this also suggests that adopting an approach that takes into account the links between the source and target cultures is absolutely paramount in maintaining suspension of disbelief. Therefore, the context of culture-specific elements and the relationship between the source and target cultures are of ultimate importance when choosing a translation strategy. We are now going to examine the challenges of subtitling from a theoretical perspective, in order to crystallise the dynamics that govern the subtitling of non-standard features or varieties, such as AAVE.

In this chapter, we will discuss the notions of domestication and foreignisation in depth, specifically in the context of subtitled films and decide to what extent and in what conditions they are indeed adapted to their analysis. Venuti (1998: 67) claims that ‘translation wields enormous power in constructing representations of foreign cultures’. Whilst Venuti is discussing literary translation, we postulate here, following Ramière (2006), that cinema, ‘because of its tremendous social impact and visibility as a mode of intercultural exchange, may in fact affect cultural representations to a greater extent than other types of translation – both in the way a national cinema is perceived abroad and, more importantly perhaps, in how cultures perceive each other and themselves’. It is the central function of translation as a shaping force that is under scrutiny here: since translation, both as a practice (the act, the process of translation) and as a product (the TT), is key to creating ideas and representations of an

Other in the target culture. This Otherness is created with the means and resources available in the TL, as we will see below. This very fact allows the possibility of multiple representations of Otherness through translation: subtitles are an appropriation of an Other's voice, but paradoxically, this Other is not altogether silenced – the soundtrack is always there. The subtitles, then, are like a mask that has been superimposed onto a film. This mask, as we will see below, can be more or less transparent, or act like some sort of camouflage:<sup>2</sup> it can serve to emphasise foreignness, by re-enforcing its own characteristics as mask, or it can be made to look like a familiar face.

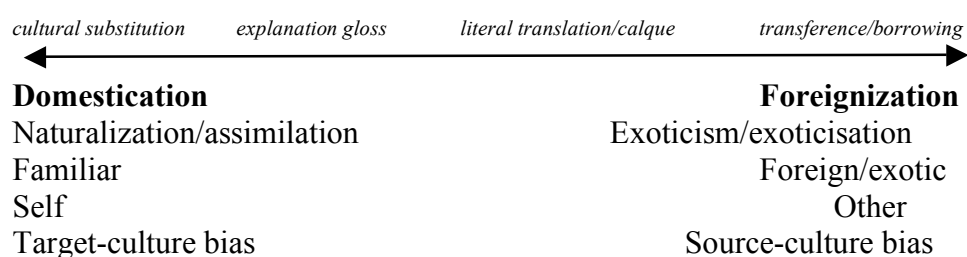
First, we are going to examine Venuti's concepts and how they have been used and adapted in Translation Studies. Venuti also argues that the Anglo-American tradition of translation is one of domestication, and, in order to establish whether Venuti's concepts can be used for the purpose of our study, we must investigate whether domesticating dynamics have also prevailed in the French tradition of translation. Finally, while Venuti's concepts provide very useful working tools to translation specialists, particularly for the study of the translation of culturally-bound elements, both concepts must be questioned, refined and adapted to the study of subtitled films.

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that translation is a concealing art, or even censoring in nature. Rather, this is a comment on what it means to translate an Other, to make it accessible, with a limited set of resources – in other words, re-presenting the Other, literally presenting it again to viewers in the TL and emphasising its Otherness as Other. It should also be noted here that if translation is by nature domesticating (in that a translator has to use the resources of the TL), portraying Otherness in translation necessitates 'covering up' this domestication, and, in a way, restating or reinstating the foreign.

### *Venuti's domestication/foreignisation paradigm*

Venuti's paradigm has been presented as a tool for conceptualising the relationship between a ST and a TL, and is sometimes presented as a continuum, as in the figure below, taken from Ramière (2006), with domestication and foreignisation sitting at each end of the continuum. Of ultimate relevance here is the fact that the author is specifically concerned with the translation of culturally-bound elements in films:<sup>3</sup>



*Figure 1 – Typical progression of translation procedures found in the literature (reproduced from Ramière, 2006)*

Ramière highlights that not all possible translation strategies are presented here (it is difficult to situate omission and neutralisation on this continuum) and argues that:

According to this model, translation procedures are distributed along a scale with two poles, usually termed foreignisation and domestication, but also referred to as exoticism/assimilation, source/target, foreign/familiar, Self/Other, etc. Each translation procedure is situated on this spectrum according to the extent to which it accommodates the target reader/viewer's own cultural background. (Ramière, 2006)

While this figure provides a convenient visual representation of the polarisation of domestication and foreignisation, and while Ramière

<sup>3</sup> Ramière's study, however, is fairly brief, limited in scope (it only deals with three films), and only provides quantitative data (which is in itself problematic, because quantitative ordering involves qualitative assessments, the relevance and nature of which are not addressed directly in her paper), while no actual examples are cited.

provides an interesting classification of translation procedures, it also constitutes an oversimplification of Venuti's argument. Tempting as it may be to idealise translation strategies in such a neat way, the intricacies of cultural interplay can sometimes stretch the boundaries of the concepts of domestication and foreignisation, potentially even making them blend into one another, to a point where what is usually classified as cultural substitution could be construed as a case of foreignisation, as we will demonstrate below.

Culturally-bound elements are all those signs that are specific to the sociocultural context of a film. These signs may be shared with other sociocultural groups (including the audience of the subtitled version of the film) or they may be idiosyncratic. These elements may be references to people, objects, or events, or may be imbued in language itself – in the form of non-standard features, for instance, or of lexical items that carry specific connotations. Language and culture are often inextricably linked, as Kramsch (1998: 3) argues: 'Language is the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways'. The use of a particular language or variety could be considered to stand, metonymically, for the culture itself.<sup>4</sup> Culturally-bound elements are those features that display cultural saliency: they are specific to a culture, but they also, more crucially perhaps, perform (sometimes alongside other elements) the

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<sup>4</sup> At the end of Chapter Four, we discussed the omnipresence of metonymies in films. Language is one of the elements used to establish the personality of characters quickly. The use of marked language, we argue, allows for easy indexation because it is often associated with social and cultural traits.

culture that they embody. These elements and the culture they embody are engaged in a reflexive process: a culture is identifiable because some elements point to it, whilst concomitantly a culture cannot be portrayed without the use of these elements. Culturally-bound elements are both a by-product of a culture, and they can also – through metonymy – invoke that culture.

According to Venuti, domestication and foreignisation as translation strategies operate at two levels: first, the choice of foreign texts to be translated, and secondly the methods used to translate. He defines domestication as ‘an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bring[ing] the author back home’, whilst foreignisation is ‘an ethnodeviant pressure on those (cultural) values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad’ (Venuti 1995: 20). In other words, a domesticating strategy places emphasis on the fluency of style in the TL – Venuti uses the word ‘transparent’ to qualify such translations – with the possibility of transposing cultural references from the original into the target culture. Foreignisation does the opposite, and privileges a more literal translation. It tries to preserve the foreign characteristics of the original and provide readers with a flavour of foreignness in the TL.

Naturally, this distinction between domestication and foreignisation is far from unproblematic. Venuti himself makes the point that the very action of translating a text, of changing the language it is written in, can be

construed as an act of domestication – albeit admittedly a necessary one – making translation in itself violently ethnocentric. Building on Schleiermacher and Berman, Venuti (1995: 20) argues that insofar as foreignisation seeks to restrain this violence, it is ‘highly desirable’ and ‘can be a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism’. It is quite clear then, that Venuti has an agenda when he advocates foreignising translation:

To advocate foreignizing translation in opposition to the Anglo-American tradition of domestication is not to do away with cultural political agendas – such an advocacy is itself an agenda. The point is rather to develop a theory and practice of translation that resists dominant target-language cultural values so as to signify the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text. (Venuti, 1995: 23)

Venuti makes the point that there is an ‘Anglo-American tradition of domestication’, and that throughout history, the dominant translating practice has been to domesticate foreign texts, writing translation in the most transparent way possible, hiding the presence of the translator whilst privileging a fluidity of style. Few disagree with Venuti’s claim, announced in the title of his book, *The Translator’s Invisibility*, that translators have historically been exiled from the domain of authorship and reduced to invisibility. This Venuti (1995: 17) explains by a certain ‘complacency in Anglo-American relations with cultural others [...] that can be described [...] as imperialistic abroad and xenophobic at home’.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> James Underhill is a notable exception and one of few people to have voiced criticism of Venuti’s work. He claims that ‘if Venuti is radical, it is because he is militating against not militating for; against fluency, against the canon, against convention, against the bourgeoisie, against censorship’ (Underhill, 2006: 115) and he accuses Venuti of belonging to a category of contemporary critics dubbed ‘the School of Resentment’ as defined by Harold Bloom (1999) – that is ‘critics who use literature as a battlefield in which to play out academico-political conflict’ (Underhill, 2006: 115). However vehement he may be in his criticism of Venuti’s stance, Underhill (2006: 116) acknowledges that



The same is arguably true about France, where the ideology of translating texts using a transparent style came to the fore very early on. Nicolas Perrot D'Ablancourt, a prolific translator of Greek and Latin, declared as early as the seventeenth century that translators ought to bring order and beauty to their work:

La diversité qui se trouve dans les langues est si grande, tant pour la construction et la forme des périodes, que pour les figures et les autres ornemens, qu'il faut à tous coups changer d'air et de visage, si l'on ne veut faire un corps monstrueux, tel que celui des traductions ordinaires, qui sont ou mortes et languissantes, ou confuses, et embrouillées, sans aucun ordre ny agrément. (D'Ablancourt, 1640)

D'Ablancourt unambiguously expresses his preference for what he considers to be an aesthetically beautiful translation, and asserts that it is not only preferable to modify some elements of the ST ('changer d'air et de visage') but in fact necessary if the result is not to be 'monstrueux'. D'Ablancourt elaborates further that the elliptical and discontinuous discourse of Tacitus must be translated:

sans choquer les délicatesses de nostre langue & la justesse du raisonnement. [...] Souvent on est contraint d'ajouter quelque chose à sa pensée pour l'éclaircir; quelquefois il en faut retrancher une partie pour donner jour à tout le reste. (D'Ablancourt, 1640)

This echoes what was said in an earlier chapter about the prescriptivism of French, as a language, and about the high prestige status of the written word. 'Choquer les délicatesses de nostre langue' is out of the question and foreign texts should be made to conform to the canon. D'Ablancourt's time of writing roughly coincides with the creation of the Académie française

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'[Venuti's] critique of a society that promotes the invisibility of the translator and thereby edits the reality of foreign experience is equally well-founded.'

by cardinal Richelieu in 1635. While the Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterêts, signed on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1539 by the king, François I, had paved the way for the standardisation of the French language, one of the aims of the Académie française is to safeguard the purity and fluency of the French language. According to article XXIV of the ‘Statuts et Réglements’ of the Académie française, ‘la fonction de l’Académie sera de travailler avec tout le soin et toute la diligence possibles à donner des règles certaines à notre langue et à la rendre pure, éloquente, et capable de traiter les arts et les sciences’.<sup>6</sup> Whilst the Académie has not quite managed to freeze the French language in time, laws have been passed (the most recent example is the Loi Toubon, 1995) to protect the integrity of the French language, particularly from what was perceived to be the imperialistic endeavours of English.

This idea that the purity and eloquence of the French language somehow have to be safeguarded rapidly affected education and translation. While D’Ablancourt made a case against literalism and in favour of a transparent style, the seventeenth century in France also witnessed a number of retranslations of the Bible, in which ancient Greek gave way to ‘la Belle

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.academie-francaise.fr/role/statuts\\_AF.pdf](http://www.academie-francaise.fr/role/statuts_AF.pdf) [accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2011]. The copy of the ‘Statuts et Réglements’ provided on the Académie française’s website is an edited and commented version of the original – the Académie française did not however provide a date of edition as well as the name of the person who wrote the comments. A footnote in the annotated version of the ‘Statuts et Réglements’ adds that article XXIV is ‘essentiel [et] formule la raison d’être de l’Académie, lui prescrit sa mission, et fonde son autorité’ (Lettres patentes pour l’établissement de l’Académie française, original reproduced on the website of the Académie française, 1635: 19). In the ‘Note liminaire’ that preceeds the ‘Lettres patentes’, the secrétaire perpétuel of the Académie, Maurice Druon, confirms that ‘la mission, elle [...] est inchangée depuis les origines : donner des règles certaines à notre langue, la maintenir en pureté’. Elsewhere on their website, it is indeed argued that ‘le dispositif imaginé par Richelieu était si parfait qu’il a franchi les siècles sans modification majeure’.

Langue'.<sup>7</sup> This evangelical proselytism is sometimes singled out as being one of the ways of imposing a particular dialect of a language on a population, for purposes of standardisation and homogenisation.<sup>8</sup> This cleared the way for a growing protectionism of the French language by the State itself. Regarding translation in seventeenth century France, Steiner (1970: 50) argues that 'the French emphasised literary grandeur and the need of the audience'. D'Ablancourt goes even further:

Je ne m'attache donc pas toujours aux paroles ni aux pensées de cet auteur (Lucien), et demeurant dans son but, j'agence les choses à notre air et à notre façon. Les divers temps veulent non seulement des paroles, mais des pensées différentes. [...] J'y ai retranché ce qu'il y avait de plus sale et adouci en quelques endroits ce qui était trop libre. (D'Ablancourt, 1654, cited in Ballard, 1992: 172)

Meschonnic (1997: 144), concurring with d'Ablancourt, argues that 'Au XVIIème siècle, la beauté passe par l'élimination de ce qu'a fait le XVIème siècle. Elle n'est plus quantitative, elle est qualitative, elle est nuance, elle est pureté'. Underhill (2006: 109) also confirms that 'The French of the seventeenth century evidently felt that their language had by that stage absorbed enough foreign terms and foreign culture to step out of the shadow of the Greco-Latin culture'.

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<sup>7</sup> In actual fact, the first translation in French of the Bible was written in 1530 by Lefèvre d'Étaples, despite the French parliament forbidding any translation of the Scriptures in 1526. Lefèvre d'Étaples' translation was then published in Anvers, with the blessing of Charles Quint. It was only during the late seventeenth century that literalism was abandoned, particularly with Sacy-Port Royal, who published his translation of the Bible, book by book, between 1672 and 1693.

<sup>8</sup> This particular point about Bible Translation is incidentally one of the reasons why Venuti (1995: 23) criticises Nida's stance in favour of dynamic equivalence: 'Nida's concept of dynamic equivalence in Bible translation goes hand in hand with an evangelical zeal that seeks to impose on English-language readers a specific dialect of English [...] When Nida's translator identifies with the target-language reader to communicate the foreign text, he simultaneously excludes other target-language cultural constituencies'.

Wanting to limit the Greek influence on French culture and language, the seventeenth century set a lasting trend for French translators, and contrasted sharply with the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, during which while there was already in France a strong tradition of translation (particularly from Greek and Latin), ‘beauty’ was thought to be Hellenic, and to consist in the extension of the lexicon and the creation of new words. The seventeenth century witnessed a shift, as the beauty of the French language started to be asserted more decisively. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this hegemony of fluency endured.

Mercier argues that

Dans la France des 17<sup>ème</sup> et 18<sup>ème</sup> siècles, un traducteur ne jouit, en matière de langue, d’aucune liberté pour rendre l’étrangeté d’un original. Il est alors impensable qu’il tente d’imiter un tour de phrase étranger ou qu’il conserve une métaphore inusitée en français : il doit naturaliser le texte source. (Mercier, 2003: 172)

Although the general trend was to domesticate the original, the dissenting voices of a number of translators could be heard in France at the time, arguing for more fidelity (by which they meant a more literal approach) to the original: Bachet de Méziriac, Antoine and Louis-Isaac Le Maistre, Pierre-Daniel Huet, Gaspard de Tende all argued in favour of greater respect for the original and for the ideas of the author. However, the most successful translations at the time were those of d’Ablancourt, Malherbe or Henri Ophellot. The latter fiercely criticised his predecessors from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries for failing to rise above crass word-for-word translation, went as far as calling them ‘eunuques de la littérature, [...] artistes stupides’ (Ophellot, 1771: x). There is a sense of resignation in the panegyric made of the naturalisation of the ST which, according to

Mercier, is part of a wider tradition: ‘la naturalisation du texte source n’est finalement qu’un des aspects de l’inévitable soumission de toute pratique littéraire – et donc de la traduction – aux incontournables règles du “bon goût”’ (Mercier, 2003: 173).

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, translators and theorists became less strict and started acknowledging that the word-for-word approach and the approach which privileges fluency both had advantages. The idea of equivalence was increasingly discussed critically, not only in France but also throughout Europe. This problematisation culminated in Georges Mounin’s famous essay *Les Belles infidèles* (1955),<sup>9</sup> in which he describes two ways of translating while still being faithful:

Les verres transparents : sont les traductions qui ne sentent pas la traduction. Le traducteur adoptant cette méthode se doit d’effacer l’originalité de la langue étrangère (fidélité à la langue d’arrivée)

Les verres colorés : sont les traductions mot à mot. Tout en comprenant la langue, le lecteur « sent » les différences temporelles, civilisationnelles et culturelles que la traduction véhicule (fidélité à la langue de départ). (Mounin, cited in El Medjira, 2001)

In actual practice, however, the domesticating approach remains largely predominant in France. It has most recently been denounced by French author and translator Brice Matthieussent in his aforementioned novel *Vengeance du traducteur*. Here, the narrator/translator explains that he usually stays invisible and that his presence is only made evident through

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<sup>9</sup> The term ‘belles infidèles’ was coined to designate seventeenth and eighteenth century translations in France, such as those by d’Ablancourt, where the translator does not hesitate to change the original to make his/her translation match the aesthetic and linguistic canon of the time. The ‘belles infidèles’ have been described by Paul Horguelin (1981: 76) as ‘des traductions, qui pour plaire et se conformer au goût et aux bienséances de l’époque, sont des versions “revues et corrigées” par des traducteurs conscients (trop, sans doute) de la supériorité de leur langue et de leur jugement’.

rare translator's notes, because his style should not give away to readers the fact that they are, in fact, reading a translation. Resentful of this, the narrator repeatedly expresses his wish to claim authorial prerogatives. Naturally, this also brings to the fore the issue of the status of translators and of their relative invisibility, not only stylistically, but also in terms of artistic status, because of their lack of recognition and problematic relationship to authorship.

While Venuti makes the point, then, that there is an Anglo-American tradition of domestication, the same can be argued in relation to France – perhaps even to a greater extent. The endeavour to use the language in a way that is deemed beautiful and to safeguard its so-called purity is imbued with ideology. For a translation to be deemed acceptable, in aesthetic terms, it must conform to the canon.

The cause of foreignisation has not been helped by a number of international translation specialists, who have often advocated transparent translations. In the ongoing age-old struggle to define a 'good' translation, Norman Shapiro argues in favour of transparency, of a text that never calls attention to itself as a translation:

I see translation as the attempt to produce a text so transparent that it does not seem to be translated. A good translation is like a pane of glass. You only notice that it's there when there are little imperfections – scratches, bubbles. Ideally, there shouldn't be any. It should never call attention to itself. (cited in Venuti, 1995: 1)

Transparency, Venuti (1995: 1) argues, is achieved through fluency, and by 'the translator's effort to ensure easy readability by adhering to current

usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing a precise meaning'. Ideally, the style should be seamless so that the translation does not display the characteristics of a translation: it conforms to the canon, does not disrupt the language and asserts its own purity. In other words, a good translation is a translation that hides its own status as a translation. The work of a good translator, then, could be viewed as inherently dysfunctional: it is through the very act of writing translations, they deny their translations' status as translations.

Perhaps more famously within the realm of Translation Studies, Eugene Nida's reader-oriented approach argues that the reception of a given text in the TL should be assessed against the reception of the text in the SL. His concept of dynamic equivalence emphasises meaning and style, and focuses on complete naturalness of expression. Nida and de Waard (1986: 11) argue that 'the dynamically equivalent translation is "interlingual communication" which overcomes the linguistic and cultural differences that impede it'. Again, the ideological bias is obvious: linguistic and cultural differences constitute obstacles to be overcome in the process of translating. Nida claims that the differences between source and target cultures should be bridged by the process of translation, so that 'receptors' (to use Nida's terminology) from the target culture respond to the translated text in the same way that receptors from the source culture respond to the original. Nida's dynamic equivalence, then, is potentially ethnocentric: the hegemony of style and fluency means that a translation will conform to the literary canon of the target culture, while the stylistic

peculiarities of the original will be masked (literally hidden, disguised, travestied), to the point that the mask will become the face, achieving ‘complete naturalness of [facial] expression’ (Munday, 2001: 42). Nida’s approach, by Venuti’s standards, is thus essentially domesticating.<sup>10</sup>

Venuti certainly makes an interesting point when he claims that a domesticating approach to translation reflects a colonising or imperialistic ideology. However, he himself does not pretend to hide the fact that arguing in favour of a foreignising approach to translation constitutes a political agenda. We already highlighted above that because it substitutes a foreign language with one’s own, translation is always-already ideological, and is, in essence, domesticating for two reasons: first, the necessity to change one language for another implies that what was not intelligible before is made intelligible through the process of translation – a text is brought to a reader. The question, then, is whether or not the illusion of the foreign can be maintained in spite of the use of a familiar language. Secondly, foreignisation itself is subject to domesticating dynamics. Commenting on Ezra Pound’s work, Venuti argues:

Pound shows that in translation, the foreignness of the foreign is available only in cultural forms that already circulate in the target language, some with greater cultural capital than others. In translation, the foreignness of the foreign text can only be what currently appears ‘foreign’ in the target-language culture, in relation to dominant domestic values. (Venuti, 1995: 202-3)

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth specifying that Nida’s context of translation involves languages that are traditionally referred to as small or minor, predominantly from Africa and South America, rather than dominant ones and therefore do not have a ‘literary canon’ to conform to as such.



The foreignness of a text, in other words, is determined by domestic values (that is, values of the target culture) – the foreignness of a translated text is not an inherent property but rather something that is brought into it (as opposed to preserved from the original) as a result of a cultural reading of the ST by a translator. Foreignness is also determined by the translator's use of the domestic tools, that is, of the TL and in particular of the exploitation of the power of linguistic variation. Foreignisation, by this logic, is therefore ultimately ethnocentric, insofar as it remains a product of the target culture itself, rather than an honest, unspoiled bundle of source cultural authenticity, as it sometimes seems to be treated by translation specialists. Venuti reiterates this particular point on a number of occasions in *The Translator's Invisibility*. What he presents as this inescapable relationship between the source and the target culture is indeed at the heart of the concept of foreignisation:

This reading [the attempt to ground a symptomatic reading of translated texts on a foreignizing method of translation that assumes a determinate concept of subjectivity] uncovers the domesticating movement involved in any foreignizing translation by showing where its construction of the foreign depends on domestic cultural materials. (Venuti, 1995: 29)

Such textual features [archaisms] indicate that a translation can be foreignizing only by putting to work cultural materials and agendas that are *domestic*, specific to the target language. (Venuti, 1995: 35, emphasis in original)

In foreignizing translation, the difference of the foreign text can only be figured by domestic values that differ from those in dominance. (Venuti, 1995: 98)

The construction of the foreign in a translated text, Venuti claims, depends on domestic cultural material and values. Foreignness, then, is not an absolute: some properties inherent in the ST do not filter through in the TT,

but rather the foreign characteristics, attributes, appearances of the TT are in fact established relatively, using domestic cultural materials. Within these domestic cultural materials, Venuti argues that some are ‘dominant’, and that foreignness can be conveyed or achieved using precisely those that are not dominant. These, termed the ‘remainder’, are defined as ‘the collective force of linguistic forms that outstrips any individual's control and complicates intended meanings’ (Venuti, 1998: 108). The remainder is taken in opposition to dominant discourses, such as the standard, and conformity to the existing canon. It allows for the stimulating and ‘disturbing’ effects of translation: by using archaisms or non-standard forms, underused or out-of-use forms of discourses in their translations, translators can simulate foreignness. The remainder can serve several purposes: it accounts for the productive nature of translation (by complicating intended meanings, opening new possibilities of interpretation and disturbing dominant discourses) and, by using the remainder, translators in fact create – and to a vast extent perform – alternate discourses, which in turn create the impression of foreignness. In this respect, arguing in favour of foreignisation, Venuti diverges from Shapiro’s idea that translation should be ‘like a pane of glass’ and ‘should never call attention to itself’. Exploiting alternative discourses and breaking with the canon allow for the expression, the portrayal of the unfamiliar. A great level of competence is still required of the translators. It is in fact paramount, insofar as relevant stimuli have to be used in an appropriate amount and combination so as to trigger desired connotations and associations and portray other cultures in a way that is not only

coherent, but also hopefully enlightening. While Venuti argues that such an approach can disturb dominant discourses, the question is whether translation can provide a genuine access to a text's foreign characteristics.

Venuti's distinction between domestication and foreignisation is not strictly symmetrical, and their polarisation by other scholars at first glance seems unjustified:<sup>11</sup> although it is convenient to classify translation techniques thus (despite the fact that some techniques – such as omission – resist classification), foreignisation is in fact a type of domestication. The complexity of foreignisation is better illustrated thus: foreignisation is both the mildest type of domestication in terms of its result – it makes the TT appear foreign – and is also simultaneously the ultimate type of domestication, precisely because it relies so intensely on the appreciation of domestic values to create its impact. Zlateva (2004: 3) believes that 'what is *domesticated* is the form and the content of the *source text* and what is *foreignised* and *exoticised* is the form and content of the *translated text*' (emphasis in original).<sup>12</sup> Zlateva thus breaks with the perceived idea

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, Venuti did not intend to present domestication and foreignisation as diametrically opposed concepts. The polarisation of domestication and foreignisation has often been understood and the two concepts used as a pair of antagonistic forces defined mutually and in opposition to each other. Whereas Venuti demonstrates that the distinction between sameness and otherness, domestic and foreign (notably because the foreign is expressed through the domestic), is perhaps not that clear cut, and insists that translation can provide access to this otherness through the use of non-dominant discourses, a number of specialists of translation have recycled Venuti's concepts, and have placed them at the opposite ends of a continuum. They consequently over-simplify the complex relationship between sameness and foreignness as well as the issues associated with representation and representability of the foreign.

<sup>12</sup> Foreignisation and exoticism – or exoticisation – are sometimes used as near synonyms by some translation theorists. Kwiecinski (2001: 13) notes that these terms 'tend to be used rather loosely and to refer to different phenomena potentially leading to terminological gaps and inconsistencies', and draws a distinction between two sets of binaries: domestication/foreignisation and assimilation/exoticism. Whilst correctly stressing that the distinction between exoticism and foreignisation has become blurred to the point that the two words have often become merged (Kwiecinski, 2001: 15), the

of a frozen binary between domestication and foreignisation and illustrates that translation is always domesticating, while foreignisation comes to exist only when translators consider the form and content of the TT – that is, through intralingual play, by considering intralingual dynamics and the construction of foreignness with the domestic values of the target culture. This further emphasises the relativity of foreignness and of the construction of Otherness, which are not so much strictly diametrically opposed to, or inherently different from, what is domestic, but rather are established in relation to dominant local impetuses. According to Venuti, dialectal varieties, archaisms and other forms of *dominated* or marginal discourses (as opposed to dominant) provide tremendous creative potential for translators and offer the possibility of putting an end to the invisibility of translation and translators.

This chapter has so far established two facts. First, that Venuti's concepts of foreignisation and domestication are not diametrically opposed. Rather, foreignisation is subordinated to domestication; it is a type of domestication, since the (idea of the) foreign is in fact constructed using domestic values and tools. Secondly, the attitude in France towards domestication and foreignisation is comparable to that in the Anglo-American world. Whilst a number of voices emerged as early as the seventeenth century, calling for an exploration of the foreign properties of texts in translation, in practice the aesthetic acceptability of translations has always been conditional on their conforming to the stylistic and artistic

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author's binaries are of limited use to us. For the purpose of this thesis, we will use the word foreignisation, since it does not bear the potential for caricature that exoticism carries.

canon. The level of prescriptivism imposed on the French language means that writing is strictly regulated and that there are widespread ideas and strong feelings regarding what is correct and what is not. Bearing in mind these findings, we will now examine whether Venuti's concepts are relevant to the study of subtitling in a French context. Venuti demonstrates that foreignising translations are not a mere theoretical possibility but do exist in the Anglo-American world, where they are nonetheless misunderstood and received negatively. While there is no doubt that foreignising translations are also possible in French (through the use of archaisms or under-used forms), the use of the remainder in subtitles certainly raises the problem of their acceptability.

Considering the concepts of domestication and foreignisation in the context of subtitled films, the complexity of cultural dynamics is even greater: we have mentioned that films are intricate objects and that subtitles are problematic to analyse and difficult to place within a theoretical framework, notably because both the original and the translation are present simultaneously, thus making subtitled films hybrid objects. It is this complexity that we are now going to analyse. We will provide an account of the interplay between source and target cultures in subtitled films and reveal, in the light of the analysis provided in Chapter Four, the generative – creative – as well as the destructive processes of cultural contact, where tension, disjunction and fusion are at play. We will therefore consider the potential of translation as a shaping force and ideological notions of 'dominant' discourses, particularly when it comes to

using non-standard forms.

### ***Domestication/foreignisation and subtitled films***

#### *Relevance of domestication and foreignisation as a polarised dichotomy*

The domestication/foreignisation paradigm, when construed as a polarisation of translation approaches (as in Figure 1), appears very limited in scope: it is a convenient framework that allows us to establish whether one particular element belongs more to the source or to the target culture, but it does not allow examination of the text as a whole, or of combined elements. Because of the very nature of subtitles, subtitled films are always-already pulled in both directions, for although a translation of the dialogue is provided, the original soundtrack is retained, and the two elements have to co-exist and share the space of the film. This can be construed as a case of domestication, just like any and all translation: the dialogue is translated and a product that is foreign is brought to viewers in the TL. But there is also a foreignising edge, as subtitles themselves (along with any foreign languages that can be heard in the soundtrack) are a constant reminder of the foreign origin of a subtitled film. Subtitles, because they are written over the images, materialise as translation as soon as they appear on the screen. Interlingual subtitles, then, are in essence both domesticating and foreignising: their form pulls them towards the foreignisation end of the continuum, while the act of translation is domesticating.

It can be argued that the apparent tension between the form and the content of subtitles is also rendered more complex by the dialogic nature of films. On the level of the relationship between the cultural sphere of the film and that of viewers, the original film is foreign for its audience, it originates from a different cultural sphere, and this foreignness is formally and permanently foregrounded through the use of subtitles. On the level of the dialogue however, and this is particularly relevant when it comes to the portrayal of minorities in films (and for that matter of speakers of non-standard varieties), some characters may belong to the (portrayed) dominant culture, while others may belong to minorities. In such cases, the relationship between the two ought to be conveyed not *by* the subtitles, but *in* the subtitles: subtitles formally indicate foreignness, but if they are to portray the relationship between dominant and subordinated in a film, then their form is not enough and their content has to be relied upon if these different levels of foreignness and their relationship is to be conveyed. It appears, then, that layers of foreignness can in fact be imbricated in one another.

To put it in linguistic terms, it is clear then that as far as subtitles are concerned, both the channel (subtitles) and the code (French) have different impacts: the channel gives a general sense that the film is foreign, but it remains that an intelligent use of the code (and its potential variation) is necessary in order to convey cultural organisation and hierarchy. Subtitles formally convey a general sense of foreignness, which is independent from the original text and is the inevitable product of the

ancillary character of subtitles. Translators do not impact on the formal presentation of subtitles, but do on their content: what remains to be seen is whether a more specific type of foreignness can be invoked in the subtitles, whether translators can manage to give viewers in the TL an idea of the original in the subtitles. I will argue in this chapter that in the case of the subtitling of AAVE into French, this is possible.

Dialectal forms and elements that are culturally-bound can be translated in a variety of ways, whether they are found a cultural equivalent for viewers in the TL, or retained or eliminated in the translation. Those strategies, as seen above, are often placed on a domestication vs foreignisation continuum, because they are considered to express a pull of the TT towards one pole or the other. This is rendered more complex still by the way cultural elements are translated – particularly non-standard features in the speech of characters, because they provide an opportunity to use non-standard features of the target language. Those alternatives can be considered very domesticating, because they are necessarily anchored in the target culture. As a result, the content of subtitles can potentially collide with the other channels of the film by trying to ‘bring viewers home’, through the transposition of culturally-bound elements from the original to the target culture.

I do not mean to suggest that the polarisation of domestication and foreignisation is wholly unjustified or is nonsensical: it can certainly serve a purpose and provides a convenient framework for the classification of



culturally-bound elements on a continuum. Each element can be assessed in its own right and independently from the other channels of a film: specific cultural references can be transposed to the target culture (domesticated) or deliberately preserved as they are in the original (foreignised). Such a polarisation of domestication and foreignisation does not, however, help to work out what foreignness is invoked in a translation, how it is foreign, what the nature of that foreignness is and how it is different from other types of foreignness. This is in fact a criticism that can be addressed at Venuti's paradigm, as we will see in the following section, which provides an examination of the relevance of Venuti's original concepts of domestication and foreignisation in the context of subtitled films.

#### *Relevance of Venuti's domestication and foreignisation*

Venuti's original idea of foreignisation involves the use of the remainder. For Venuti, the remainder is not necessarily motivated by elements of the ST, as we have noted above. This leads to a problem similar to the one regarding the polarisation of domestication and foreignisation: the foreignness invoked by the remainder is not qualified, and although the remainder points towards the foreignness of that translation, it does not assert anything specific about the nature of this foreignness. This particular point can be addressed in the context of subtitled films: translators certainly have an impact on the content of subtitles, and their use of the remainder can express foreignness. This foreignness can, in turn, be supported by the other channels of the film (in other words, the other

channels of a film can be used to orientate the understanding of viewers in the TL towards a foreignness that is more specific),<sup>13</sup> or it can clash with the subtitles. Venuti's paradigm is seemingly relevant to the examination of the content of subtitles. There are, however, two important provisos, both of which were mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis. First, translators have to be cautious in their use of the remainder, for if they use archaisms or forms that have been under-used or that are not codified in writing, they might affect the ability of viewers to read the subtitles with sufficient speed. Secondly, and perhaps obviously, the use of words in the TL that have strong connections to a particular region or to a particular group of people might of course be problematic and trigger cognitive-narrative dissonances. In other words, the remainder used in subtitles should be compatible to some extent, with the images of the film, and this compatibility should pre-date its use. This is in fact an issue that is not specific to subtitled films, but to the foreignising approach in general. The main issue here is that the use of the remainder (archaisms or dialectal features) can be very problematic, precisely because dialectal forms of the TL are often bound to the target culture, and as such can clash with visual elements of a film that are bound to the source culture.

One of the main concerns with subtitled films stems precisely from the fact that foreignness is built from domestic material. Non-dominant discourses are used to create the impression of the foreign, and the foreign is thus built using local blocks of meaning, blocks that might consist in deliberate

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<sup>13</sup> This is an important difference between films and literature, and the latter may have to rely on paratextual material to achieve a similar effect.

divergence from the standard but are still, ultimately, part of the target culture. When these blocks from the target culture are superimposed onto images in the form of subtitles, there is always the possibility that the two – images and subtitles – may clash, generating a failed bi-cultural object that culminates in a break of viewers' suspension of disbelief. In the case of the French film *La Haine*, it is certainly odd for the American audience (those that frequent art houses and consume foreign films, and therefore presumably experience the foreign) to be faced with three protagonists who wander between their housing estate and Paris where hotdogs cost 'two bits', and who speak (in the subtitles) using certain forms of AAVE. The remainder, here (features of AAVE), does not fulfill its foreignising purpose, but rather the opposite. It literally dis-locates the film – it changes its locus, partially anyway, and renders it a cultural aberration that does not belong anywhere. In this particular context, the use of the remainder was also accompanied by a systematic transposition of cultural references to the target culture, as observed in the introduction of this chapter. This dislocation of the film meant that the dissonance between the subtitles and the images was too great, too deliberate an attempt to make the unfamiliar become familiar, in spite of many indications of foreignness (images, soundtrack, subtitles).

It would seem that the use of the remainder in film subtitles is doomed to failure, necessarily creating a schizophrenic object that inhabits two spaces at once. In what precise circumstances, then, is it possible to use the remainder in subtitles, without leading to two cultures clashing on screen?

Cultures, far from being discrete entities, sometimes share a fair amount of overlap, can take inspiration from one another, and fuse. This chapter seeks to argue that in the event of such an overlap, it is possible to hint at the foreignness of the original by using a remainder that shares, to a more or less direct extent, associations with the culture of the ST. By playing on the overlap between two cultures, it is possible, through the use of linguistic devices from the TL, to evoke and even invoke, to awaken and bring to the fore meanings of the ST that might have been thought ‘lost’ in translation, precisely by taking advantage of the polysemiotic nature of films. We will see below that although the translators’ cultural transposition of *La Haine* proved unsuccessful (commercially and critically at least), such strategies are not necessarily condemned to failure. Whilst the use of African American slang to subtitle *La Haine* was generally deemed unsuccessful, I will argue that *verlan* can serve a valid purpose when used to translate AAVE.

### ***The use of verlan to subtitle AAVE***

We have explained in Chapter Four that *verlan* still carries strong connotations nowadays: it still bears strong associations with speakers of *banlieue* French, and with the French *cités* in general. We highlighted at the end of the previous chapter that some *verlan* words like ‘teuf’, ‘keuf’ and ‘meuf’ are now in the Larousse dictionary. Words like ‘keubla’, ‘tassepé’, ‘feuj’ and ‘kepa’ (or any alternate spellings thereof) are not, which reflects their lack of integration in the French lexis. In other words, the former have all been codified, and to some extent, can be legitimately

written, whereas codification has been ‘forced’ onto the latter words by the subtitlers, using certain tacit rules that appear to be used when it comes to *verlanisation* (for instance, the use of the letter ‘k’ rather than ‘qu’ with *verlan* words starting with the sound /k/). I would contend that words like ‘teuf’, ‘keuf’, and ‘meuf’ are recognisable and understood by a larger part of the French public than ‘keubla’, ‘tassepé’, ‘feuj’, and ‘kepa’. If the codification of these words into writing is problematic (and not unanimous – ‘keubla’ can for instance be found spelt ‘kebla’, or ‘tassepé’ without the middle ‘e’), what is even more problematic is whether they will be understood by viewers or prevent them from engaging with the film.

The ‘Code of Good Subtitling Practice’, available on the European Association for Studies in Screen Translation’s webpage states that in subtitles, ‘the language should be grammatically correct since subtitles serve as a model for literacy’ (Carroll & Ivarsson, 1998).<sup>14</sup> Whilst *verlan* is not grammatically incorrect, its use certainly challenges accepted models for literacy as well as a certain idea of the norm. Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 9) also suggest that subtitles have to be unambiguous and ‘semantically adequate’.<sup>15</sup> Whilst it is difficult to establish precisely what ambiguity and semantic adequacy might be, and what particular elements in subtitles may be ambiguous for viewers, words in *verlan* – more particularly those that are less widely used – certainly run the risk of not being understood and of generating ambiguity. Naturally though, viewers

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.esist.org/> [accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2011].

<sup>15</sup> The Code of Good Subtitling Practice also provides rules that aim to avoid ambiguity in subtitles. For instance, ‘simple syntactic units should be used’, and ‘the text must be coherent’ (Carroll & Ivarsson, 1998).

can rely on other contextual clues to speculate on the meaning of those words, which overall, represent a very small portion of the dialogue. In addition, the opacity of *verlan* might even be desirable, in the same way that AAVE can potentially be opaque for non-speakers of AAVE.

In the subtitles of the corpus, the use of *verlan* is particularly salient because it is associated with a very specific culture, one that is local. The other features that we discussed in Chapter Four – particularly those intended to convey informality – are fairly generic, to the point that they seem to be accepted, normalised ways of transcribing speech in writing, and can commonly be found in ‘oral’ forms of writing: comic books, advertisements, or dialogue transcription in novels, for instance. Unlike *verlan*, these features are not tied to a particular social or geographical group. The case of *verlan*, then, engages us in a particularly interesting analysis *a posteriori*: because it is so strongly associated with a particular age group (youths) from particular areas (the euphemistic *banlieues*) that are socially deprived,<sup>16</sup> *verlan* runs the risk of triggering cognitive-narrative dissonances when used in film subtitles.

However, we have shown in the previous chapter that French street culture has strong ties with its African American counterpart, which is absolutely crucial to our study. The link between the two cultures is a strong and significant one, and is constantly re-asserted in the media by artists,

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<sup>16</sup> Again, this is not to say that all the young people in the *banlieue* use *verlan*, or that *verlan* is exclusively used in the *banlieues* by unemployed young people of various ethnic origins. Rather, the *banlieues* are treated, by various specialists of *verlan*, as the birthplace of *verlan*, where the most recent innovations take place. Therefore the inhabitants of the *banlieues* are considered the primary innovators and users of *verlan*.

through clothing, parallels made between American inner cities and French *cités*. They are so deeply connected that a layperson might hazard that they are, from a French perspective, very similar. Whilst representations of African America are ubiquitous in France, the opposite is far from true. I argue here that it is possible, through the use of *verlan* in the subtitles, to trigger associations with French street culture and also, by proxy to its overarching ‘mother’ culture. In the end, the use of *verlan* to translate AAVE can benefit from networks of representations and stereotypes that associate French street culture and African Americans to trigger connotations for viewers in the TL, connotations which go beyond mere domestication. The use of *verlan* may actually serves a purpose that can be called foreignising (I qualify this statement below).

It is worth noting that whilst the English subtitles of *La Haine* were singled out as problematic, French film critics rarely discuss the quality of the translation (whether dubbing or subtitling) of films in their reviews. In the vast majority of cases, it is in fact impossible to determine whether the critics have seen a film in a dubbed or subtitled version. Whilst the use of features of AAVE to translate *banlieue* French was deemed a hindrance, the use of *verlan* to translate AAVE has not been commented upon. The use of *verlan* is relevant precisely because French street culture is in many ways subordinate (for lack of a better word) to its American counterpart, because it draws so much from it – in terms of streetwear, sports, and arts – and because it draws its inspiration and momentum from it. Whilst French teenagers in the *cités* (those we have described as the primary users of

*verlan*) certainly hold their American counterparts in high regard,<sup>17</sup> the opposite is not true, or certainly not to the same extent. American youths know little about French rap music or sport culture, and have little interest in French *cités*. A careful assessment of the cultural dynamics at play is therefore necessary, should translators want to use features that are connotated geographically or socially in the TL. The important difference with Venuti's theory is that the choice of *verlan* in the TL is clearly motivated by the ST. *Verlan* metonymically invokes French street culture as well as African America, and the images and soundtrack, rather than clashing with *verlan*, provide a context for its understanding. The meaning of *verlan* is channeled by the other semiotic systems of the film: they make *verlan* make sense. This is only possible in a situation where the overlap between the source and target cultures is appropriate, and, crucially, shared by viewers.

The use of *verlan* in subtitles certainly has to be controlled and contained. The subtitles are trying to make sense of the film, and have to be in cognitive-narrative harmony (we talked about dissonance above, this is its virtuous opposite) with the other channels. *Verlan* has resonance potential: that is, it can summon SL connotations in the TL, it can metonymically invoke a network of associations that is directly in relation with the source culture. Although not the case in any of the films of the corpus, it can be conjectured here that such features (particularly when they have a cryptic component, the way *verlan* does) could potentially be overused to the point

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<sup>17</sup> This particular point was discussed in Chapter Four.



of obscuring meaning irremediably. In the films in this corpus, however, *verlan* words do not feature frequently enough to obscure meaning significantly (should viewers fail to identify these words as cases of *verlan*). The opacity of *verlan* could in fact be desirable, in that it deliberately confronts viewers with a departure from the standard that establishes characters as speakers of a non-dominant discourse. *Verlan* in the films is used significantly (and usually in the opening lines of the films), but overall quantitatively quite little, and systematically by characters portrayed as young speakers of AAVE. It should also be noted that unlike in the English subtitles of *La Haine*, where every cultural reference was transposed to the target culture, cultural references in this corpus usually retain their foreignness: ‘dollars’ remain ‘dollars’ in the subtitles, ‘Miller High Life’ beer is also retained (*Do the Right Thing*), as is Old E (*Menace II Society*), and as are references to American people (such as David Dinkins, Michael Jordan or Mike Tyson) across the corpus. In some cases, when references would be unknown to a French audience or unclear from context, they are neutralised, as in the examples provided in the following table:

Dialogue	Subtitles
1- <i>Sweet Dick Willie</i> : You mothafuckas are always talking dat old Keith Sweat shit. ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )	Avec vous, c'est toujours le même vieux refrain
2- <i>Junior</i> : Come on, shoot dis one, let's go to Sizzlers. ( <i>White Men Can't Jump</i> )	Finissons-en et en route pour le resto.
3- <i>Raymond</i> : Get yo' tired butt up here, Gretzsky. ( <i>White Men Can't Jump</i> )	Bouge ton cul, hockey man.
4- <i>Sidney</i> : Ah ain't got nothin to worry about, 'cept Cathy Rigby over here. ( <i>White Men Can't Jump</i> )	Je me fais pas de souci, sauf pour M. le gymnaste.
5- <i>Basketball player</i> : What's Opie Taylor talking about man? ( <i>White Men Can't Jump</i> )	Qu'est-ce qu'il dit, le péquenaud?
6- <i>Roland</i> : No wonder he sound like Willy Nelson. ( <i>The Wood</i> )	C'est pour ça qu'il a un accent de péquenot.
7- <i>Slim</i> : Niggas what do ah look like? Alice from the Brady Bunch? ( <i>The Wood</i> )	Est-ce que j'ai l'air d'une bonniche?

Table 41 – Examples of the neutralisation of cultural references in the subtitles

The examples in this table illustrate that when cultural references are not retained in the French subtitles, they are not transposed to the target culture either. In all these examples, a cultural reference in the original has been made more generic in the subtitles – Keith Sweat, an African American singer and his lyrics become ‘vieux refrain’, a Sizzlers restaurant becomes ‘resto’, and ice hockey superstar Wayne Gretzsky becomes a somewhat surprising ‘hockey man’. In *White Men Can't Jump*, Billy is compared first to American gymnast Cathy Rigby (‘M le gymnaste’) and then to the fictional character Opie Taylor from a small community in North Carolina

(‘péquenaud’). In *The Wood*, references are made to Willy Nelson, a country music singer (‘péquetot’) and to Alice, the housekeeper (‘bonniche’) of the Brady family in the American show *The Brady Bunch*. In all these examples, translators have clearly picked up on one particular characteristic of each reference. In none of these cases have references been transposed to the target culture. *Verlan*, then, represents the only significant effort to adapt culturally-bound target culture elements.

This analysis indicates that Venuti’s paradigm, if used in the context of films, needs elaboration. Since the use of the remainder in the TT is not necessarily linked with any singular properties that may be found in the ST, in *The Translator’s Invisibility* Venuti does not carry out the type of cultural assessment that we are suggesting in this chapter. According to his analysis, unlike ‘fluent’ translations, the translation that ‘releases the remainder’ (Venuti, 1998: 10) opens itself to the incursion of the foreign, ‘the substandard, and the marginal’ (Venuti, 1998: 11), and this in spite of the fact that the idea of the foreign is built with domestic material. Venuti (1998: 11) elaborates: ‘Cultivating a heterogeneous discourse [...] does not so much prevent the assimilation of the foreign text as aim to signify the autonomous existence of the text behind (yet by means of) the assimilation process of translation’. This is perhaps never more correct than in the case of subtitled films: the autonomous existence of the foreign text (film) is not in doubt, as outlined above. What is more crucial here is the expression of the marginal and of the substandard (in the words of Venuti) specifically through the use of *verlan*. The use of this heterogeneous discourse (*verlan*),

although eminently assimilating, does not and cannot domesticate or foreignise the source film on its own. Rather, it signifies the non-standard qualities of the dialogue in the source film. The difference with Venuti's theory is that the use of *verlan* in the TL is motivated precisely by the relationship between source and target cultures, and relates to the variation and to the non-standard qualities found in the original.

We have mentioned in an earlier section that Díaz Cintas and Remael note that good translators somehow manage to 'suggest' variation in subtitles. Whilst their assumption is quite vague and the authors do not explain exactly how translators can manage to 'suggest' particular information to viewers, we would like to offer the explanation that the use of *verlan* in French subtitles, when juxtaposed with images of African American youths, can aptly 'suggest' the variation of the original.

The assessment that translators make to decide whether some forms of the remainder can be used in the TT involves looking at a film as a whole – and not merely at the original dialogue in an atomised way, translating item-for-item, word-for-word. Translators analyse the culture(s) portrayed in the film and decide whether features of the TL can trigger the right associations from viewers and give them access to the meanings of the ST. Because of the constraint of reduction and the presence of the other channels in subtitles, pieces of information are discarded (because they are deemed superfluous, irrelevant or semiotically redundant), while others are selected (because they are salient) and undergo some level of

reorganisation. Subtitling therefore involves a de-atomisation of the ST: translators must look at the film in its entirety and in its complexity before they are able to make a judgment and decide whether a particular use of the remainder makes sense from a cultural perspective.

‘Suggesting’ the right associations for viewers in the TL requires knowledge of the networks of representations that are intertwined in subtitled films in order to work out the meanings that viewers will understand. While this may sound commonplace in translation and translation theory, it has deeper implications in audiovisual translation. The semiotic hybridity of films implies that meanings are constantly the subject of a negotiation between the different channels: images portraying African American youths, over which subtitles are presented, can ‘channel’ meanings and have the power to privilege one or more interpretations over others. The foreignness inherent to subtitles, the other channels of the films, and the fact that cultural references are not transposed to the target culture invite viewers to consider the film as foreign. Because of this we would like to argue that Venuti’s domestication/foreignisation paradigm does have some operational relevance in the context of subtitled film: the form of subtitles is a constant reminder of foreignness, but the content of subtitles can use features like *verlan* which are in a way domesticating because they are so deeply rooted socially and culturally. However, when juxtaposed with the image of the foreign (and with the subtitles as a further reminder of foreignness), viewers can match socio-cultural features associated with the remainder with socio-cultural properties of the original,

and in those cases only can translators make use of the domestic to express the foreign. In the case of subtitled films, the use of domesticating forms can serve a foreignising purpose and create a specific Other, and say something of the nature of the Other's foreignness.

In this context, the task of translators is most peculiar: it obviously involves a willingness not to standardise the dialogue, but also and more crucially, a great deal of empathy to determine what associations viewers will be making. Translators have to draw on a pool of widely acknowledged (and therefore hopefully more recognisable) stereotypes to construct and express difference. There is a tension – almost a discomfort – in the practice of audiovisual translation: whilst we have acknowledged that translation is always-already ideological, translation seems to require from translators a combination of specialist – and to a certain extent elitist – skills, and of lay persons' assumptions. In relying on recognised stereotypes, translators run the risk of perpetuating those very stereotypes. For example, the use of *verlan* may well bear social and geographical connotations that are appropriate in the representation of African America, but the themes tackled in the films of the corpus (such as racism, substance abuse, and violence) may well be associated with speakers of *verlan* (i.e. people who use *verlan* are violent and so on) and perpetuate negative perceptions of certain social groups. The use of *verlan*, whilst very interesting from a translational perspective because of the parallel it exploits with African America, also means that negative stereotypes associated with speakers of *verlan* can be attributed to the characters

portrayed. In other words, alongside the socio-geographical information, negative stereotypes are also ‘carried over’ in the translation process.

It can be argued here that this is also the case with such media of representation as films: the films of the corpus that claim to realistically portray the experiences of African Americans in the United States somehow pigeonhole them to a limited set of stereotypes. Ghettoisation, drugs, and violence are the only leitmotifs, and it is no wonder, then, that speakers of AAVE are often associated with negative stereotypes, such as poor education and aggressive behaviour. We insisted above on the fact that specialists of AAVE emphasise that AAVE is not sub-standard, but rather is a rule-governed system that is learnt and known by its speakers. AAVE is often thought of as somehow inferior to English, and the characters portrayed in the films of the corpus who use features of AAVE are systematically perpetuating negative stereotypes. Paradoxically, the films of the corpus were said to be presenting a more realistic representation of African America but appear to be themselves perpetuating to some extent the stereotypes that plague the perception of AAVE and its speakers. Whilst translators may well be aware of issues connected to prestige and of the social status of languages, it is very difficult – perhaps impossible – to ignore these issues and find a middle ground in the form of translations that do not reinforce these poor perceptions. If the films could be accused of perpetuating negative stereotypes about African Americans, then some might argue that the subtitles ought to do the same. What the subtitles do, however, is

perpetuate stereotypes about the French *banlieues* (more specifically about speakers of *verlan*) and reassert the link between American inner cities and French *banlieues*.

### ***Conclusion***

What does this study reveal about domestication and foreignisation as general concepts for translation? According to Venuti, the use of the remainder is not motivated by specific elements of the ST, and as a result the foreignness is one that disturbs dominant discourses. It is a foreignness that is not revelatory of the nature of the original. This study addresses this particular point and suggests that foreignisation can be qualified. The use of the remainder (such as *verlan*) can, in some cases, go beyond hinting at the foreign nature of the original and can actually explore this foreignness. Foreignisation as a concept needs to see its scope broaden: beyond a disturbance of the dominant discourses, it can also serve more specific purposes. Naturally, this is done through the use of domestic material (which, as Venuti rightly pointed out, is always the case with translation), and foreignisation remains essentially reliant on the use of this material. One of the main issues that translators face when they are translating non-standard varieties is the illustration of specific connotations of the original in the translation. The use of *verlan* to translate AAVE reveals that this can be achieved to some extent when two cultures share strong ties that are widely recognised. However, such solutions are far from universal and are only possible in very limited cases. It is therefore important to explore the cross-cultural potential of non-standard features used in the TL. Relations



between the source and target cultures need to be explored case by case in order to find out how much overlap there is between the two, and how familiar viewers in the TL are with the source culture. While French viewers can be expected to be quite familiar with African American culture (either through media exposure or even by proxy through exposition to French street culture), American viewers do not benefit from the same level of exposure to French street culture. Consequently, the use of *verlan* to subtitle AAVE can trigger associations with the United States, but the use of AAVE to subtitle *banlieue* French cannot, and instead brings the film back ‘home’ to American viewers in a way that is deeply problematic.

Subtitlers work under strict time constraints, and their research into how much is shared by the source and target cultures is bound to be limited. Their assessment relies on systems of representations and existing stereotypes, and their translation decisions are informed by these assessments. This might in itself be considered problematic insofar as it means that translation can confirm existing stereotypes, in a negative way, and there seems to be an irreconcilable tension between relying on stereotypes to establish characters quickly on the one hand, and perpetuating those stereotypes on the other.

Subtitled films offer the possibility of familiarising oneself with foreign languages and cultures: first the soundtrack retains intonation and pronunciation patterns that would be replaced through dubbing, and in parallel, the images bring viewers into contact with ‘mannerisms and

behaviours of other cultures (gesticulation, way of dressing, interpersonal relationships, geographical spaces)' (Díaz Cinas & Remael, 2007: 15). And whilst this possibility of having direct access to the original is part of the reason why subtitling is such a vulnerable form of translation, it has also been described by specialists of subtitling as one of the most positive aspects of subtitling (D'Ydewalle & Pavakum, 1992; Koolstra & Beentjes, 1999). It is because of the part of foreignness already present that the idea of foreignisation is so much more relevant in the context of subtitled films: the subtitles can make use of the domestic tools and values described by Venuti specifically for the purpose of the foreign, because the foreign is already there and is complemented by the subtitles.

Whilst linguists are well aware that linguistic varieties are not hierarchically organised, it is possible that because of the mechanics described above, the use of the remainder in translation reinforces the status of the standard as the perceived superior variety. In films, as in literature, linguistic forms have high metonymic values, and stand for whole networks of representations. As we have seen, Venuti's concepts – domestication and foreignisation – prove very useful when considering the cultural dynamics at play in interlingual subtitling. Because of the nature of films, however, the level of cultural proximity between features in the dialogue of the original and the subtitles should be looked at carefully before translation is attempted. While Venuti argues that translations are transparent and translators invisible, subtitles are anything but transparent. Consequently, their foreignising form can potentially be benefited from,

and subtitles (both in terms of their form and their content) can work together with images to constitute a system, which despite having domesticating elements serves purposes that are ultimately foreignising.

## Conclusion

It is easy to forget how violent the translation process actually is. Texts undergo all sorts of manipulation, languages are replaced with other languages, cultures substituted, disguised, masked, or veiled. Subtitles present the important difference of being added onto a film, whilst large parts of the original – the images and the foreign soundtrack – are retained and constitute a potentially destabilising presence, one that permanently reminds viewers that they are watching (and listening to) a foreign film. This thesis illustrates the possibility that subtitles may resonate with the other channels of a film and demonstrates that the polysemiotic nature of films, rather than being a limitation, can be explored in order to represent foreignness.

Throughout the course of the thesis, several findings were presented. In Chapter One, I established that films combine several semiotic systems and that subtitles add to this complexity. The literature review also revealed that while a limited number of studies have dealt with the translation of AAVE, none has done so in the context of subtitling into French. Chapter Two provided an examination of the linguistic variety under scrutiny: a description of the main linguistic and interactional features of AAVE was provided, and it was demonstrated that through their use of language, speakers of AAVE give away, consciously or not, information about their social and cultural background. Building on this, Chapter Three illustrated that in the films of the corpus, only certain features of AAVE were relied on to portray speakers of AAVE. Most notably, features with a cryptic

meaning, or one that could be difficult to understand by a wide audience, barely featured in the films, if at all. Words specific to the lexis of AAVE are not found at all in the films of the corpus, while the use of verbal markers is very infrequent. Consequently, the films rely heavily on syntactical and phonological variation to portray speakers of AAVE. This sustains the claim that film language undergoes a process of neutralisation, and thereby loses some of its specificities. In Chapter Four, the analysis of the subtitles of our films revealed that a shift had taken place between the use of variation to represent AAVE in the film dialogues on the one hand, and the use of variation in the French subtitles: whilst the films rely primarily on phonological and syntactical features, to the detriment of lexical ones, the French subtitles rely essentially on lexical variation, and more specifically on the use of low register words to portray speakers of AAVE. A number of grammatical devices were also identified, but while such devices convey the informality of the situations portrayed, they do not convey any information specifically about speakers of AAVE. This shift, from syntactical/phonological in the films to predominantly lexical in the subtitles, is significant as it illustrates that different media potentially rely on different codes for representations. This is not entirely surprising, of course: the conventions of dialogue and subtitle writing are driven by different imperatives. Film dialogues have to be immediately understood by as wide an audience as possible and any element that may be partially cryptic is discarded. In the subtitles, the conventions of writing are key to guaranteeing easy readability and understanding. From a French perspective, our study is in tune with current discussions of diamesic

variation: in the subtitles, the qualities of written French are upheld. Grammar is rarely non-standard, and when it is, it relies on features that have been widely codified in writing.

Such is the level of diamesic variation in French that some linguists speak of the situation of France as one of diglossia.<sup>1</sup> This gap between the spoken and the written variety is problematic because it poses a dilemma for subtitlers: should one stick to existing conventions and strictly follow the rules of written French? Or should these conventions be challenged, the boundaries of written French pushed, and how? Very recent developments in the study of electronic French (van Compernelle, 2008a, 2008b) indicate that there is a re-appropriation of the written code by users of the language: the gradual codification of electronic French is slowly allowing it to move away from preconceived ideas that it is childish, lazy, or just plain wrong. The conciseness of its forms would certainly represent a great advantage for subtitling, and electronic French constitutes an ever-growing pool of features that can potentially be drawn upon to portray non-standard voices. Naturally, readability being key to understanding subtitling, borrowing from electronic French could only happen very slowly. In Chapter Four we mentioned examples of the elision of weak sounds in writing in the French subtitles ('p'tit' and 'pauv'), and there is a case to be made that features that mirror pronunciation in writing of the type of 'jsais pas', or even 'chais pas', would widen the range of linguistic resources available to subtitlers. The main issue is to make such forms acceptable and recognised;

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<sup>1</sup> See Ager (1990), Offord (1996) and Gadet (2003).

a further question is whether subtitlers should be the ones to pioneer such changes. The use of such resources would be invaluable for the purpose of intralingual subtitling. It would permit the representation of heterogeneous discourses in writing with a higher level of accuracy and fidelity and would also open the possibility of transcribing the discourses of different groups of the population, with different accents, and idiosyncrasies. Currently, the restrictions imposed on written French imply that heterogeneous discourses are homogenised in writing in a way that borders on censorship. There is, in the end, a very precarious balance between accessibility (making sure that a film can be viewed and understood by the widest possible audience) and what could be seen as adventurous creativity. While readers of comic books, for example, may already be accustomed to features that reflect the flavour of spoken speech in writing (whether in terms of accent, pronunciation or prosody), other people may not. From an interlingual perspective, the thesis also confirmed that subtitles display homogenising tendencies between the different varieties portrayed in the original films. The examination of the use of *verlan*, however, revealed that it is possible to draw connections between the original and target cultures in order to portray foreignness in translation. Some of the words of *verlan* used in the corpus have integrated the French lexis and entered mainstream dictionaries, but others may remain cryptic to some viewers. Context often provides clues, but the words of *verlan* themselves may remain mysterious. This is not necessarily a problem though, and it might even be argued that the translation reflects the cryptic potential of the original. Translators

mediate between accessibility on the one hand, and the use of potentially cryptic features on the other.

The use of non-standard features such as *verlan* in French subtitles certainly suggests the existence of an increased porosity between spoken and written French. It is paving the way for an extension of subtitlers' linguistic resources, and, in the context of translating AAVE, it represents a deliberate attempt at portraying non-standardness. The fact that *verlan* is found in five of the films in the corpus is also very significant, as it shows that similar strategies can be relied upon in analogous contexts. The subtitles of the films that use *verlan* have been written by different translators working for different companies, and it is fairly unlikely, given the relative secrecy of subtitling companies and their unwillingness to communicate on translation strategies, that the translators were in contact with each other.<sup>2</sup> The search for such new linguistic resources is key to moving away from prescribed limitations and to broadening the pool of resources and discourses that translators can draw from, almost like a toolbox, but in an Oulipian way. Just like the authors of the Oulipo, subtitlers work under very difficult formal constraints, particularly constraints of space, which not merely represent a limitation but also powerful creative stimuli.

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<sup>2</sup> This is in fact an aspect of the job that could certainly be improved – subtitlers still have to rely on internet forums and blogs to communicate with each other and exchange tips and advice, and would greatly benefit from corporate channels in order to facilitate communication with colleagues.



The use of *verlan* is certainly a very salient feature in the subtitles of the films of the corpus. It is so strongly associated with the French *cités* that its use in subtitles could appear almost counter-intuitive and counter-productive. The final chapter of the thesis illustrated that forces of domestication and foreignisation do not have to be thought of as polarised and that, in fact, domestic resources can be used in the representation of the foreign. *Verlan* helps align speakers of *banlieue* French with speakers of AAVE. Whilst this is only possible because of the strong link that exists between the two cultures, it opens great creative possibilities and draws attention to the importance and function of linguistic variation in the expression of social and cultural traits, as well as to the mechanisms of cross-cultural communication. We mentioned in the opening chapter of the thesis that if a particular linguistic feature is to evoke a social or geographical meaning, the association between the feature and said meaning has to pre-exist the occurrence of the feature in a text for readers to be able to make sense of it. In the case of a film, this association has to exist in two different contexts, but only to some extent: the use of *verlan* is not a case of dialect-for-dialect translation but is used metonymically to bridge the gap between the source and target cultures.

Like Mookie in *Do the Right Thing*, translators are the contact point between cultures and make decisions without necessarily knowing what the consequences will be. They deal with representations as much as they shape them, and this is, in the end, everything that is at stake here: subtitled films provide viewers with an experience of the foreign, shaping or

reshaping what viewers know – or what viewers think they know – about the foreign. Translation plays a very important part in the way viewers experience the foreign through films, and translators therefore bear enormous responsibility in the transmission of the foreign. Because this can only be done using domestic material, they are also responsible for the subversion, transformation, or stretching of this domestic material, and also for associations made between the source and target cultures. Translators always have the option of neutralising variation in the original, thus evening out the complexities of the original. Or else they can use features like *verlan* and reinforce the link between French *cités* and American inner cities, which, as we have shown, is not unproblematic. The two quotations by Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X at the very end of *Do the Right Thing*, one advocating the use of violence, the other condemning it, distantly echo the translator's dilemma between cultural distancing through the neutralisation of non-standard features and cultural bridging through the use of non-standard features. Can we *Do the Right Thing*, then? Mookie certainly chose his side.

## Appendix

Dialogue	Subtitles
<p><i>Pino:</i> How come niggas are so stupid?</p> <p><i>Mookie:</i> If you see a nigga, kick his ass. (<i>Do the Right Thing</i>)</p> <p><i>Mookie:</i> Pino, all you always talk about is nigga dis nigga dat, and all your favourite people are so called niggas.</p> <p><i>Pino:</i> It's different. Magic, Eddie, Prince, They're no niggas. I mean, they're not black, I mean, let me explain myself, they're not really black, I mean they're black, but they're not really black, they're more than black, it's... it's different. (<i>Do the Right Thing</i>)</p> <p><i>Youth:</i> Dem niggas ain't homboys. Put dem poor-ass niggas over dere. (<i>Clockers</i>)</p> <p><i>Errol:</i> Don't be looking at me in de eye, nigga. (<i>Clockers</i>)</p> <p><i>Rodney:</i> Ah don't wanna be no zero nigga. [...] Nigga gonna spend all his money like dat is gon end up broke every day of his life. Why? Cos the nigga don't believe in hisself. (<i>Clockers</i>)</p> <p><i>Rodney:</i> You think ah'm one of dem little crew niggas sittin on a project bench? (<i>Clockers</i>)</p> <p><i>Sidney:</i> You don't even fall for dat nigga shit out dere on de court. (<i>White Men Can't Jump</i>)</p> <p><i>Dealer:</i> Hey man, you know dis nigga right here? (<i>In Too Deep</i>)</p> <p><i>God:</i> Yo watch out for dis nigga,</p>	<p>- Pourquoi les nègres sont si cons? - Si tu vois un nègre, tabasse-le.</p> <p>T'en as toujours après les nègres et tes stars, c'est tous des nègres.</p> <p>C'est différent. Magic, Eddie, Prince... c'est pas des nègres.</p> <p>Je veux dire, ils sont pas noirs. Je m'explique...</p> <p>Ils sont pas vraiment noirs, ils sont noirs, mais pas vraiment.</p> <p>ils sont plus que ça. C'est... différent.</p> <p>Ces Blacks, c'est pas des voyous.</p> <p>Va poser ton cul de Black là-bas.</p> <p>Me regarde pas comme ça.</p> <p>Je veux pas d'un zéro. [...]</p> <p>Le Black qui dépense tout se reveille fauché tous les jours</p> <p>parce que le Black ne croit pas en lui.</p> <p>Tu me prends pour un de tes sales nègres de la cité?</p> <p>Les conneries des Blacks, ça te trouble pas.</p> <p>Tu le connais, ce mec?</p> <p>Il a pas l'air, mais il est balèze.</p>

<p>he ø stronger than he look. (<i>In Too Deep</i>)</p> <p><i>God</i>: Mexicans don't fuck wid niggas. (<i>In Too Deep</i>)</p> <p><i>Slim</i>: Nigga don't know nothin. (<i>The Wood</i>)</p> <p><i>Slim</i>: Nigga don't drink. (<i>The Wood</i>)</p> <p><i>Roland</i>: You look you ø a fast nigga, ah mean, I told you man you better run. (<i>The Wood</i>)</p> <p><i>Mike</i>: What, nigga? (<i>The Wood</i>)</p> <p><i>Slim</i>: Put dat on dat nigga's tab, please. (<i>The Wood</i>)</p> <p><i>Stacey</i>: Y'all niggas want summin? [...] You niggas is wastin time, come on! (<i>The Wood</i>)</p> <p><i>Stacey</i>: She ø cute so there ø always some nigga tryin to fuck wid her. (<i>The Wood</i>)</p> <p><i>Slim</i>: You let dat nigga Terry bone. (<i>The Wood</i>)</p> <p><i>Youth</i>: Now go and give de nigga a drink. (<i>Menace II Society</i>)</p> <p><i>Gangster</i>: Get de fuck out! Break yo'self nigga!</p> <p><i>Harold</i>: Alright nigga chill! (<i>Menace II Society</i>)</p> <p><i>Chauncy</i>: You know you ø my nigga Caine. (<i>Menace II Society</i>)</p>	<p>Ils dealent pas avec les blacks.</p> <p>Cet enfoiré sait que dalle!</p> <p>Il ne boit pas.</p> <p>T'as l'air rapide. T'as qu'à courir.</p> <p>Alors, enfoiré?</p> <p>Mettez ça sur sa note.</p> <p>Vous voulez quelque chose, les mecs? [...]</p> <p>Vous perdez du temps. Venez!</p> <p>Elle est mignonne. Les mecs essaient de la baiser.</p> <p>T'as baisé avec Terry.</p> <p>File-lui à boire.</p> <p>T'as entendu? Sors!</p> <p>C'est bon, je sors.</p> <p>T'es mon pote, tu sais.</p>
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Table A1 – Further examples of the subtitling of the word 'nigga

Dialogue	Subtitles
<i>Buggin' Out</i> : Mookie! How come ain't no brothas up on de wall? Mookie! ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )	Y a pas de Noirs sur le mur?
<i>Pino</i> : You talk some brotha talk to him. ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )	Parle lui en Noir.
<i>Radio Raheem</i> : I love you, brotha. ( <i>Do the Right Thing</i> )	Je t'aime, Frère.
<i>Flipper</i> : That doesn't mean to say that because a brotha is with a white girl, he is less down. Ah mean that's progressive. ( <i>Jungle Fever</i> )	Ça veut pas dire que si un Noir sort avec une Blanche,  il se renie, il est moins progressiste.
<i>Waitress</i> : Fake tired brothas like you comin in here. So typical. ( <i>Jungle Fever</i> )	Des faux Noirs comme vous qui viennent ici. C'est typique.
<i>George</i> : Keep mah mama outta dis, brotha. ( <i>White Men Can't Jump</i> )	Mêle pas ma mère à ça.
<i>George</i> : You lost, brotha. ( <i>White Men Can't Jump</i> )	T'as perdu.
<i>Sidney</i> : White boys don't count. You have to give me a brotha. ( <i>White Men Can't Jump</i> )	Les Blancs, ça compte pas.  Je veux un Black.
<i>Scotty</i> : Yous a poor excuse for a brotha. ( <i>New Jack City</i> )	Tu parles d'un refré.
<i>Xavier</i> : Was it a brotha dat killed yo' fatha? ( <i>Get on the Bus</i> )	C'est un Noir qui a tué ton père?

Table A2 – Further examples of the subtitling of the word 'brotha'

Dialogue	Subtitles
<i>Ahmad: You ø de delivery boy, bitch! (Do the Right Thing)</i>	Toi, t'es le livreur, connard!
<i>God: Don't be callin mah baby no bitch. (In Too Deep)</i>	La traite pas de mule.
<i>Kyle: Bitch!</i>	Fiotte.
<i>Flip: I know you didn't jus' call me bitch.</i>	T'as dit quoi, là?
<i>Gary: Sounded like bitch to me.</i>	Fiotte, je crois.
<i>Flip: I know you didn't jus' call me bitch! (Get on the Bus)</i>	T'as pas fait ça?
<i>Card player: Ah ain't yo' bitch, nigga. (Menace II Society)</i>	Je suis pas ta gonzesse.
<i>Boy: Ah ain't yo' bitch. (Menace II Society)</i>	Je suis pas une morue.

*Table A3 – Further examples of the subtitling of the word 'bitch'*

<i>Dialogue</i>	<i>Subtitles</i>
<i>Mother Sister: Don't stare at me! De evil eye doesn't work on me! [...] You don't have dat much love. (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>Me regarde pas comme ça!  Le mauvais oeil marche pas sur moi!  T'as pas assez d'amour pour ça!</i>
<i>Buggin Out: Mookie! How come ain't no brothas up on de wall? Mookie! (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>Y a pas de Noirs sur le mur?</i>
<i>Mookie: I can't do nothin wid him, Sal. (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>Je peux rien faire, Sal.</i>
<i>Mookie: Hey, Da Mayor don't know nothin, awight? (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>Le Maire sait rien, d'accord?</i>
<i>Mookie: Don't start no shit, awight? (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>Commence pas.</i>
<i>Da Mayor: Don't call me nothin. (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>M'insultez pas!</i>
<i>Mookie: You don't do nothin wid dem anyway. (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>T'en fais rien de toute façon.</i>
<i>Mookie: Mah name ain't Kunta Kinte. [...] Don't call me no bum. (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>Je m'appelle pas Kunta Kinte. [...] Me traite pas de bon à rien.</i>
<i>Gator: Ah promise Mama. Ah'm straight, ah'm clean, you don't have to worry about me anymo'. (Jungle Fever)</i>	<i>Je te promets, maman. Je prends rien. T'en fais pas.</i>
<i>Cyrus: Ah don't say nothin to nobody. (Jungle Fever)</i>	<i>Je dis rien à personne.</i>
<i>Strike: This ain't no joke. (Clockers)</i>	<i>Je deconne pas. [sic]</i>
<i>Strike: Can't you get Errol for dat shit, man? (Clockers)</i>	<i>Tu peux pas demander à Errol?</i>
<i>Errol: Don't be looking at me in de eye, nigga. (Clockers)</i>	<i>Me regarde pas comme ça.</i>
<i>Errol: You can't cheat dis shit. (Clockers)</i>	<i>On la trompe pas, cette saloperie.</i>

<i>Rodney: Ah don't wanna be no zero nigga. (Clockers)</i>	<i>Je veux pas d'un zéro.</i>
<i>Rodney: Summin wrong? (Clockers)</i>	<i>Ça va pas?</i>
<i>George: Mah motha ain't no astronaut. (White Men Can't Jump)</i>	<i>Ma mère est pas astronaute!</i>
<i>George: Keep mah mama outta dis, brotha. (White Men Can't Jump)</i>	<i>Mêle pas ma mère à ça.</i>
<i>Player: Hey, ah can't run man. (White Men Can't Jump)</i>	<i>Je peux pas jouer, mec.</i>
<i>Sidney: Don't take it personally, baby. (White Men Can't Jump)</i>	<i>Me fais pas la gueule.</i>
<i>Sidney: Don't be talkin bout mah motha, awight? (White Men Can't Jump)</i>	<i>Et parle pas de ma mère.</i>
<i>Pookie: This ain't Delancy Street. You ain't gonna jew me down, that's m y price, man, take it or leave it. (New Jack City)</i>	<i>On est pas à Delancey Street. Fais pas ton feuj. C'est mon prix.</i>
<i>Nino: It ain't like ah haven't been tryin. Ain't dat right Selina baby huh? (New Jack City)</i>	<i>C'est pas faute d'avoir essayé. Pas vrai, Selina?</i>
<i>Nino: Don't nobody know nothin? (New Jack City)</i>	<i>Personne sait rien?</i>
<i>Dealer: Yo God, I ain't tell 'em shit. (In Too Deep)</i>	<i>J'ai rien dit.</i>
<i>God: Don't be callin mah baby no bitch. (In Too Deep)</i>	<i>La traite pas de mule.</i>
<i>God: Yo watch out for dis nigga, he ø stronger than he look. (In Too Deep)</i>	<i>Il a pas l'air, mais il est balèze.</i>
<i>Youth: You don't fuckin listen man. (In Too Deep)</i>	<i>T'écoutes pas.</i>
<i>Evan Jr: Yo dawg, ah ain't goin. (Get on the Bus)</i>	<i>Mon pote, j'y vais pas.</i>



<i>Xavier: No bro, ah ain't gay. (Get on the Bus)</i>	<i>Non, je suis pas homo.</i>
<i>Evan Jr: Man, why you talkin 'bout stealing, ah ain't stolen from nobody. (Get on the Bus)</i>	<i>Ecoute...</i>
	<i>Voler? J'ai jamais volé.</i>
<i>Mike: Man, don't do dat, come on. (The Wood)</i>	<i>Non, fais pas ça.</i>
<i>Card player: Ah ain't yo' bitch, nigga. (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>Je suis pas ta gonzeesse.</i>
<i>A-Wax: Slingin all dat shit in the hood, y'all ain't got any mothafuckin money. (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>Avec tout ce que tu deales, t'as jamais de blé?</i>
<i>Gangster: Don't make me rush you, get yo' ass out the car. (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>M'oblige pas à te faire sortir.</i>
<i>Caine: Grampa, ah ain't never kill nobody. (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>J'ai jamais tué personne.</i>
<i>Caine: Look it ain't loaded. (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>Il est pas chargé.</i>
<i>O-Dog: What's wrong? You don't want no hamburger? (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>Quoi, tu veux pas de hamburger?</i>
<i>O-Dog: You ain't his daddy. (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>T'es pas son père.</i>
<i>Caine: It ain't mine. (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>Je suis pas le père.</i>
<i>Caine: I ain't got time for dis awight? (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>J'ai pas le temps pour ça.</i>
<i>Boy: Ah ain't yo' bitch. (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>Je suis pas une morue.</i>
<i>Brenda: You ain't got a job. (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>T'as pas de boulot.</i>
<i>Youth: Yo man, ah ain't goin up in dere. (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>Je vais pas là-bas, mec.</i>

<p><i>Youth: He ain't botherin you so don't fuck wid him. (Boyz n the Hood)</i></p> <p><i>Dook: You don't know what I be gettin. Ah ain't fuckin no dopeheads. Ah might let dem suck my dick but ah don't fuck 'em. (Boyz n the Hood)</i></p> <p><i>Doughboy: Ah ain't no criminal. (Boyz n the Hood)</i></p> <p><i>Monster: She ain't like dat wid Rick though. (Boyz n the Hood)</i></p> <p><i>Doughboy: Ain't no God. (Boyz n the Hood)</i></p> <p><i>Doughboy: Oh we got a problem here? We got a problem here? We got a problem there? (Boyz n the Hood)</i></p>	<p><i>Il te fait pas chier, alors, l'emmerde pas.</i></p> <p><i>Tu sais pas qui je nique. Je baise pas de camées.</i></p> <p><i>Elles me sucent, mais je les baise pas.</i></p> <p><i>Je suis pas un criminel.</i></p> <p><i>Elle fait pas ça avec Rick.</i></p> <p><i>Dieu existe pas.</i></p> <p><i>Ça va pas? Qu'est-ce qui va pas, mec?</i></p>
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*Table A4 – Further examples of the omission of preverbal particle 'ne' in the subtitles.*

<i>Dialogue</i>	<i>Subtitles</i>
<i>Coconut Sid: Ain't no other explanation. (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>Y a pas d'autre explication.</i>
<i>Mister Señor Love Daddy: Y'all need to cool dat shit out. (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>Faut laisser refroidir!</i>
<i>Mookie: Ah gotta talk to you. (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>Faut que je te parle.</i>
<i>Youth: Man, we gotta get dat money, man. (Clockers)</i>	<i>Faut qu'on le gagne, ce fric.</i>
<i>Rodney: Why you always arguing wid me? (Clockers)</i>	<i>Pourquoi faut toujours que tu me contredises?</i>
<i>Strike: Ah gotta go, ah'm sick. (Clockers)</i>	<i>Faut que j'y aille. Je suis malade.</i>
<i>Rodney: Ah heard dat homicide came back on you again yesterday. (Clockers)</i>	<i>Paraît que le flic de la criminelle est revenu te voir hier.</i>
<i>Rodney: Hey look here, now ah gotta deal wid dis. (Clockers)</i>	<i>Maintenant, faut que je m'occupe de ça. Regarde.</i>
<i>Gee Money: If ah make dis, you gonna have to come out yo' pockets. (New Jack City)</i>	<i>Si j'y arrive, va falloir racler vos poches.</i>
<i>Nino: Good, because you gotta rob to get rich in de Reagan era. (New Jack City)</i>	<i>Bien. Faut voler pour être riche à l'ère Reagan.</i>
<i>Pookie: Dat shit be callin me man, it be calling me man, I just gotta go to it. (New Jack City)</i>	<i>Mais c'est plus fort que moi. Faut que je replonge.</i>
<i>Gee Money: Ah jus' met her. Ah need time to getta know her. (New Jack City)</i>	<i>Mais faut que je la connaisse mieux.</i>
<i>Nino: The leader, Jughead, he told to prove my loyalty, ah had to snuff somebody out. (New Jack City)</i>	<i>Le chef m'a dit: "Pour prouver ta loyauté, faut buter quelqu'un.</i>
<i>Latique: you gots to earn yo' stripes, man. (In Too Deep)</i>	<i>Faut les gagner, tes galons.</i>

<i>God: Ah hear you ø real good wid yo' tongue. (In Too Deep)</i>	<i>Paraît que t'as la langue agile.</i>
<i>Evan Jr: Ah gotta use de restroom. (Get on the Bus)</i>	<i>Faut que j'aille au petit coin.</i>
<i>Slim: Somebody oughtta give her a tic tac. (In the Wood)</i>	<i>Faudrait lui donner des Tic Tac.</i>
<i>Tat: Don't you think it's about time you gave me mah money? (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>Faudrait voir à me payer.</i>
<i>O-Dog: He ø dead man, fuck dat, let's go! (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>Il est mort, faut se tirer!</i>
<i>Doughboy: Heard you ø like mister G Q Smooth now. (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>Paraît que t'es devenu un minet.</i>
<i>Dook: Yo man, you gotta have a scholarship to go to USC? (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>Faut une bourse pour y aller?</i>
<i>Tre: Ah mean, ah think it'd be better if we're together. (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>A mon avis, vaut mieux qu'on reste ensemble.</i>
<i>Doughboy: He don't need to be seeing dis. (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>Faut pas qu'il voie ça.</i>
<i>Dook: Let's get de fuck outta here, let's go man, let's go! (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>Faut qu'on se casse. Rappelle, mec!</i>

*Table A5 – Further examples of the omission of indefinite clitic pronoun 'il' in the subtitles*

<i>Dialogue</i>	<i>Subtitles</i>
<i>Buggin Out: Damn, Sal, you cheap, man. (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>Putain, Sal, t'es radin!</i>
<i>Cee: You might as well through dem shits out. (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>T'as plus qu'à les balancer.</i>
<i>Buggin Out: You ø lucky de black man has a lovin heart. [...] You ø lucky ah'm a righteous black man, cos you'd be in serious trouble man. (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>T'as du pot que le Noir ait du coeur. [...]</i>
<i>Ahmad: You ø so old, you ø like a fossil. (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>Si j'étais pas un Noir correct, t'aurais de sérieux ennuis.</i>
<i>Mookie: Dat's fucked up. (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>T'as l'air d'un fossile!</i>
<i>Mookie: You don't do nothin wid dem anyway. (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>T'es con.</i>
<i>Cyrus: Man, are you on crack or somethin, you ø crazy! (Jungle Fever)</i>	<i>T'en fais rien de toute façon.</i>
<i>Strike: And, Go, you ain't supposed to be over here. (Clockers)</i>	<i>T'es sous crac?! T'es fou.</i>
<i>Youth: You got de money? (Clockers)</i>	<i>T'es pas censé être ici.</i>
<i>Rodney: Cos you ø like mah son, man. (Clockers)</i>	<i>T'as le fric?</i>
<i>Darryl: You ø still here mothafucka? (Clockers)</i>	<i>Parce que t'es comme mon fils.</i>
<i>Errol: Got fi'ty bucks? (Clockers)</i>	<i>T'es toujours là, enfoiré?</i>
<i>Errol: You ain't got no business fuckin with dis shit. (Clockers)</i>	<i>T'as 50 dollars?</i>
<i>Rodney: You ø like my son. (Clockers)</i>	<i>T'as pas à toucher à cette saloperie.</i>
<i>Sidney: You ø not good enough. (White Men Can't Jump)</i>	<i>T'es comme mon fils.</i>
<i>Player: You loose? (White Men</i>	<i>T'es pas assez bon.</i>

<i>Can't Jump)</i>	<i>T'es relax.</i>
<i>Raymond: You need you a good gun, man. (White Men Can't Jump)</i>	<i>T'as besoin d'un bon flingue.</i>
<i>Sidney: You ø a real cool customer on the court. (White Men Can't Jump)</i>	<i>T'es plutôt calme sur le terrain.</i>
<i>Latique: Keepin it real wid us, right? (In Too Deep)</i>	<i>T'es avec nous?</i>
<i>Cole: If you ain't one of us, you mus be one of them. And yo' stupid ass is dead. (In Too Deep)</i>	<i>Si t'es pas avec nous,</i> <i>t'es avec eux,</i> <i>et t'es mort.</i> <i>T'es nul!</i>
<i>Latique: You ain't shit. (In Too Deep)</i>	<i>T'écoutes pas.</i>
<i>Youth: You don't fuckin listen man. (In Too Deep)</i>	<i>Où t'étais passé, toi?</i>
<i>God: Where you been at? (In Too Deep)</i>	<i>T'es flic, J.?</i>
<i>God: Now, you ø a cop J.? (In Too Deep)</i>	<i>T'es pas un keuf, J. Reid.</i> <i>T'es un vendu.</i>
<i>God: You ain't no cop, J. Reid. You ø a sell-out! (In Too Deep)</i>	<i>T'aime pas qu'on t'appelle "mon pote"?</i>
<i>Evan Jr: You don't like to be called 'dawg', right? (Get on the Bus)</i>	<i>- T'as vu Boyz N the Hood?</i> <i>- T'es dedans?</i>
<i>Flip: You seen Boyz n the Hood?</i> <i>Gary: You in there? (Get on the Bus)</i>	<i>T'es fou!</i>
<i>Man: You ø crazy. T'es fou! (Get on the Bus)</i>	<i>Tu veux de la musique,</i> <i>t'en auras.</i>
<i>Jeremiah: You want music? Music you got. (Get on the Bus)</i>	<i>T'as vu ses nichons dans Purple</i>
<i>Slim: You seen dose titties in Purple Rain? (The Wood)</i>	

<p><i>Roland: Man, you crazy? (The Wood)</i></p> <p><i>Slim: Yo, you ø de new kid, right? So what's up nigga? U cuz or blood? (The Wood)</i></p> <p><i>Roland: You look you ø a fast nigga, ah mean, I told you man you better run. (The Wood)</i></p> <p><i>Slim: You ain't got a dollar? (The Wood)</i></p> <p><i>Slim: Fool, you ø crazy. (The Wood)</i></p> <p><i>Slim: What else we gon do man? (The Wood)</i></p> <p><i>Slim: So what's up Mike? How many you got? (The Wood)</i></p> <p><i>Slim: You won, big Mike. (The Wood)</i></p> <p><i>Slim: You let dat nigga Terry bone. (The Wood)</i></p> <p><i>O-Dog: What d'you say bout mah mama? (Menace II Society)</i></p> <p><i>Caine: The fuck did you do man? (Menace II Society)</i></p> <p><i>Caine: Y'all ain't grown. (Menace II Society)</i></p> <p><i>Youth: Tat know you ø out here? (Menace II Society)</i></p> <p><i>Tat: Fuck you mean you ain't got mah money? (Menace II Society)</i></p> <p><i>Caine: Nigga, ah know you ain't dumb enough to be showing niggas de robbery tape man. (Menace II Society)</i></p> <p><i>A-Wax: Slingin all dat shit in the</i></p>	<p><i>Rain?</i></p> <p><i>T'es cinglé.</i></p> <p><i>T'es le nouveau?</i></p> <p><i>T'es un cousin ou un frère?</i></p> <p><i>T'as l'air rapide. T'as qu'à courir.</i></p> <p><i>T'as pas un dollar?</i></p> <p><i>T'es fou.</i></p> <p><i>T'as une autre idée?</i></p> <p><i>T'en as combien?</i></p> <p><i>T'as gagné, Grand Mike.</i></p> <p><i>T'as baisé avec Terry.</i></p> <p><i>T'as dit quoi, là?</i></p> <p><i>T'as déconné!</i></p> <p><i>T'es pas grand.</i></p> <p><i>Tat sait que t'es là?</i></p> <p><i>Comment ça, t'es raide?</i></p> <p><i>T'as été assez con pour faire tourner la cassette?</i></p>
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<i>hood, y'all ain't got any mothafuckin money. (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>Avec tout ce que tu deales, t'as jamais de blé?</i>
<i>Gangster: Get de fuck out! Break yo'self nigga! (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>T'as entendu? Sors!</i>
<i>Sharif: Come on man, you wasn't dere long enough to catch de HIV. (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>T'es pas resté assez longtemps pour chopper le sida.</i>
<i>O-Dog: You ain't his daddy. (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>T'es pas son père.</i>
<i>Chauncy: You know you ø my nigga Caine. (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>T'es mon pote, tu sais.</i>
<i>Brenda: You ain't got a job. (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>T'as pas de boulot.</i>
<i>Ricky: You ain't got no money. (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>T'as pas de fric.</i>
<i>Youth: Nigga, what you mean you ain't skinny? (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>T'es pas un sac d'os?</i>
<i>Doughboy: Heard you ø like mister G Q Smooth now. (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>Paraît que t'es devenu un minet.</i>
<i>Tre: Damn, bro, how'd you get so big? (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>T'es mastoc! Comment t'as fait?</i>
<i>O-Dog: Is you down, nigga? (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>T'es avec nous ou pas?</i>
<i>A-Wax: Hey homey, you need some help? (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>T'as besoin d'aide, mec?</i>
<i>Caine: When ah was growin up, you was like mah dad, man. (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>Quand j'étais petit...</i>
<i>Ricky: You ain't got no money. (Boyz n the Hood)</i>	<i>t'étais comme un père pour moi.</i>
	<i>T'as pas de fric.</i>

*Table A6 – Further examples of elision of /y/ in subject pronoun (vocalic simplification) 'tu' in the French subtitles*



<b>Dialogue</b>	<b>Subtitles</b>
<i>Buggin Out: He makes much money off us black people. (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>Il se fait du fric avec les Noirs.</i>
<i>Mookie: Fuck! Mah money, shit! (Do the Right Thing)</i>	<i>Merde! Mon fric! Merde.</i>
<i>Gator: He done stepped in the cash money thing. (Jungle Fever)</i>	<i>Il a marché dans le flouze.</i>
<i>Gator: You see, me, myself, personally, I woulda opted for some money and shit. (Jungle Fever)</i>	<i>Tu vois, moi, personnellement, j'aurais opté pour le fric, tout ça.</i>
<i>Youth: You got de money? (Clockers)</i>	<i>T'as le fric?</i>
<i>Raymond: Hey, gimme de money. [...] Come on man, loan me some money. (White Men Can't Jump)</i>	<i>File-moi ton fric. [...] Prête-moi du fric, mec.</i>
<i>Pookie: Lemme see de money, lemme see de money. (New Jack City)</i>	<i>Fais voir la maille.</i>
<i>Nino: We wasn't makin no money then was we? (New Jack City)</i>	<i>On se faisait pas de fric.</i>
<i>Pookie: I'll take his money and report to you. (New Jack City)</i>	<i>J'empoché son fric et je te rencarde.</i>
<i>Stacey: Gimme de money! (The Wood)</i>	<i>File-moi le fric!</i>
<i>A-Wax: Slingin all dat shit in the hood, y'all ain't got any mothafuckin money. (Menace II Society)</i>	<i>Avec tout ce que tu deales, t'as jamais de blé?</i>

*Table A7 – Further examples of the subtitling of the word 'money'*

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——— 2004. *She Hate Me*, 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks (Fiction, United States of America, 138 min)

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