Working conditions and collaborative practices in the translation of French film: subtitling banlieue cinema

Hannah Silvester

Department of French, School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

ABSTRACT
This article analyses questionnaire responses provided by a small group of well-established subtitlers working to translate a genre of French independent/auteur film into English. The subtitlers were asked open questions about their working practices and conditions. Their responses are analysed in relation to the commission, collaborative practices, and technical aspects of the subtitling process. The study compares the workflow and working conditions of these subtitlers with other published accounts of the subtitling process. One of the most striking findings of the analysis is the high degree of collaboration taking place among the agents involved in the subtitling of these films. On occasion, longer time frames allow for consultation with colleagues and experts, and in many cases the director and/or producers are also involved in the translation process, offering insight into the source text, and attending a simulation of the subtitled film in order to discuss and finalise the subtitles in collaboration with the translator. When working on these films, the translator often approaches the director with queries. In these relationships, a different power dynamic is suggested, and the collaboration that takes place is more subtitler-led than other published accounts of director-subtitler collaboration in cinema.

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1. Introduction
Audiovisual translation (AVT) has been growing as a field of academic study since the 1990s. Within this field, subtitling is recognised as a mode of translation involving certain parameters that are not always in consideration when working with other text types. The study of interlingual subtitles involves examining the process of translation between languages, but must also take into account additional factors, such as the working conditions and workflow, the multimodal nature of film, and processes of condensation and synchronisation required to make a film accessible to those who do not speak the source language of the film. Di Giovanni notes that ‘subtitlers hardly ever work alone on the linguistic operations involved in the overall subtitling process’ (2016, p. 6). Furthermore, Pedersen argues that the subtitling situation is a ‘crucial’ factor, ‘because in very many ways, pivotal explanations of subtitling behaviour lie...
Within the subtitling situation, he includes factors such as broadcasting and pragmatic considerations, to include deadlines and the subtitler’s ‘experience and competence’ (ibid., pp. 116–118), as well as the source text and the target text audience, highlighting that all of these factors can contribute to our understanding of decisions made during the subtitling process.

Further recent work in AVT also advocates for a consideration of the subtitler’s status and/or working conditions in studies of subtitled film (Ramos Pinto, 2018, p. 29; Silvester, 2018, p. 74). Kristiina Abdallah (2012, p. 45) has carried out extensive work on translators in production networks, and advocates for an inclusion of the translators’ working conditions in the study of translation quality, noting that the working conditions of the translator could have a significant impact on the texts they produce. Despite the studies mentioned above, it has been acknowledged that translation process research in audiovisual translation is ‘underdeveloped’ (Massey & Judd, 2020, p. 359). Kuo’s (2015) study, in which she conducted a large-scale global survey, emphasises the variation in subtitling situations around the world. In order to critically examine and understand this global variation, the individual contexts need to be studied in greater depth. This understanding may then be brought to bear on other work in the discipline, such as case studies and quality assessment work.

This article examines the working practices and processes of a small, well-established group of France-based subtitlers working to translate a genre of auteur film from French into English. The questionnaire responses will be analysed in relation to three specific areas: the commission process, collaborative working practices, and technical aspects such as spotting and the use of subtitling software. The subtitlers’ experiences will be compared and contrasted with other published accounts of subtitler working conditions and practices, in order to examine how this part of the industry works compared to mainstream film subtitling, and subtitling for Netflix, for example. In this way, the article will examine the profile of the subtitlers and their work experience, how they work, including the prevalence of collaborative work in their work flow, and how they deal with the aspects of their work that are unique to subtitling.

2. Literature review

2.1. The global subtitling industry

One of the biggest industry-focused studies to emerge in recent years is Kuo’s (2015) ambitious survey of 429 subtitlers in which she sought to compare global subtitler working conditions for the first time. She found that rates varied greatly among the respondents, even among those working in the same country (ibid., p. 171). For example, her findings indicated that in countries with strong unions, ‘the working conditions of subtitlers … were more homogenous and more likely to remain at a certain level, particularly as regards rates, royalties and credits …’ (ibid., p. 189). In addition to this larger-scale study, Jankowska (2013) conducted a survey regarding the status of AVT professionals in Poland. She notes that ‘we know and publish very little about the professional market’, and argues that we should undertake similar studies in other global contexts in order to gain a better understanding of the situation (ibid., p. 56). Although there are some general accounts of the subtitling process (see, for example, Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021), there are relatively few recent explanations of how films
are subtitled in specific contexts. The existing literature in this area will be outlined below and drawn on again during the analysis.

Abdallah (2011) has written about a production network of subtitling in Finland, describing some aspects of the network and the power dynamics between different actors. This work provides an insight into the subtitling process for television in Finland. Tuominen (2018) has also examined the work of subtitling practitioners in the Finnish context. In particular, she considers the notion of community among subtitlers, noting that in recent years, ‘a significant number of subtitlers have formed a more cohesive community that they have used to advocate for their profession’ (ibid., p. 83). This kind of community collaboration can also be seen among the French subtitlers interviewed here. In the Danish context, Beuchert (2017) produced a subtitling process model. In her in-depth analysis of Danish subtitlers’ working practices, she outlines the employment conditions and practices of the subtitlers, noting that most of the subtitlers in Denmark work for agencies (ibid., p. 144). Beuchert’s findings will be returned to in the analysis of the subtitlers’ responses. Jankowska’s (2013) work considers the status and working conditions of audiovisual translators (including those working on subtitling, voice-over, audio description, dubbing and subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing), working in the Polish context. She examines the translators’ job satisfaction and their feelings about the conditions in which they work, noting that for audiovisual translators in Poland, rates are falling and deadlines are becoming tighter (ibid., pp. 49–50). The remaining work on the subtitling process is often anecdotal or based on the personal experiences of an individual (Capitani, 2016; Márquez-Tejerina, 2017).

2.2. Collaboration in audiovisual translation

Since there are a number of agents involved in the translation of a film from start to finish, and that the conditions in which they are working can influence the outcome of the process, it is important to consider the relationships between the various people taking part. In Holz-Mänttäri’s theory of translatorial action, she encourages us to examine ‘translation as purpose-driven, outcome-oriented human interaction’ (Munday, 2008, p. 124). Holz-Mänttäri outlines the various agents involved in the translation process – Initiator, Commissioner, ST Producer, TT Producer, TT User and TT receiver (ibid.) – thus emphasising the communication and relationships inherent in translatorial action. In examining the context of translation production in this way, we are encouraged to consider factors such as the ‘interplay between the translator and the initiator’ (ibid., p. 125). Such interactions during the translation process bring to mind the concept of translaboration, proposed as a means of ‘exploring the practical and conceptual confluence of translation and collaboration’ (Alfer, 2017, p. 286). Zanotti (2020) has recently explored the practice of translaboration in audiovisual translation in relation to Full Metal Jacket (Kubrick, 1987). She notes that Kubrick, the director, was directly involved in the translation process, discussing the translation of the title, and other solutions for specific aspects of the translation with the dubbing translator Riccardo Aragno. Zanotti outlines a collaborative relationship in film translation in which ‘there are visible power differentials between the agents involved’ (ibid., p. 17). Zanotti describes a process of collaboration between a director
and a translator that is considered to be relatively unusual and notes that ‘the collaborative dimension of audiovisual translation in professional settings has … received less attention’ (ibid., p. 2).

Collaboration between the various agents involved in the creation and translation of film has been encouraged through the practice of accessible filmmaking, in which Romero-Fresco (2019) advocates for the inclusion of translation and accessibility considerations in the filmmaking process. He notes that ‘unlike other important elements in film, translation and accessibility are not supervised or controlled by the filmmaker or the creative team’ (ibid., p. 2), reinforcing the notion that contact between the director/producer and the audiovisual translator is not common practice. Romero-Fresco examines the revenue of the top-grossing and Best Picture Oscar-winning films between 2001 and 2017, and finds that ‘the dubbed and subtitled versions provide an average of 45% of a film’s total revenue’ (ibid., p. 2). Yet, the director is rarely involved in the process of making a film accessible to new audiences. In her study of the translation of migration and diasporic British cinema into Spanish, De Higes Andino states ‘once the film is sold, the original film’s authors lose control over their work, and distributors commission the dubbing and subtitling’ (2014, p. 514). Pointing to the ‘inflexible nature of industrial subtitling’, and the power the distributor has over translation, Romero-Fresco notes that ‘independent filmmaking offers an ideal platform for accessible filmmaking to be developed’ (2018, p. 506).

Zanotti points out that standard practice ‘is to outsource the creation of foreign language versions to audiovisual translation companies, preventing the involvement of filmmakers …’ (2020, p. 2). However, she also notes that the situation is different when it comes to ‘auteur cinema’ (ibid., p. 3). Regarding Hollywood cinema, Buckland notes that ‘an auteur … is a director who gains control over all the stages of filmmaking: not just film production, but also distribution and exhibition’ (2003, p. 84). Banlieue film, the genre in question here, could be described as auteur film (Milleliri, 2011, para. 6), and in France, it is said that directors ‘enjoy an “auteur” status’ (Jäckel, 2001, p. 79). This would not be the first example in which France-based subtitlers working on auteur cinema describe cases in which they have the opportunity to communicate with the director regarding their work. Eisenschitz notes ‘Sous-titrer des films dits d’auteur…. peut permettre (ou exiger) un contact plus direct avec les cinéastes’ [subtitling ‘auteur’ films … can allow (or require) more direct contact with filmmakers] (2013, para. 3), while ‘dans le cinéma dit industriel… aucune consultation avec l’auteur, réalisateur ou scénariste, n’est encouragée ni tolérée’ [in ‘industrial’ cinema … consultation with the writer, director or scriptwriter is neither encouraged nor tolerated] (ibid., para. 30). These practices will be explored in more detail in the analysis.

There are a few cases in which directors have become more involved in these processes, such as the aforementioned translation of Full Metal Jacket (Zanotti, 2020). Furthermore, Romero-Fresco (2019) cites some exceptions to the rule, such as the case of ethnographic documentary filmmakers like Alastair Cole, who designates a ‘producer of language and accessibility’, with whom he develops a subtitle guide document (Cole, 2015, p. 138). This was, for example, the case for his multilingual documentary film Colours of the Alphabet (Cole, 2016).
2.3. Subtitling in France

There is some limited work focusing on subtitling practices in the French context specifically, including Eisenschitz’s (2013) extensive account of his experience over the course of his career. Marignan (2019) has written about the impact of technological developments, the advent of video on demand (VOD) platforms, and the phenomenon of fan-subbing on subtitlers’ work, though this is largely applicable to those working on subtitling for TV and for VOD platforms. These works will all be drawn upon in the analysis of these experienced France-based subtitlers. Many of the accounts in the literature are related to subtitling for television or for VOD, and the experiences of the subtitlers surveyed here depart from those described in the literature in a number of ways. Given the significant variation in professional subtitling practices around the globe, more in-depth research into specific contexts would increase our understanding of the ways in which subtitlers work, and this could underpin other work in the field.

This article presents the experiences and practices of a group of French to English subtitlers. The survey results were collected as part of a larger research project into the subtitling of banlieue film. Banlieue film depicts the housing estates (banlieues) situated on the outskirts of large towns and cities in France, which are primarily home to the underprivileged, and populations of immigrant heritage (Tarr, 2005, p. 17). Many of the films are made by directors who grew up in the banlieues and are often working with small budgets to produce films that can counteract less favourable perceptions of the banlieues and the people who live there (Ervine, 2013, p. 139). Independent cinema is described as films which ‘are made outside mainstream cinema practices … and … tend to give an alternative voice to dominant ideology’ (Hayward, 2006, p. 225). She also notes ‘they are mostly low-budget films’ (ibid.). There is some overlap between independent cinema and art cinema, which is also said to be ‘produced outside dominant cinema systems’ (ibid., p. 27) and to ‘favour[s] narratives motivated by realism and authorial expressivity’ (Street & Forbes, 2000, p. 37). These characteristics could be attributed to many films belonging to the banlieue film genre. As such, this data provides valuable insights into the film subtitling industry in France, and the working conditions of experienced practitioners working to translate independent or auteur films.

The subtitlers can benefit from union membership and work in a context where the rights of subtitlers are advocated. It should be noted, though, that the subtitling situation in which this small number of well-established subtitlers work is unlikely to be representative of the French subtitling industry in general (e.g., including subtitling for products other than feature films), or indeed of global practices. The results of Kuo’s survey showed clear links between working conditions and the presence of ‘strong subtitlers’ associations and unions’, revealing that in contexts with strong unions, ‘the working conditions of subtitlers … were more homogenous and more likely to remain at a certain level, particularly as regards rates, royalties and credits …’ (2015, p. 189). Thus, in certain countries, there is less variation in conditions, as freelancers are supported by associations and unions that can sometimes negotiate rates and other conditions on their behalf (ibid., p. 175). The French context is highlighted by Kuo as an example of one in which subtitlers have the support of the Association des Traducteurs et Adapteurs de l’Audiovisuel (ATAA – the French association of audiovisual translators), which is described as ‘a rather active and visible AVT association’ (2015, p. 172). This
article therefore examines the experiences of subtitlers working in a context that is recognised as offering better conditions than some identified in Kuo’s study.

3. Data collection

The research instrument took the form of a questionnaire, produced as a Word document, and emailed to respondents. It was therefore a self-administered questionnaire (Sun, 2016, p. 269). This method was chosen over a standardised interview, as it allowed the busy respondents to complete the questionnaire at their own pace, and when they had availability to do so. The questions were all open-ended, which Sun noted ‘can elicit rich information’ (ibid.). Open-ended questions were chosen to avoid limiting the topics that might arise, so that these more unexpected avenues could be explored further where relevant. Saldanha and O’Brien note that one of the advantages of open questions is that it can offer an opportunity for respondents to ‘highlight an opinion they hold and which is not addressed in the questionnaire’ (2014, p. 157). The disadvantage of this approach was that the level of detail varied among responses. However, given the small number of participants, longer responses were manageable, and a follow-up questionnaire was developed (in the same format), to further explore areas of interest.

The subtitlers surveyed were approached due to their membership of ASIF! (Anglo Subtitlers in France).1 Six France-based ASIF! subtitlers returned completed questionnaires. They are herein referred to as subtitlers A, B, C, D, E and F. The goal of ASIF! is:

- to raise awareness in the French film community that to maintain a pool of talented and highly-skilled translators for subtitling, we need to be paid a decent commercial rate that reflects the added value we bring to a movie. (ASIF!, 2014)

Thus, the subtitlers interviewed were nearly all involved in a movement to promote the value of their contribution, and to campaign to be paid a fair rate for their work. The website lists 52 members at the time of writing, and these members have worked on some prominent films in their time. Although the pool of 6 respondents is small, it should be noted that so too is the French film industry, compared to the US market. The number of French films released each year is much smaller than the number of Anglophone films to be translated into other languages. In 2014, global box office figures for films from the US/Canada amounted to $10.4 billion (this is without considering other Anglophone film markets), while figures for those released in France in the same year were $1.8 billion (Motion Picture Association of America [MPAA], n.d., p. 30). Collectively, the subtitlers benefitted from more than 100 years of experience in the French subtitling industry at the time of responding, and therefore offer a wealth of insight into subtitling practices. The findings of this study provide an insight into a corner of the AVT industry that remains underexplored and offers a starting point from which these aspects could be pursued both in more depth (e.g., through interviews), and on a larger scale (e.g., by surveying a larger pool of respondents).

The subtitlers in ASIF! regularly consult on rates and have made collective agreements to boycott films in the past, where large-budget productions are offering much less than the recommended rate for film subtitles. Given the findings of Kuo’s study highlighted above, this collective action and close collaboration among subtitlers suggests there
could be much less variation in rates and conditions among France-based subtitlers working within the French to English feature film subtitling industry than in some others. However, a much larger study would be required to fully understand the broader French context. It does suggest, though, that the experiences and working conditions outlined here could be somewhat representative of those of well-established subtitlers working to translate independent films from French into English.

A post was made in the ASIF! Facebook group, explaining the research project and asking for expressions of interest from those subtitlers who had worked with films they would consider to be banlieue films, and who would be interested in answering some questions about their approach to translating the films and their experience of the professional process. Those who responded were then sent an information sheet, a consent form and the questionnaire. The study was granted ethics approval from the College of Arts Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow (application number: 100140168). The questions aimed to find out about the general background of the subtitlers, along with more details about their workflows and the process of subtitling a film from commission to submission of the translation. Respondents were told that even partial responses would be valuable. Most provided informative responses and agreed to answer any further questions via email. Based on their initial responses, a follow-up questionnaire was devised to further examine certain areas of interest, such as the use of professional subtitling software, and the various stages in the workflow. The data was collected in 2015–2016.

4. Analysis

It became clear that there are elements of the process and working conditions of these subtitlers that seem to stand out compared to published and anecdotal descriptions of the ways in which subtitlers work. As was noted earlier in the article, there has been relatively little in-depth work published on working practices in specific contexts, despite the acknowledged significance of this aspect of subtitle production. In the first instance, the subtitlers will be introduced, and their backgrounds explained. This will be followed by an examination of three areas: the commission, collaboration in the subtitling process, and technical aspects such as spotting and the use of subtitling software.

4.1. Meet the practitioners

All six respondents have spent extensive time both in France and in Anglophone countries. All of the subtitlers have English as their first language, with the exception of one bilingual subtitler, born in France but raised in the United States, speaking French at home. At the time of responding, all of those interviewed lived in France, and had done so for 20 years or more. There was variation in the level of education received; four of the subtitlers had studied subtitling and/or film translation at postgraduate level, while the other two had studied film or media but had received no formal tuition in translation or subtitling. Where only 32.9 percent of Kuo’s respondents possessed a specialised qualification in subtitling (2015, p. 167), 60% of the respondents in this smaller group of participants held a specialised subtitling qualification. In all cases, the subtitlers were translating into their native language. Most of
the subtitlers had extensive experience in subtitling. Although subtitling was not the
main activity of one respondent (who primarily undertook other translation work),
four of the other subtitlers had more than 20 years of subtitling experience, and
the remaining subtitler had been subtitling since 2004 (more than 10 years at the
time of responding).

Thus, these subtitlers are all professionals having worked for at least a decade in the
industry. The participants joined the industry a long time ago, and their working
methods may reflect more traditional ways of working that developed before the huge
growth in popularity of streaming platforms. The subsequent shift in subtitling practices
included a reduction in subtitling timeframes and a shift towards the ‘US+24’ model, or
the ‘ubérisation’ of subtitling (Marignan, 2019). Some of the subtitlers seem to have a
strong reputation, and do not need to bid for work. This will be discussed further in
the following analysis of the commission process.

4.2. The commission process

When asked how they acquired work, and whether they had to bid for jobs, all six of the
subtitlers responded that they were usually contacted by the production company or
international distributor/sales company. Two subtitlers noted that they generally
obtain work through recommendations, and two mentioned occasionally working for
agencies or subtitling houses. Subtitler B noted:

I am usually approached by either the producer, or the international sales company handling
the film – either because I have already worked for them, or sometimes through word of
mouth. Very occasionally, work comes through one of the laboratories that provide subti-
tling services, or through an agency (but this would not be movie work, more like TV or
 corporate jobs).

This would suggest that the process of acquiring work for film subtitling, and the practice
of direct contact with the original content creator, is distinct from practices for other
types of audiovisual content in France. Subtitler A stated that he never works for
agencies, only directly with production companies. The absence of an organisation in
the middle allows the subtitlers to have greater control over their rates and conditions,
as they can explain to the director or production company any particularities or issues
with the work they are to undertake.

The subtitlers’ questionnaire responses generally revealed that here, too, ‘translation
briefs are extremely rare in real-life subtitling’ (Pedersen, 2011, p. 115). When asked
about the brief, three of the subtitlers noted that they tended to work things out in
discussion with the producers or directors. Returning to Holz-Mänttäri’s list of
roles and players, in the subtitling of these films it could regularly be the case that
the Initiator, the Commissioner and the ST Producer are the same person. Given
that in the theory of translatorial action, it is pointed out that the people involved
in the translation process ‘each have their own specific primary and secondary
goals’ (Munday, 2008, p. 125), the translation process is potentially facilitated here
by the direct inclusion in the process of fewer individual players (i.e., the potential
absence of a distribution company or language service provider), and therefore
fewer diverging goals.
4.3. Collaborative practices in subtitling French film

Collaboration was a recurring theme in the subtitlers’ responses. Szarkowska, Díaz-Cintas and Gerber-Morón carried out surveys of professional subtitlers and viewers as part of a study on quality in subtitling and note that ‘… even though on occasions they think of themselves as the metaphorical cogs in a bigger subtitle production machinery, they ultimately fail to feel that they are an integrated part of a larger team’ (2020, sec. 6). The authors note a tendency among freelancers to ‘position[ing] themselves in manifest opposition to language service providers and media localisation companies’, noting that this could be ‘because of the isolated, freelancing status of most professionals working in the industry’ (ibid.). This sense of isolation is, in some cases, contradicted by the responses in this study, further highlighting the particularity of the circumstances in which this group of subtitlers is working. Many of them highlighted that online resources were useful, with the Internet not only facilitating access to dictionaries, but also providing the possibility of accessing forums, and contacting native speakers. Subtitler E noted that she was able to consult with a translator known for her specialist knowledge of a certain linguistic variety during her work on one film, and that this translator was paid by the production company for her time. Here, we see a clear example of collaborative translation (O’Brien, 2011, p. 17). This scenario demonstrates the initiation of a translator-translator collaboration by the subtitler, in addition to an awareness on the part of the director/production company of the challenges presented by the language in the film. Further, it shows a recognition of the value of consulting with another translator with relevant expertise, as well as the willingness to invest in this.

In her PhD thesis, De Higes Andino interviewed 5 translators working in AVT, noting that ‘interviews with them reveal that lack of communication between the translator and the other agents in the translation process is characteristic of most translation briefs’ (2014, p. 515). However, subtitler B said that he tries to ‘go back to the source, if possible; the writer, director, or whoever else is representing the film, and who might be able to clarify points’. The choice of language here is noteworthy and highlights the auteur nature of the films in question. As noted earlier, this is one area in which the work of this specific group of subtitlers seems to depart from the mainstream film industry trend and is more representative of auteur cinema practices.

The questionnaire responses from five of the subtitlers revealed that in the majority of cases, they attend a simulation, where the film is screened with the subtitles. Subtitler A said he attended a simulation with the director/producer ‘90% of the time’, adding ‘that’s the great advantage of working in France’. In his account of his subtitling experiences, Eisenschitz also mentions attending a simulation (2013, para. 29). The subtitlers surveyed here highlighted the valuable input they receive at this stage, even where the director/producer does not speak English well. Subtitler D wrote:

…it’s vital [because] it gives me perspective […] Some clients feel their English isn’t good enough to judge the English or make themselves useful. I find that, in a majority of cases, they are almost always useful. They ask surprising questions that lead to you reconsidering your choices … give you behind the scenes information that shed[s] light on a specific scene, etc. I have one client who now considers it unnecessary to simulate when we work together and I deeply regret his choice. I’m never as confident on the final outcome as when there’s been a simulation.
This indicates the presence of fruitful communication between director/producer and subtitler in many cases of translation in these films. Although the practice of simulations in subtitling feature films is one which has been discussed elsewhere (Eisenschitz, 2013, para. 29; Sánchez, 2004, pp. 10–11), it is noted that ‘the subtitler is sometimes, though not always, invited to attend the session’ (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 36). Given that in many of the accounts of the subtitling process, the subtitlers studied work with agencies rather than production companies (Abdallah, 2011; Beuchert, 2017; Pedersen, 2011), the prevalence of attendance at a simulation with a director or producer in the case of subtitling these films seems noteworthy. Indeed, in other accounts where the simulation is not explicitly mentioned, we can deduce that discussion between the director and subtitler is rare; Capitani notes that ‘the client will comment on the subtitler’s work only in exceptional cases’ (2016, p. 258). The regular attendance of these subtitlers at the simulation suggests a more collaborative approach to subtitling than might be seen in the mainstream film industry (Zanotti, 2020, p. 2). Contact and discussions between the subtitler and director/production company suggest that the intentions and thoughts of the director and the subtitler are considered important in the subtitling of the films.

Zanotti argues that examining collaborative translation in subtitling ‘allows us to … fully acknowledge the complexity of the process that lies behind the creation of foreign language versions’ (2020, p. 2). In examining the context in which interlingual subtitling takes place, then, it is important to consider the various agents involved, as previous work has highlighted the impact this could have on the outcome of the translation process (Abdallah, 2011; Zanotti, 2020). Eisenschitz’s account of subtitling between English and French, in which he highlights the prevalence of collaboration in the subtitling of auteur films, also expresses the subtitler’s appreciation of the director/producer’s input. He mentions ‘une correspondance humoristique par e-mail avec Debra Winger, productrice de Big Bad Love (Howard, 2001), sans laquelle le film serait resté incompréhensible’ [a comical email exchange with Debra Winger, producer of Big Bad Love (Howard, 2001) without which the film would have remained incomprehensible] (2013, para. 3). This favourable view of collaboration in subtitling is reiterated in the above comments from Subtitler D.

Alfer notes that the bringing together of translation and collaboration brings to the fore ‘questions of power, equality of participation, and mutuality of influence’ (2015, p. 26), along with ‘more fundamental question [sic] about the nature of labour, its relationship with language, the conditions of (textual) production …’ (2017, p. 286). In the case of the director who feels it no longer necessary to simulate when working with Subtitler D, a different dynamic in the director-subtitler relationship is suggested when compared with the ‘forced collaboration’ described by Zanotti (2020, p. 18) in her analysis of Kubrick’s work with Riccardo Aragno, the Italian translator of Full Metal Jacket. Where Kubrick inserted himself into the translation process, the above comments from Subtitlers B and D, along with Eisenschitz’s experiences, imply a collaborative relationship in subtitling auteur film that is largely governed by the subtitler, who contacts the director at relevant points during their work. The working experiences examined here point to a different realisation of the power dynamics in collaborative AVT practices and conditions of production than have been described, for the most part, in mainstream cinema.
4.4. Technical aspects of the workflow

In this section, the technical aspects of the subtitling process, and the related questions of deadlines and technology are explored. Many of the subtitlers would usually have around three weeks to one month to subtitle a film, though some can have one week or less. There can be great variation; Subtitler E mentioned one project where she had only 3 days to complete the task. On the other hand, Subtitler A was given two months to work on one film featuring non-standard language and mentioned that for some other films presenting similar linguistic challenges, he was ‘given plenty of time’, stating that ‘it looks like producers know more time is needed for such films.’ In contrast, in Kuo’s study, 42% of respondents were given two days or less to work on assignments (2015, p. 181). The director/producers’ awareness alluded to above can have a significant impact on the amount of time given to the subtitler. In his study of norms for television subtitling in Scandinavia, Pedersen notes ‘there is evidence of some subtitlers not always being able to set aside the time it takes to use interventional strategies, nor to research all ECRs properly’ (2011, p. 118). The length of time given for a translation can clearly influence the subtitler’s approach and choice of strategies.

The data collected here suggests that it is possible for some subtitlers to negotiate longer deadlines when working with certain films, and for these auteur films, the process of commissioning and subtitling the films works slightly differently than in other areas of the subtitling industry. Subtitler C did note, however, that ‘the time factor is the worst part of the job and it’s definitely getting worse as producers adopt a ‘just-in-time’ model, i.e., they wait till their film is selected in a festival before getting it subtitled’. Marignan examines the impact of an increase in recourse to crowdsourcing subtitles in France, highlighting the decision made by the French television channel TF1 in 2008 to offer access to subtitled episodes of American series on their VOD platform 24 h after they screen in the United States (2019, para. 10). She points out that the growth in the adoption of this ‘US+24’ model required professional subtitlers to change the way they worked (ibid., para. 11). Although there is a difference in working practices between France-based film subtitlers, and those working on TV series, there does seem to be a growing trend for tighter timescales in both areas.

Though some parts of the commission process are similar for most of the respondents, it is interesting to note that they are not always involved in the same aspects of the subtitling process. The subtitlers were asked about the materials provided to them for each job, and responded unanimously that they always have a copy of the film, with subtitler F noting ‘I always have a copy of the film and refuse to translate a film without seeing it. I won’t even translate a press kit without seeing the film!’ Here again the status of the subtitlers in this group, and their level of job security is reiterated. They hold quite a lot of power in the relationship and are able to state their expectations and requirements with confidence.

The subtitlers were also asked about spotting – the process of setting the times at which subtitles will appear and disappear from the screen. Subtitler E stated that she never does her own spotting, subtitler C ‘sometimes’ did his own spotting and subtitlers A, B, D and F had rarely done so. Subtitler F mentioned that she had just purchased subtitling software and was increasing the amount of spotting she did. Those who rarely do the spotting are resistant to it, and the reasons for this vary, some maintain that it is not
their job (subtitler E), or that as they are not trained/experienced in spotting, it takes them too long to be economical (subtitler B). This is clearly influenced by the rules and regulations of the country in which the subtitlers are based. Subtitler D noted ‘because audio-visual translators are administratively authors in France (the rewriting of dialogue is seen as the work of an author), we bill as such and not as technicians’. Subtitler A notes that spotting is also a task that technicians have been trained to do, and many of the trained technicians are now losing their jobs due to these changes in subtitling practices.

In a recent study, Oziemblewska and Szarkowska surveyed professional subtitlers about their thoughts on working with templates; a time-coded transcription of the dialogue that sometimes also includes additional information (2020, p. 1). It seems that the subtitlers surveyed here have what could be described as a ‘blank template’ (Nikolić, 2015, p. 193), where they only have the timecodes, with no text. The French banlieue film context does not seem to be the only one in which such practices are observed, though in the work of Nikolić and that of Oziemblewska & Szarkowska, there is no breakdown of practices based on country-contexts or language combinations. Indeed, given the recent introduction of cloud-based tools (Oziemblewska & Szarkowska, 2020, p. 13), it will become increasingly difficult to identify country-specific trends, since subtitlers could live in one country and work in a number of others.

Spotting is an important part of the subtitling process, and Eisenschitz notes that the spotting ‘influe souvent sur la perception du rythme du film et devient un élément du montage’ [often influences the perception of the film’s rhythm and becomes an aspect of the montage] (2013, para. 9). This element of rhythm is therefore another aspect that cannot always be attributed to the subtitler and is often carried out before the subtitler begins their work, though they do have the option to change the spotting in places. Indeed, all of the subtitlers owned subtitling software (half had Annotation Edit, and the other half had EZ Titles), and could therefore edit the spotting and return the subtitles in an SRT (timecoded subtitle file) format. Although the subtitlers do not often do their own spotting, it is interesting to note that they still need to be proficient in the use of subtitling software, and that they may have to tweak the existing spotting in places.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, it would seem that the experiences of these subtitlers working to translate auteur cinema from French into English confirm some aspects of the process described elsewhere in the literature. The provision of a brief is indeed rare, and deadlines can be tight. On the other hand, the subtitlers regularly work with the same clients, and so there are certain expectations already in place; previous work could be said to form part of the brief for new projects. In other ways, these accounts of the subtitling process depart from what is described as ‘the norm’ (Zanotti, 2020, p. 2), in the sense that there is often collaboration between the director/producer and subtitler.

The degree of collaboration taking place in the film translation process is one of the most striking elements of these accounts. Not only do the timeframes often allow these subtitlers to consult with colleagues and other experts, they also frequently have contact with the director or production company. In most cases, they would attend a simulation of the subtitled film along with the director or producer in order to finalise
the translation and discuss any issues, concerns, or other challenging aspects of the work. The director/auteur is available to the subtitler to offer their insight into the reasoning behind choices made in the source text. Although there is evidence of director-translator collaboration in other accounts of the auteur cinema subtitling process (Zanotti, 2020), the experiences of the subtitlers examined here imply a different power dynamic between director and subtitler. Here, the relationship often seems to be led by the subtitler, who would approach the director when need be. I would argue that the collective action of subtitlers in France, as well as the extensive experience of those surveyed for this study, has resulted in a tradition in which the subtitler has a higher status in the case of these auteur films. The auteur’s interest in, and oversight of the various parts of the film making and dissemination process could be one explanation for these practices. These findings should be tested further through in-depth interviews with subtitlers and directors, or even better through observation of their interactions, as well as through studies involving a broader range of participants to examine the prevalence of these practices.

Note

1. See https://anglosubtitlers.wordpress.com/. Though active at the time of data collection, the group is now dormant.

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Notes on contributor

Hannah Silvester is a Lecturer in French at University College Cork, Ireland, where she teaches Translation Studies and Audiovisual Translation at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Hannah completed a PhD in Audiovisual Translation at Glasgow University in 2018 and holds an MA in Screen Translation from the University of Sheffield. Her PhD thesis examined the subtitling into English of films depicting the French banlieue. Her research interests include the subtitling of non-standard language, multimodality and audiovisual translation, and subtitler working conditions.

ORCID

Hannah Silvester http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1640-2165
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