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Interpreting *The Chinese Wall* knowing Dutch and ‘Dutchness’

ABSTRACT

Many film scholars equate ‘film’ with ‘moving images’. But knowledge of language and background information importantly influence a film’s possible interpretations. In this article I discuss how comprehension of Dutch language and culture affords subtle aspects of meaning unavailable to viewers who have to rely exclusively on the English subtitles.

KEYWORDS

cultural knowledge
subtitles
relevance theory
film as multimodal
discourse
Dutchness

The Chinese Wall will presumably yield more or less the same interpretation for an audience reasonably familiar with narrative film and its conventions. That being said, different viewers may arrive at marginally diverging interpretations of elements in the film due the fact that each interpretation is mediated by an individual who is a unique bundle of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and personal history. Often, it is these marginal interpretations that ‘customize’ the art for a viewer, and add to his or her pleasure. To the extent that this bundle (called the individual’s ‘cognitive environment’ in Relevance Theory, see Sperber and Wilson 1995; Forceville 2014) is truly idiosyncratic, it is usually of no interest in scholarly or critical discussions of films. But where differences in interpretations can be ascribed to group membership, they can be pertinent, for instance because they can tell us something about culture-specific meaning attribution.

The Chinese Wall is well suited for such an angle. The film is set in a Chinese restaurant in the Netherlands, where the customers are Dutch and the owners Chinese. There are some sentences (thought and uttered) in Chinese, while the rest of the dialogue as well as the interior monologue of the protagonist, Aagt, and of the young man at the end of the film, are presented in Dutch. Both Chinese and Dutch are rendered in English subtitles.

Here I (native speaker of Dutch, having studied English) will focus on some dimensions of Dutch language and culture in the film that I presume are *not* accessible to someone lacking this knowledge and who therefore has to rely completely on the English subtitles and on general knowledge. Penn Ip analysed the Cantonese phrases with me.

To begin with the setting: Chinese restaurants abound in the Netherlands. They are typically places where one can have a decent, quick, and cheap meal. It is thus fitting that Aagt, an elderly woman living alone, is a regular in such a restaurant. Of course the name of the film suggests symbolic interpretations (understanding between people is often difficult, as if they are separated by obstacles as fierce and insurmountable as the Great Wall of China) – but it may evade non-Dutch speakers that 'The Chinese Wall' is simultaneously the name of the restaurant ('De Chinese Muur', also written in Chinese characters), as can be deciphered from the letters (in reverse) on the window of the restaurant (Shot 1).

The mother's thoughts in the opening sequence suggest two important themes. You can't appreciate what you don't know (the daughter doesn't know the scent of warm Chinese rain); and close (family) ties are important (I'm glad Min Quan is here). It is fitting, given the community-oriented Chinese culture, that the symbolic 'wall' is destroyed in a Chinese restaurant when the Dutch loner Aagt shares her dessert with other guests when she is simultaneously beginning to understand better who they are.

In one respect, a systematic divergence between the Dutch original text and the English subtitles surfaces: the *tone* of the English translations is often more neutral than the original:

- (1) Shot 7. Aagt thinks: 'Family outing', but the original runs 'Gezinnetje'. The diminutive form here adds to the distancing, deprecatory attitude Aagt adopts.
- (2) Shot 11. 'Funny' can in English have both positive and negative connotations. When Aagt comments on the Chinese daughter serving (Shot 18), the translation is 'funny girl', where the original runs 'grappig kind, toch', with a distinctively positive, warm connotation. But here the original runs 'raar', which is not a compliment, and is better translated as 'strange', or 'odd' (Shot 12). The subtitle has 'faces', while the original is 'koppen', which is a harsher word, more like 'nuts' or 'skulls'. This same harshness is avoided in the translation of 'mijn ouders hadden die roze bril van mijn kop moeten slaan' (emphasis added) as 'Why didn't [my parents] burst the bubble?' A more literal translation would be '... should have slapped that rosy-coloured glasses off my nut' (Shot 34). The word 'kop' occurs a third time when Aagt mentally praises Freddie for being proud of his demented wife ('...omdat ze met 'r demente kop in de plantenbak urineert', Shot 45).
- (3) 'Celebrating with a bottle of champagne' for 'Een hele fles champagne leegdrinken' (literally, 'empty a whole bottle of champagne', Shot 46) downplays the sense of getting drunk suggested by the original.

- (4) 'I'll have the Kulukai' (Shot 47) sounds more polite than the terse 'de Kulukai' – although this may be picked up by non-Dutch speakers as well.
- (5) 'Dementia is not so bad, you don't care about anything anymore' (Shot 59) – but the original uses an expression that is more crude: 'you don't care shit anymore'.
- (6) In 'You turn into an uncontrollable chatterbox' (Shot 74) the last word in Dutch is 'lulautomaat', which has the rude word 'dick/prick' in it (the Dutch verb 'lullen' is used as slang for 'talking mindlessly').
- (7) Aagt observes, 'That's not his first beer' (Shot 62). This litotes is less censorious than 'Dat is zijn zoveelste biertje al' (That is his umpteenth beer).

The point of discussing these passages is that the 'neutral' translations systematically downplay the harshness of Aagt's language, and by extension the degree of bitterness she feels about her life. Of course, there are other cues (the contents of what she says, her discontented facial expressions), but the translations underemphasize what the register of her words contribute to this awareness.

There are some other translations worth commenting on.

- When Aagt muses, 'Then I'd have a son-in-law' (Shot 52), the original adds 'Schoonzonen zijn lang zo erg niet'. The untranslated part is 'sons-in-law are by no means as bad'. Without the translation, this part of Aagt's evaluation must be inferred, or guessed – and works only inasmuch as this stereotype ('from the viewpoint of a mother, daughters-in-law behave worse than sons-in-law') is activated by the viewer.
- 'Just today' for 'Net vandaag' (Shot 54) should have been, 'Today, of all days' (i.e., on her birthday).
- Surely most viewers are bound to be puzzled by 'But at the end decayed love is more destructive than alcohol', in quotation marks (Shots 62–63). What Aagt thinks here is: 'Uiteindelijk maakt vergane liefde meer kapot dan drank'. The attentive Dutch viewer recognizes that Aagt here cynically scrambles and reverses (!) a well-known slogan in a Dutch anti-alcohol campaign of the period, 'Uiteindelijk maakt drank meer kapot dan je lief is', which literally translates as something like, 'Eventually, alcohol destroys more than you care for/than you love'.
- Finally, some of the background remarks are not translated. Again, nothing crucial is lost, but some of them contribute on a micro-level to the sub-current of well-being in the restaurant that initially escapes Aagt. For instance, when the 'husband' answers the phone (Shot 9), he says, 'Erm, that's good'. A snippet of conversation in the skating company runs 'No, but all right, I do feel that, if you simply ...' ('Nee, maar goed, ik voel dat wel, als je gewoon ...', Shot 24), while the "chef" of the group says, 'Perhaps it is convenient if *all of us* ...' ('Misschien is het wel handig als we *met zijn allen* ...' Shot 25). The point is that these ephemeral, non-translated tidbits have positive connotations of wellness and togetherness.

At least once the translation does more justice to the spirit of Aagt's thoughts than the original. 'Normally eating alone is already against all social conventions' sounds much more natural than the contrived 'Normaal druist alleen eten al in tegen alle wetten van gezelligheid' (Shot 76), something like '... already contravenes/clashes with all laws of cosy communality'

(‘gezelligheid’ supposedly captures the essence of Dutchness, and has no good translation).

Similarly, when the Chinese mother puts the tables together (Shot 89), she is translated as saying ‘I put tables together, much more nice and cozy’. In fact, while the first part of this is audible in the Dutch original, in the part after the comma only the verb ‘helpen’ (to help) can be distinguished by the attentive listener. The translation conveys the spirit of what happens here better than the (audible part of the) Dutch original.

In short, having knowledge of the Dutch language, and of Dutch culture, may add small elements of meaning not open to viewers lacking this knowledge. The converse is no less true, of course: Penn Ip’s cultural knowledge probably alerted her to something I had missed: the cynical young man at the end of the film wears an emphatically ticking watch sporting a waving Mao – perhaps a reminder that egocentric dogmatism in one’s interpretation of the world can lead to terrible events.

Film is moving images + music + sound + language. Looking closely at subtitles is a worthy part of film studies.

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Charles Forceville wrote *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising* (Routledge, 1996) and co-edited *Multimodal Metaphor* (with Eduardo Urios-Aparisi, 2009) as well as *Creativity and the Agile Mind* (with Tony Veale and Kurt Feyaerts, 2013), both published with Mouton de Gruyter. Committed to cognitive, socio-biological and relevance-theoretical approaches, Forceville works on multimodality in metaphor, argumentation and narrative discourse (documentary, film, animation, advertising, comics and cartoons).

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