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***The reasons for and implications of multilingualism in
Une bouteille à la mer***

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*It is sometimes said that the only way to fully understand others is to learn their native language, suggesting that translation and interpretation are ultimately doomed to failure. Applying this principle to the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, one would advise each of the two peoples to learn the other's language in order to arrive at a mutual understanding. A film which explores this very situation, however, *Une bouteille à la mer* (Binisti, 2011), takes another tack, using first English, then French to overcome the misunderstanding, at least on an individual level. As a result, the spectator's impression is that those who remain in their unilingual worlds of Hebrew and Arabic are stuck in ideological compartments that are reinforced by the walls of their respective languages. Instead of suggesting that in order to perceive and understand the Other's real self one must learn his or her mother tongue, the film portrays foreign languages as rescue vehicles that can enable us to escape from intolerant, obscurantist worlds.*

1. Introduction

In *Une bouteille à la mer* (Binisti, 2011), the environment is one of armed conflict between Gaza and Israel, in which members of the opposing camps have a different cultural identity, recalling the Shibboleth story in the Old Testament, also a story of two warring peoples: in order to identify strangers as either friends or enemies, the Ephraimites would have them pronounce the word shibboleth, a word that was reportedly impossible for a foreigner to pronounce unaccented. Upon hearing an accent, they would then execute their victim (Book of Judges, 12:6). In both narratives, then, the film and the biblical passage, language is at the heart of people's identity. In the film, each of the two groups inhabits a linguistic and ideological bubble, with the result that dialogue between Jews and Arabs is not only difficult, it is often forbidden. In other words, even if the conflict has not come about because of the separation of two languages, it causes two languages and their speakers to be separated. It is a situation which raises questions about language relations in a world whose six thousand tongues often come into contact with each other, remaining separate only when concerted efforts enforce this.

From a language contact perspective (Haugen, 1971; Mackey, 1976; Schiffman, 1996; Weinreich, 1953), one could establish a typology of relationships between two given languages: first, outright hostility of the kind evoked in the Shibboleth story, i.e. those who speak foreign languages are our enemies; second, a less hostile but equally divisive attitude which, instead of encouraging people to learn each other's tongues, discourages such practice in the name of cultural purity;¹ third, willingness for inter-linguistic dialogue via either translation or semi-communication; fourth, willingness to learn the Other's language in order to ensure maximum communication, and perhaps even cultural emulation; fifth, willingness to learn the Other's language and to forget one's mother tongue. In the film, we see progression from scornful, reluctant communication to quasi-abandonment of one identity in favor of a new one. My paper will explain how subtitles reveal the dynamics of language interaction and what the film suggests about linguistic nationalism, paving the way for a new definition of the concept of *culture*, based on texts rather than on language per se. This has important implications for the communicational, ideological, and esthetic functions of language.

2. The story

Une bouteille à la mer tells the story of Tal, an Israeli girl whose family has emigrated from France to Israel. In order to find out why the Palestinians are perpetrating bombing attacks in Jerusalem, she asks her brother, a soldier, to throw a message in a bottle—a sort of plea for understanding—out into the sea off Gaza. The bottle is found on the beach by a group of young Gazans, one of whom ends up giving the English-language message to his cousin, Naïm, the only one able to read it. English thus becomes the initial language of the dialogue between Tal and Naïm, and the fourth language in this film, which also contains French, Hebrew, and Arabic. The film's multilingualism represents a departure from the unilingual French book upon which it is based. In other words, there is a reversal here of what Lukas Bleichenbacher calls a “replacement strategy,”—the masking of a multilingual environment—for in this case the cinematic version employs what could be called a “re-amplification strategy” instead (Bleichenbacher, 2008, p. 55). The problem is, of course, that a multilingual book would have either included translations, thereby becoming cumbersome, or have been impossible for most readers to understand. As a result, the film enriches and gives more breadth to the written text, unlike most novel-based films which reduce the scope of the original work. This is made possible by the use of subtitling, in such a way that the multilingual context can be fully experienced by the viewer.

3. Languages in the film, and the importance of subtitling

Tal is forced to use a language and a channel of communication that are both different from the ones she uses in everyday life: since she does not know Arabic and expects the Palestinian receiver of her message to speak neither French (which she speaks at home with her family) nor Hebrew (which she speaks with friends and at school), she writes the message in English. Both the language and the channel of communication are thus chosen as a way to establish contact with an unknown Palestinian, who may be as unwilling to carry on a dialogue in Hebrew as Tal is unable to do so in Arabic. English functions here as the language of neutrality.

Une bouteille à la mer is a French film about Israel and Palestine, so for the sake of realism it must involve the use of at least three languages. This is done by means of French subtitling of Hebrew and Arabic dialogues, while using unsubtitled French when Tal is with her family. As with all subtitled films, this creates a multilingual situation which is additive rather than subtractive, because the two channels – one visual and the other aural – enable the viewer to perceive two languages at once. It is an ingenious solution to the dilemma of domain occupation that often makes peaceful linguistic coexistence difficult or impossible on the radio, in schools, or in administrative contexts. In France, for example, the polemic concerning the presence of English-language songs on the radio centers on this very question, because in some sense, each time English gains ground, French loses ground. Subtitling changes this dynamic, creating a two-layered domain that admittedly requires an effort on the part of the listener/viewer, but succeeds in keeping both languages present. It is less effective, however, when Tal and Naïm's English-language emails are subtitled in French, because it is more difficult to read both texts before they disappear from the screen. One may assume that the French-speaking audience abandons the original here.

Translation, in the form of subtitles, enables viewers to develop language identities or associations between each language and its users, for example Tal's parents (French and Hebrew) and Naïm's uncle (Arabic). French, as seen in the case of Thomas, the French teacher at the Centre culturel français in Gaza, who seems to share very little with Tal's parents, in spite of their having the same native tongue, is identified with more than one ideological and cultural stance. That is because the French language must play several different roles: one as the language of Jewish settlers of French descent (Tal's family), another as a language of communication between Tal and Naïm, and a third as the main source and sole target language of the film. As for Hebrew and Arabic, the French-language viewer is able to get a feel for the way these two languages are used by their native speakers, for example Hebrew as a liturgical language for Tal's parents and Arabic as a language of emotion (anger, love, friendship, family ties) for Naïm and his extended family. In all three cases, different cultural elements are conveyed, and it would be very

difficult or impossible to dissociate the latter from their respective languages. In this sense, Hebrew and Arabic are languages of cultural identity, made visible and audible to the spectator through the original language audio track along with subtitling. The notion that translation and multilingualism go hand in hand, one allowing the other to exist, is thus true for the film's viewers, but the story itself does not suggest that such an arrangement is desirable or possible². First of all, there is no semi-communication (Grin, 2010; Haugen, 1971), and there is scarcely any real desire to bend to the Other's system of communication by learning his or her language, except for Naïm's learning French. "On the ground", so to speak, there seems to be no need for translation, because there is no desire to communicate with those who are perceived as being the enemy and speak a different language, as in the *Shibboleth* story.

4. Domain sharing: your Language, mine, or a neutral tongue?

One of the most interesting aspects of the film is the way it handles the problem of domain sharing. Domain sharing is the linguistic counterpart of territory sharing, but its terrain is language instead of land. It thus seems particularly relevant to discuss language cohabitation in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which is, among other things, a territorial dispute. As mentioned earlier, subtitling solves the (dual) comprehension problem in the cinematic medium. In real life, however, translation rarely comes to the rescue of individual speakers, who either adapt to their interlocutors' tongues or convince the latter to adapt to theirs. Neither Tal nor Naïm seems to want to learn Arabic or Hebrew respectively, an element which makes the film different from and less one-sided than the original book, in which Naïm understands and speaks Hebrew. English thus solves this problem, and since it is used for a dialogue that is not part of the normal order of things, it does not usurp a domain reserved for Arabic or Hebrew: it creates and occupies a new one, an Israeli-Palestinian channel of communication. Events follow a teleological pattern here insofar as the desire to communicate determines language choice and, eventually, language learning on the part of Naïm. As for culture, defined as a series of practices and representations, it must be seen more as a choice than a heritage. The two young people create a new culture both by expressing themselves in tongues different from those used around them and by collaborating in the creation of a text which incarnates a new vision of the situations in which they live. One must look for the meaning of this culture less in the structures of English or French than in what the two languages are made to say, in the content of each one of their messages³.

If one assumes that a bomb attack is a form of communication, employed either because its perpetrators have decided that their interlocutors understand only this form of dialogue or because other

means have been to no avail, it seems plausible to define the film's opening scene, in which a bomb explodes in Jerusalem before Tal's shocked eyes, as a kind of statement. Her message in a bottle thrown out to sea is thus a request for an explanation of this statement, for she supposes that one Palestinian will be able to understand another's gesture. What follows confirms this cultural or national logic, for the receivers of the missive respond with a knowing sneer, indicating that "only an Israeli could ask such a naïve, stupid question!" And yet, the dialogue continues, even if Naïm's first email to Tal expresses more disgust than enthusiasm, as if he were reluctantly stooping to the level of his contemptible interlocutor merely to set the record straight, to prevent the further spreading of a misrepresentation of Palestinian reality. The dialogue is on, and it will continue until the end of the film, at which point Naïm succumbs to Tal's rhetoric and to the magic of the French language, letting his point of view evolve to something very different from what it was at the outset. And notwithstanding his claim at the end that he will come back to Gaza, he leaves for France, geographically and linguistically abandoning his native domain.

It is sometimes said that peace would be favored if Palestinians and Israelis learned each other's languages. The validity of such a proposal is undermined, however, by two factors. First, in a dialogue between a Palestinian and an Israeli, the problem would still remain as to which of the two tongues they should use, because alternating would result in an awkward, inefficient situation in terms of communication. There would thus be no other solution than settling on one of the two, bringing them back to the starting point. Second, even if they were able to agree on a third, neutral tongue, nothing would improve as long as the content of their discourse stayed the same. By the same token, of course, translation cannot magically resolve the conflict, whose roots have nothing to do with language differences. The first part of the film confirms this fact, for the two protagonists seem unable to get beyond the impasse resulting from their identification with Palestine and Israel, respectively.

5. An identity shift

The film soon evolves, however, "cheating" in a sense: when Tal reveals to Naïm that she was born in France, he seizes upon this fact as a way of removing her from the negative category which constitutes his stereotype of all Israelis and transforming her into a member of a group which he idealizes: the French and French speakers. This is possible for several reasons, but an important one is the fact that neither of them lives in France, which can thus exist as an idealized, perfect country in their imaginations. For the two protagonists, French is the language and the culture of escape from misery, violence and hatred, a tongue whose

sounds are lovely and whose poetry – that of Jacques Prévert in the film – creates a world of love, beauty, and hope. Naïm will in fact use French to create a new identity for himself. This double identity transformation (Tal's from Jewish to French and then Naïm's from Arabic to French) is indispensable for the warming of relations between the two characters. One recalls that, at the beginning of their dialogue, Naïm says, in response to Tal's suggestion that his wry sense of humor makes him resemble a Jew, that he would rather be dead than be like an Israeli soldier. In other words, Tal proposes one definition of an Israeli, while Naïm proposes another. The logic of labels, categories, and nation-states whose citizens accept the social contract, means that to be an Israeli, for example, is to be like other Israelis. At this point, Tal has not yet become aware of what Palestinians are undergoing at the hands of the Israeli army, which she sees as a group of "good guys," the term she uses to characterize her brother, a member of that army. But she also asks Naïm, "What's with all these generalizations? What counts is who you are and who I am," as if she were refusing to adhere to the logic of their two different national identities.

At this point, the more logical of the two in this dialogue is Naïm, insofar as his judgment of Israelis is based on the concrete fact that Israelis are bombing Gaza. How could people who carry out or allow such a policy be good, kind, virtuous? Tal's naïveté or ignorance, on the other hand, stems from the fact that she sees, like Naïm, what comes into her country – Palestinian bombing attacks – but cannot see what leaves it: the bombs that rain upon Gaza. Naïm seems to be more aware of the meaning of the two concepts *nationality* and *war*, of which Tal has only a vague conception. And everything indicates that without the providential intervention of the French tongue and the aura which the film creates around it, the two protagonists must remain at loggerheads. As it is, French enables both of them to lift themselves out of this confrontational political and cultural situation and to see themselves as participants in a common tradition. Unfortunately, however, this does nothing to resolve the general conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, whose identities are based upon their perceived difference from the group facing them, which makes reconciliation difficult or impossible. An early scene in the film ironically hints at the absurdity of this situation, when Tal's history teacher explains that in the first century AD, a group of Jews, the Zealots, preferred to commit collective suicide rather than submit to Roman rule. We are thus reminded of present-day Palestinians who prefer death to the humiliation of second-class citizenship and the poverty that accompanies it, and the suggestion is that the two peoples are actually similar but tragically unable to see their similarity. This is undoubtedly the beginning of Tal's awareness that her country forces its perceived enemies into a desperate situation.

6. Nation, culture, and language as prisons

The film suggests a definition of the concept of *culture* akin to that formulated by Ernst Cassirer in his *Essay on Man*: the process of man's progressive self-liberation (Cassirer, 1974, p. 228). In that sense, one can affirm that Tal and Naïm create a new culture that enables them to break free of the forces that prevent them from crossing national, cultural, and linguistic borders. At the same time, it confirms Edward Saïd's (1994, p. xiii) and Tzvetan Todorov's (1989, p. 507) characterizations of a *nation* as "one narration among others" and "an abstraction" respectively, for the two friends' new world view clearly threatens the order reigning around them. As for languages, they are often used to enforce the rule which makes the content of Tal's and Naïm's messages taboo on both sides of the linguistic/national barrier, reflecting a context in which communicating with a foreigner in a language unknown to one's compatriots is suspect. Thus, speaking their mother tongues with their friends and families, in what should be a liberating experience, is often synonymous with oppression rather than freedom insofar as they must remain silent about their forbidden dialogue. Naïm is punished by Hamas militia men for sending an email in French to Tal because they want to control all communication, and incomprehensible foreign-language messages are impossible for them to control, while Tal's parents upbraid her for communicating with a Palestinian who, they automatically suppose, will use this contact to terrorize them. The principle governing these actions is that languages must be kept separate so that no information – except official propaganda – will be passed to the enemy. The coherence and meaning of this world are predicated upon the assumption that Palestinians speak only Arabic and Israelis only Hebrew.

English and French are like cracks that vitiate the foundations of this dual edifice. In the viewer's eyes, however, these foreign languages are seen not as weapons, but as a means with which to defuse the conflict on an individual level. As for the two national tongues of Israel and Palestine, it is the way in which they are used that locks their speakers into ideological, linguistic compartments that prevent them from seeing the bigger picture, a world of tolerance and appreciation of new sounds, words, and ideas. Nor does the French-Hebrew bilingualism of Tal's parents enable them to remove their nationalistic blinders, underlining the fact that language does not necessarily determine culture or ideology. This is because a given language can have different meanings to different people and in different situations, a fact that contradicts the Romantic notion of "the spirit" of a language. It is quite clear, for example, that learning French cannot reconcile Naïm with Tal's parents, even though their mother tongue represents liberation and peace for him. The mere language change is unable to remove their suspicion that he is part of a terrorist movement: on the contrary, the fact that he is communicating with their daughter in French makes him all the more dangerous in their

eyes, in a vision similar to that of the Ephraimites in the Shibboleth story who saw foreigners speaking their language as spies. And yet, the process of learning a new language, thereby opening oneself to new perspectives, remains a positive value in the film, where Naïm plays the role of cultural and linguistic mediator when he teaches his cousin a bit of French and when he recites a Jacques Prévert poem to his mother. In the first case, it is a weakening of the concept of linguistic identity intended as an implicit contradiction of his uncle's assertion that learning French is a waste of time and money. In the second case, (French) language and culture become the vehicles of an enticing imaginary world having none of the characteristics of the unpleasant land of Gaza that we see in the film. Rather than showing language choice as the affirmation of cultural and political rights, then, the film suggests that part of the problem is the instrumentalization of language in the service of ideological confrontations.

7. Linguistic salvation

Just as one does not need to speak Inuit in order to describe the various kinds of snow, one does not need to speak Arabic or Hebrew in order to discuss the issues that fuel the conflict between Israel and Palestine⁴. That is why Tal and Naïm succeed in communicating with each other, first in English, then in French. The fact that they “belong to two different cultures” ultimately fails to interfere with this process, first because culture is in the message (*signifié*) much more than in the form (*signifiant*) –which is why translation is possible– and secondly because if some parts of culture are inherited, other parts are chosen.

If subtitling makes it possible for this film to portray a multilingual situation realistically, it also shows that the distinction between a foreigner and a native is relative or arbitrary by suggesting that one's identity does not depend entirely on one's mother tongue or nationality. It thus portrays multilingualism in a particularly positive light, unlike the Hollywood movies which, according to Harold Schiffman, do the opposite, depicting speakers of foreign languages as “bad guys” (2008, p. 1). In doing so, however, the film also departs from realism, indulging in a tendency to idealize the French language, turning it into a dream-like refuge from a world of violence, hatred, oppression and ugliness. French thus becomes, for Naïm and for his mother, synonymous with tenderness, love, freedom and beauty. Interestingly, this transformation can be compared to that which enables Jews to give a sacred status to Hebrew or Muslims to Arabic, for the French language becomes the key to Naïm's salvation. His inspired, inspiring text, however, instead of being the Bible or the Koran, is the poetry of Jacques Prévert. One must note that such a process is possible with any language, regardless of the usual connotations or stereotypes which accompany the various tongues spoken

in the world. Thus, the film could have used German in place of French, relying on the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, for example, to create an imagined German-language world of sweetness and light, or Russian and the poetry of Alexander Pushkin to reinvent an atmosphere shaped by nature, nostalgia, and tragic sentiments. The content of the messages sent in this language of escape amounts to little more than the two protagonists' willingness to put themselves in each other's shoes, which leads them to share a common dream. As it turns out, then, Tal was ultimately right in affirming that "what matters is who you are and who I am," for instead of looking for their identities in their cultural and linguistic roots, she and Naïm have used foreign languages –English for her and French for him– as a way to transcend and throw off the chains of constraining national and cultural identities. And any language suffices for such a strategy, as long as it is not one's mother tongue or national idiom. This kind of multilingualism is indeed a far cry from that which assigns each language to a nation or ethnic group or, in Ingrid Piller's words, "a bounded entity that is associated with a particular ethnic or national group, the product of a particular language ideology that brought the modern nation state and its colonial relationship with internal minorities into being" (Piller, 2012, p. 14). Insofar as subtitled multilingual films increasingly tend to show national identities as parts of a large puzzle, they confirm this post-national perspective. Or, as Edward Saïd (1978) said in *Orientalism*,

the more one is able to leave one's cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment and generosity necessary for true vision. The more easily, too, does one assess oneself and alien cultures with the same combination of intimacy and distance. (p. 259)

8. Conclusion: linguistic culture, text, and subtitles

The claim that a language conveys an ideology, supported by linguists such as Claude Hagège (2012) in a modern version of the linguistic vision of Herder and Humboldt, is questioned by Harold Schiffman, who points out that the use of English by the African National Congress, for example, has different ideological implications from that of British imperialists, even though it is the same language (Schiffman, 1996, p. 14). This polemic contains, however, three elements that need to be carefully distinguished. The first is the text or texts which explain how the users of a language define it and the rules of its usage, including spelling, pronunciation, and linguistic policy, or what Schiffman calls *linguistic culture*. The second is the texts written or spoken in the language. As for a language's image among other languages in the world, it constitutes a third element which is different from but related to the first

two. A discussion of multilingualism in general or in subtitled films must take into consideration these three factors insofar as the objective of such films can be the promotion and increased visibility of lesser-known tongues and their speakers, the legitimization of nationalistic discourse or, on the contrary, the foregrounding of an alternative, dissident point of view showing that, in Iran, Serbia, Saudi Arabia, the United States, or Israel, for example, many different points of view exist. *Une bouteille à la mer* clearly uses a certain image of French and French culture but fails to associate them with any concrete aspect or event of French life or history, except for the poetry of Jacques Prévert and a reference by Naïm's mother to the way French people greet each other, i.e. something we might call "the French way of life." This tendency, in other words, functions as an extension of French linguistic culture, but instead of being a manifestation of how the French view and use their language, it is a demonstration of a similar practice being carried out by non-French, Francophile devotees of this system of belief in a language and culture. At a time when French literature has much less influence than it did fifty years ago, when French authors seemed to be on the cutting edge of ideological developments in the western world, the film thus succeeds in revitalizing a myth by using, for the most part, the mere sounds of the language. This recalls a passage in Umberto Eco's work, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, in which the Italian author proposes a mode of linguistic co-existence on what he calls "a continent with a multilingual vocation":

Polyglot Europe will not be a continent where individuals converse fluently in all the other languages; in the best of cases, it could be a continent where differences of language are no longer barriers to communication, where people can meet each other and speak together, each in his or her own tongue, understanding, as best they can, the speech of others. In this way, even those who never learn to speak another language fluently could still participate in its particular genius, catching a glimpse of the particular cultural universe that every individual expresses each time he or she speaks the language of his or her ancestors and his or her own tradition. (Eco, 1997, p. 351)

Nonetheless, even if Eco's solution focuses on the esthetic value of each tongue rather than its function as a weapon, a nationality test, or a proof of territorial rights, he refers to the importance of speaking "the language of [one's] ancestors and [one's] own tradition." In *Une bouteille à la mer*, the dialogue is precisely made possible by the protagonists' decision to set aside the languages of their ancestors as well as the traditions that go along with them. By choosing Jacques Prévert as a symbol of Naïm's infatuation with French, the film questions the authoritarian, nationalistic logic which led to the war between Israel and Palestine in the first place

and continues to fuel conflicts in the world. As it is, the French language becomes the means with which to defuse a political and cultural conflict. If English was the language of cruel reality, French becomes that of an imagined world, and the young Palestinian clearly prefers the latter to the former. In this sense, Naïm confirms Eco's vision in the sense that the symbolic use of language turns out to be as important as its communicational role. And yet, without translation – here in the form of subtitles – it still remains very difficult for different languages to come together without putting up barriers to communication.

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Filmography

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- 1 This idea, that language differences reinforce patriotism by making it impossible for people to communicate with foreigners, thereby discouraging them from traveling, was expressed by l'Abbé Pluche, quoted by Umberto Eco in *The Search for the Perfect Language*, pp. 338–339.
- 2 Anthony Pym contends, in *Translation as a Tool of Multilingual Inculturation* that multilingualism and translation fuel each other, which is true in the examples he chooses but is far from being generally the case.
- 3 I am arguing here in favor of a content-defined concept of culture, in which what one says is more important than how or in what languages one says it. For example, the expression “have a nice day” conveys, in my view, a cultural message. The fact that its equivalent is now used in French, Italian, etc., is thus an indication of the spread of Anglo-Saxon or American culture.
- 4 David Bellos (2011) explodes the myth about terms for snow among Eskimos, while Jean Marcel (1973) similarly shows that Marcel Proust’s French is not a foreign language for a Quebecer, in spite of the environmental differences between Canada and France.