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# Subtitles and cinematic meaning-making: Interlingual subtitles as textual agents

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**Abstract:** This theoretical paper adopts the point of view of the audience of subtitled films and outlines a theory of subtitles as communicative agents within the participation structures of film reception. Based on examples from three Swiss fiction films – *Heidi* (2015), *Heimatland* (2015) and *Der Goalie bin ig* (2014) – the following communicative effects are found and illustrated: uniformity, authorisation, foregrounding, aestheticisation, foreignisation. These effects are conceptualised in terms of Constitutive Communication theory and textual agency (Cooren. 2004. Textual agency: How texts do things in organizational settings. *Organization* 11(3). 373–393. doi:10.1177/1350508404041998), which describe that by communicating with audiences, subtitles animate into being other participants in film discourse and contribute to what viewers take away in terms of characters, stories, the cultural aspects they represent and the source culture(s) from which the text is perceived to communicate.

**Keywords:** communication, film discourse, interlingual subtitles, participation frameworks, pragmatics of fiction

## 1 Introduction

Interlingual subtitles are primarily studied within the research paradigms of audiovisual translation (AVT). Typically, subtitles are regarded as translation products, and subtitled films are explicitly or implicitly compared to source texts. This is the case when subtitling is considered in terms of deficit (e.g. Robinson 1998), or reduction (e.g. Hatim and Mason 1997; Remael 2003), but the comparative angle is the standard approach also when subtitles are considered a signifying code in cinematic communication in their own right (e.g. Guillot 2012, Guillot 2016, Guillot 2017).

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For the complementary approach I suggest here, I want to start from two simple premises: (1) Subtitles are not just a product of translation; and (2) theorising the workings of subtitling is not just the concern of AVT and translation studies. Instead, I approach subtitling from the perspective of the pragmatics of fiction and with a focus on the meaning that viewers arrive at and that is communicated to them by a collective sender (Dynel 2011), i.e. by the heterogeneous multiplicity of authors of the film, in as far as it is manifest in the audiovisual text. The collective sender speaks to audiences through the multi-modal and layered artefact of the subtitled film using images, sounds, the spoken film dialogue, but also subtitles, which serve as an additional affordance for the communication with a culturally and linguistically Other target audience. This paper's aim of conceptualising interlingual subtitles as part of the communication that takes place in and through subtitled films leads to two connected research questions:

- (1) How and from what position do subtitles and subtitled films communicate with their audiences?
- (2) What communicative functions are manifest in the subtitles and in the composite text of the subtitled film?

These questions are addressed in two main parts. Section 2 outlines a theoretical model of the communicative setting of the interlingually subtitled film. Section 3 illustrates and actualises the theoretical assumptions based on the explorative study of three recent fiction films with Swiss German dialogue and English subtitles. Section 4 recapitulates on the benefits of the pragmatics of fiction for the understanding of interlingual subtitles.

## 2 Pragmatics and the interlingually subtitled film

### 2.1 Pragmatic dimensions of subtitling

The translator, as Hatim and Mason (1997) seminally state, is a communicator. By extension, subtitles as diagonal translation (Gottlieb 1994) communicate across languages, cultures and from the spoken to the written medium. The source and target texts of that translation process as well as the production and reception of those texts are situated in a particular context and give rise to pragmatic processes that need to be taken into account when analysing the communicative functions of subtitling: Film dialogues together with the other semiotic modes employed for the meaning-making of unsubtitled films take

place within the cultural context in which they were written, performed, directed, but also within the film context in which they occur. The subtitler needs to read and infer the explicatures and implicatures to which the film gives rise within those contexts, while also including the ideal audience's reception of the unsubtitled film. The translator as sender writes subtitles that are arguably meant to reduce the distance between the source text and the culturally Other target audience.

Rather than thinking about the communicating translator, I assume that subtitles themselves communicate, which is to say that texts have agency.<sup>1</sup> Subtitles communicate on behalf of something or someone (the production company, the subtitle translator, etc.), but when they appear on screen, they have obtained at least some independence from the processes that were involved in their production and from the agents that created them. Rather than thinking of subtitles as the target text of a translation process, it is thus worthwhile to examine them as communicative agents: Like the spoken dialogue, the *mise-en-scène*, or the multimodality of actor performances, subtitles as textual agents are part of the audiovisual signal that communicates the meaning of the subtitled film. The audience as recipient of that film can either be said to rely on subtitles to get access to meaning that is encoded in other semiotic modes, and in particular in the spoken dialogue; or they can be regarded as co-constructing meaning based on all communicative channels presented to them by the collective sender.

The distinction between subtitles as loci or vehicles of communication and as communicative agents is consonant with two different ways in which pragmatic concerns enter research on subtitling: (1) Subtitles as translation transfer pragmatic meaning from a source to a target culture. (2) Subtitles as texts are a form of situated language use that occurs in particular contexts. A question in line with paradigm (1) might be: How do subtitles translate insults to the target language and to writing? The question for (2), on the other hand, and the overarching questions for this study is: How do subtitles as a form of situated language use communicate?

## 2.2 Pragmatics of fiction and film pragmatics

Like dramatic discourse (e.g. Short 1981) and mass media communication (e.g. Burger 1984), film discourse needs to be understood as layered in the sense that it takes place on several planes of communication (Piazza et al. 2011). Interaction

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<sup>1</sup> See Cooren (2004, 2010, 2012) and Section 2.3.

in and of film occurs between the collective sender and the viewers on the one hand, and within the diegetic world of the film, between characters, on the other (see e.g. Bubel 2006; Dynel 2011; Messerli 2017a). The relationship between the two layers (Clark 1996) or communicative levels (Brock 2015) is hierarchical by convention, so that interaction on the diegetic level is designed by the collective sender with the film viewers in mind. Accordingly, the audience infers and co-constructs meaning based on the signs that are manifest in the film. While actual viewers vary in the stance they take towards the artefact, ideal viewers willingly suspend part of their disbelief. These viewers are neither distanced analysts who understand every utterance as scriptwriting voiced into being by narrative constructs which are in turn animated by actors and the cinematic apparatus; nor are they immersed into the fiction to the point where their understanding processes would be identical to those in face-to-face interaction. To use Clark's (1996) distinction between appreciation and imagination: Viewers *appreciate* that what they are engaging with is an artefact, but they let themselves *imagine* that the characters whose actions they witness exist within the fictional world. Moreover, viewer positions are dynamic and susceptible to the collective sender's communicative and meta-communicative cues (Messerli 2016).

### 2.3 Subtitles as communicative agents

Giving more weight to the contribution of subtitles to meaning-making warrants the inclusion of a theoretical framework that looks beyond the typical sender–recipient metaphor and gives more independence to subtitles as text. In this vein, it is instructive to transfer Cooren's (2004, 2010, 2012) theory of communication to film discourse (see Messerli 2017b), and to regard the semiotic systems and texts that constitute subtitled films as communicative agents with which the viewers interact.<sup>2</sup> Subtitles in this view are texts that speak to viewers about aspects of the film in the written target language. As such, subtitles can do actions that could not be done without them, for instance when they present writing as writing on the screen, and they can communicate somewhat independently of their authors – in fact, it is safe to assume that viewers typically

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<sup>2</sup> The conceptualisation of the subtitled film's meaning-making could also be situated as research on multimodality in the tradition of Kress and Leeuwen (2001), Baldry and Thibault (2006), and Bateman and Schmidt (2013), to name but a few different approaches. In this article, however, I have chosen to instead lean on the theoretical framework of textual agency, in which individual modalities can be viewed as separate agents that together communicate meaning.

know very little about who translated the subtitles they are reading. At the same time, subtitles do not communicate in and of themselves, but on behalf of a narrative entity, such as a film-maker, a narrator or a character. Those narrative entities in turn may communicate on behalf of other agents higher up the *chain of agencies* (Cooren 2010). Thus, a subtitle can for instance be said to speak on behalf of a character, who speaks on behalf of a film, who speaks on behalf of a writer/director.

For the viewers, inferring on whose behalf subtitles speak may be ambiguous. For instance, while speaking characters/actors may typically be thought to communicate on behalf of characters, they may also be understood as speaking on behalf of actors, directors, production companies, etc. Based on Cooren's framework, it is thus plausible to assume that the scenes of a film will lead to the formation and adjustment of the viewers' mental models (Van Dijk 2008) not only of the events and actions represented on screen, of the characters that utter them and the diegetic world in which the actions purport to take place, but also of the agents on whose behalf they may speak: of book characters adapted to film, of the authors who wrote them, of those involved in all stages of film production, and also of cultural aspects both relating to the space where the film was produced and to the spaces it fictionally represents.

Example 1: *Heidi* (2015), 00:19:23–00:19:26

00:19:23 I'll show you tomorrow //  
where the edelweiss grows.

Consider example 1 from *Heidi* (2015).<sup>3</sup> Two children, Heidi and Peter, have been seen playing in a rural setting, surrounded by goats, before the camera cuts to a long shot of green hills and mountains in the distance. Children and goats are in the middle of the frame, and we hear the boy's voice, while the subtitles – as representation of his utterance – promise the showing of *edelweiss* the next day. In this conventional example, the subtitles perform a number of actions. They animate into being Peter, the boy, as a speaking character. We would gather some information about him without the subtitles, from the way he looks and acts and sounds, but because we assume a metonymical relationship between subtitles and dialogue, we assume we know what Peter said based on the subtitles. The subtitles also interact with the image. In this case, the fact that *edelweiss* are mentioned fits the depicted hills and mountains. Together, the subtitled scene animates a narrative into being, in which flowers and mountains

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<sup>3</sup> For transcription conventions see Appendix. The transcriptions are meant as access points to multimodal and layered cinematic events that are further described in the discussions in-text, but are ideally viewed as film scenes in context.

play a role. Moreover, this Swiss narrative is the well-known story of Heidi, and it evokes other renditions of the same story in the viewers' minds, i.e. the Heidi story exists because it is animated by the different texts that speak on its behalf. Finally, the Heidi story, *Heidi* (2015), the *edelweiss* scene, and the subtitles in example 1 all also construct a particular version of Switzerland. Distorted through fictionalisation and stylisation, the camera nonetheless mimetically presents Swiss landscapes, the story tells of places and characters that exist or could exist, and the subtitles name iconic flowers that serve as another access point into the viewers' encyclopaedic knowledge of Switzerland.<sup>4</sup>

The example also illustrates that for this view on communication in and of subtitled films, translation choices in subtitling are secondary to the communicative effects<sup>5</sup> that are achieved by the subtitles as agents.<sup>6</sup> Subtitles in this sense speak in the context of the films they are a part of, and they position themselves in particular ways within the semiotic systems of film and within the cultures they represent.

### 3 Communicating aspects of fictionalised Swiss culture through subtitled films

#### 3.1 Data and methodology

The examples used here to illustrate subtitles as communicative agents are from a small corpus of recent Swiss fiction films, *Der Goalie bin ig* (2014), *Heidi* (2015) and *Heimatland* (2015), with English subtitles all translated mainly from Swiss German dialects<sup>7</sup> by professionals and distributed on optical media (DVD or Blu-ray, from

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<sup>4</sup> i.e. the network of semantic meaning that is invoked by lexical items, one of the central tenets of frame semantics (see Fillmore 2006).

<sup>5</sup> This study rests on the qualitative analysis of multimodal texts and not on empirical reception studies (see Section 3). The term *effect* is therefore used here not as a reference to measurable influence on viewing participants, but as what I understand to be the plausible result reading subtitles may have on an ideal-typical viewer.

<sup>6</sup> I assume as an ideal-typical viewer a monolingual recipient who only speaks the subtitle language. This ideal-typical viewer is bound to follow different understanding processes than viewers who also understand – partly or fully – the spoken dialogues. However, even in the case of non-monolingual viewers, the primary communicative aim of subtitles will not arguably be to invite reflection about translation processes, but for viewers to arrive at meaning and follow the narrative.

<sup>7</sup> While in a few scenes of *Der Goalie bin ig* (2014), French and Spanish are spoken, almost the entire dialogue is conveyed in the Swiss German dialect typical of the Canton of Berne where

where they were transcribed). Through these subtitled films, audiences are presented with aspects of fictionalised Swiss culture, which includes idyllic landscapes in *Heidi* (2015), small-town social interactions in *Der Goalie bin ig* (2014) and contemporary politics in *Heimatland* (2015). I assume that common ground between the collective sender and the audience of the films with English subtitles is limited. I also hypothesise that work is done in the subtitles to co-communicate particular elements of the source text to the viewers, and that this cross-cultural communicative intent manifests itself in the subtitles themselves as well as in the way they orient towards the film they accompany. This role of subtitling is discussed in terms of particular effects observed in the data. Functions of subtitles with regard to the viewers' supposed perception of the films and their understanding of meaning will be explored and exemplified, before a more comprehensive discussion contextualises the range of functions based on the theoretical framework presented.

A brief description of each film will be enough to contextualise findings. *Der Goalie bin ig* (2014) is adapted from Pedro Lenz' 2010 novel of the same title. Its main character takes the fall for a friend, goes to jail and after his release tries to reintegrate himself into life within a small village in Switzerland. *Heidi* (2015) is a recent adaptation of Spyri's (1880) novel. It presents the life of a girl who lives with her grandfather in the Swiss Alps, with some scenes playing in the city of Frankfurt. *Heimatland* (2015) is a political satire directed by ten Swiss directors. Focalised through different characters, it is set in an alternate contemporary reality in which a dark cloud over Switzerland forces its residents to migrate and seek refuge in the neighbouring European countries.

The three films analysed comprise 2430 subtitles and 290 minutes of running time. A subtitle was understood to be any chunk of subtitling text that appears on screen at a particular time in the film. For instance, example 1 above presents the subtitle that appears at 19:23 in the film *Heidi* (2015). The subtitles were analysed qualitatively and in their multimodal context, with the aim of exploring different aspects of communication within the subtitles and interactions between the subtitles and the subtitled films. Examining subtitles exploratively in this case also means that the goal was not to establish typicality, but to collect some of the main communicative effects that are achieved by means of subtitling. Accordingly, results are presented as a typology of communicative effects brought about when collective senders communicate with culturally

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the film is set. *Heidi* (2015) for the most part uses the Swiss German dialect of the Canton of Graubünden for its dialogues, but the German characters that appear in the story speak variations of High German. In *Heimatland* (2015), different Swiss German dialects as well as French are represented in the spoken dialogue.

Other audiences through subtitled films. This typology is neither exhaustive, nor are categories mutually exclusive, since subtitles are always multifunctional. The individual categories were established bottom-up based on my own close-readings and repeated viewing of the films both with the audio track enabled and disabled. Theoretically, they are informed by general tenets of translation studies and pragmatics, as is indicated by the references that support each function identified in the typology.

## 3.2 Functions of subtitling in *Der Goalie bin ig* (2014), *Heidi* (2015) and *Heimatland* (2015)

### 3.2.1 Standardisation

The subtitles in the corpus present the spoken dialogue as monochromatic white text. Whereas the phonetic variation of spoken dialogue communicates information about settings, speakers, intentions, emotions, etc., subtitles inherit from writing that they represent only little of the heterogeneity of voices and spoken utterances and instead encode meaning as a standardised sequence of written words. Standard punctuation, italics, capitalisation and quotation marks are used to represent some aspects of prosody (e.g. question marks to represent raising intonation) and functions of utterances (e.g. quotations marks to represent quotations) – all other variation that may be *heard* on the soundtrack cannot be *read* in subtitles.

### 3.2.2 Discretisation

Tied to standardisation is a structuring effect that I will call discretisation: Horizontally, subtitles package information into discrete chunks (words separated by spaces and line breaks) whose presentation and segmentation is optimised for perception and processing.<sup>8</sup> Vertically, subtitles make binary decisions about what spoken words to include and exclude: Whereas spoken dialogue is on a continuum from easier to harder to hear, the analysed subtitles are discrete, i.e. either present or absent.

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<sup>8</sup> This optimisation of subtitles for the viewers is often rendered in terms of the spatio-temporal constraints under which subtitle translation operates (see e.g. Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007).



### 3.2.3 Authorisation

Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) framework of identity construction understands authorisation as a way of affirming identity by invoking "structures of institutionalized power and ideology" (603). Transferred to Cooren's Constitutive Communication Theory this is to say that an utterance signals that it is legitimate by speaking on behalf of a particular authority, and that in doing so it also contributes to the constitution of that authority. Within film as a communicative setting, the primary institution that lends such authority is the film itself, i.e. the collective sender who authors and controls the shape of the artefact that audiences are viewing.

Authorisation in the subtitles considered here is first of all dependent on the conventions of subtitle setting and placing, which separate them aesthetically from the other visual information on screen.<sup>9</sup> Subtitles appear as utterances that are not explicitly tied to a speaker, and they leave it to the audience to infer on whose behalf they are communicating. In some cases, assigning subtitles to speakers is facilitated through the convention of co-presence, and implication that the utterance of the character we see speak is also the source text for the subtitles we read. In other cases, however, no diegetic speaker is visible, and the viewers have to recognise the voice or use contextual cues in order to map subtitles to speakers. In either case, subtitles are visually present as communicative agents whose careful placement is sanctioned and whose communicative content is authorised by the collective sender. As a consequence, utterances in the subtitles can not only be understood as a form of transcribed character utterances, but also as an expression of meaning intended by the film (i.e. the collective sender).

Example 2: *Heidi* (2015), 00:22:38–00:22:46

00:22:38	Look who's there.
00:22:40	That's unbelievable.
00:22:45	He shouldn't be allowed //
	to take care of a child.

In example 2 from *Heidi* (2015) it is possible for viewers to identify that the negative assessment of the person referred to here, Heidi's grandfather, originates in several inhabitants of the village. The visual information presents the grandfather, i.e. the reference of the utterances rather than the speakers who

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<sup>9</sup> This aesthetic separation is one of the reasons why subtitles are sometimes regarded as external to the text, i.e. as what Genette (1997) calls paratext (O'Sullivan 2011: 158).

produce them. The subtitles become captions that reinforce the characterisation of the old man as an outsider.

Example 3: *Heidi* (2015), 1:26:26–1:26:31

1:26:26 Dear Klara,  
1:26:28 the village is now under thick snow.  
1:26:30 Everything is white and sparkling.

Perhaps even more typical is example 3, which subtitles a voice-over. The voice-over itself represents a letter written by Heidi, read out loud in the character's voice. The same effect holds true here: the "thick snow" and the fact that the village appears "white and sparkling" are present visually in the picture and at the same time encoded in the subtitles, which do not share the impressionistic framing of the personal letter, but instead again actualise in authoritative subtitles that there is indeed snow and that everything is to be understood as white and sparkling. In this case the chain of agencies co-constituted by the subtitles includes Heidi as letter writer, the collective sender, but also the cultural spaces in which this story exists: the quaint Swiss village as an Alpine winter wonderland contrasted with the normative and inhospitable behaviour of its social structures.

*Der Goalie bin ig* (2014) employs this aspect of authorisation to give visual presence to its narrator.

Example 4: *Der Goalie bin ig* (2014), 00:58–01:27

00:00:58 *It all started long before that,*  
00:01:02 *but now I might as well say*  
00:01:04 *it all began the night //*  
*I got out of the nick.*  
00:01:09 *I'd already blown //*  
*the money they gave me.*  
00:01:12 *And the north wind was colder //*  
*than hell.*  
00:01:23 *Schummertal.*  
00:01:25 *November.*  
00:01:26 *And my heart was as heavy //*  
*as an old wet floorcloth.*

Example 4 is from the beginning of the film, where the protagonist, *Goalie*, starts his story. Compared to example 3, the subtitles as an authoritative voice in this case are more consistently marked as the subjective monologue of *Goalie* – with the help of lexis, where *nick*, *blown* and *hell* are examples of a more colloquial register, the use of the first-person pronouns, and through the italics that distinguish this voice from

the dialogue. The emphasis in this case is on the atmosphere and the state of mind of the protagonist. The subtitles here animate a narrator into being, but also a particular genre of film, the milieu in a village in Switzerland, and a style that positions this voice as literary, as writing rendered into writing.

These examples of authorisation demonstrate that even though subtitles are typically tied to spoken character utterances, they have the capacity to go beyond character voices when it comes to the framing of a film scene. Rather than expressing the impressionistic thoughts and emotions of the characters (e.g. their views of Heidi's grandfather, Heidi's impressions of the snowy landscape, Goalie's emotions after leaving prison), the subtitles in these cases have a narrative, authoritative quality and describe on behalf of the film that this is how viewers are invited to see and understand the scene they are engaging with.

### 3.2.4 Foregrounding

Examples 2–4 were discussed from the perspective of authorisation, but they also contain instances of foregrounding. This is to say that subtitles in these cases have the function of highlighting aspects of other semiotic modes or of the film as a whole. In contrast to the dialogue, subtitles are part of the film's primary visual mode, and a reduced carrier of meaning that is optimised to be understood in full. In example 2, attitudes towards a character were given centre stage and contributed to characterisation; in examples 3 and 4, the viewers' attention was shifted to the space and surroundings that are represented in the respective films. Foregrounding means that when subtitles are present, they give additional weight to the meaning they co-construct with the other semiotic modes of film.

Insofar as foregrounding influences the film viewers' reception processes of the film, it is related to the function of film dialogue that Kozloff (2000) calls *control of viewer's evaluation/emotions*.<sup>10</sup> Dialogue may "draw our attention to someone or something" (Kozloff 2000: 50) – subtitles can do the same, but in addition may also point to aspects of the dialogue. Often, additional emphasis is created through reduplication, by encoding in language what is also visible in the image (as was the case in example 3, for instance). A good example are character and place names that are intelligible in the dialogue even to monolingual viewers and are represented again in the subtitles. In addition, due to orthographic standards, names are marked by capitalisation in text. As a result, subtitles highlight all those aspects that can be named, and characters and

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<sup>10</sup> I thank the reviewers for noting this similarity.

places in particular are consistently identified and brought to the attention of the viewers. This aspect of reduplication also concerns repetition itself. Since subtitles appear in chunks of one or two lines, repeated words can coexist onscreen at the same time. Example 5 below shows two cases in *Heidi* (2015) which highlight the importance of the named character and the character emotion, respectively.

Example 5: Repetition in *Heidi* (2015)

01:28:57 Peter, Peter, Peter!

00:20:47 Thank you, thank you, thank you!

### 3.2.5 Aestheticisation

The co-presence of what is sequential in dialogue also has an aesthetic dimension. Contrary to non-conventional subtitling directly shaped by aesthetic concerns (see O'Sullivan 2011), the formulation and presentation of the subtitles analysed here do not seem to have been subject to conscious aesthetic decisions beyond existing standards, which is to say that aesthetic effects may be coincidental. Nonetheless, particular aesthetic effects of visual patterns and symmetry can be observed. Example 5 illustrates visual patterns that are created through lexical repetition in one-line subtitles, and similar cases also appear in two-line subtitles as representations of second-speaker repetition in the spoken dialogue. Visual interaction of subtitles and image beyond mere co-presence is rare in these conventional subtitles, but see Figure 1 for an example from *Heimatland* (2015).



Figure 1: Aestheticisation in *Heimatland* (2015), 00:10:23–00:10:28.

Here, the place name, “Switzerland” in the subtitles is juxtaposed with the iconic Swiss flag (white cross on red background) on a bag carried by a passer-by. The next subtitle – “You Whore of Babylon!” – presents an insult directed at the country and now partly covers the flag, which is at the same time visually cut in half by the speaker in the foreground of the frame. Thus, the visual covering of the flag by both the character and the subtitles becomes an aesthetic metaphorical rendition of the insult uttered against the country.

Two further aesthetic effects that stand out in the films here are the reinforcement of conversational cohesion by co-presenting adjacency pairs in the same two-line subtitle, which creates visual simultaneity that accompanies the sequential order of talk in the dialogue. This form of visualisation of dialogue and at the same time of the reduction of temporality represents a contrast to the final aestheticisation function I want to mention here: the representation of reading and writing in subtitles. Generally, film dialogue is “the speaking of what is written to be spoken as if not written” (Gregory 1967: 191). By analogy, book adaptations like *Heidi* (2015) and in particular *Der Goalie bin ig* (2014) include narration that is the speaking of what is written to be read, i.e. much like an audiobook they perform out loud literary writing and transfer it to speech. Transferring this form of narration back to the written medium, subtitles of narrative voice-overs can represent writing in writing. Example 6 below juxtaposes the beginning of *Der Goalie bin ig* (2014) (see also example 4) with the beginning of Donal McLaughlin’s 2013 translation of the novel from which the film was adapted (Lenz 2013).

Example 6: *Der Goalie bin ig* (2014), 00:58–01:08

00:00:58     *It all started long before that,*

00:01:02     *but now I might as well say*

00:01:04     *it all began the night //*

*I got out of the nick.*

*Naw Much of a Talker*

It aw started long afore that. Ah kid

jist as well make oot ut: it aw started

that wan evenin, a few days eftir they

let me ootae the Joke.

The comparison illustrates the literary style to which these subtitles orient – a first-person narrator looking back at his story. However, the difference between the colloquial Scottish of the literary translation and the largely standard English of the subtitles also demonstrates that subtitles here are not a direct transfer of actual literary writing. Instead, the subtitles’ quasi-literary appearance performs written-ness and evokes in viewers an imagined source text that is not referred to, but constructed in situ by the text on screen.

### 3.2.6 Foreignisation and domestication

The same example 6 is also an illustration of orientation towards the target audience, which can be discussed in terms of domestication and foreignisation, i.e. aligning the target text with existing conventions in the target language, or making understandable the source text while staying as close as possible to source language conventions (Ulrych 2000: 130–131). Among the different modes of audiovisual translation, dubbing can prototypically be seen as a domesticating strategy which conceals its own status as translation. Subtitling, on the other hand, is a clearly visible addition to the non-subtitled film and thus foreignises not just the translated text, but the entire multimodal artwork (i.e. the subtitled film).

Nonetheless, subtitles can domesticate, or conversely foreignise, to a larger or lesser extent. In example 6, for instance, the last word *nick* creates a colloquial quality that fits the film scene it subtitles. However, in employing informal British English, the subtitles also situate themselves away from the source space of the film and near a target audience familiar with British colloquialisms. In terms of translation, the choice of lexis may be attributed to domestication, but at the same time the subtitle as communicative agent also foreignises the film scene and what is represented therein. More generally, subtitles mark as Other that which they make accessible, and thus create both distance and proximity between the source text and the target audience.

## 4 Concluding discussion

The examples from the three Swiss fiction films have demonstrated some of the ways in which subtitles contribute to meaning-making. The three films are similar in that their subtitles appear as a unified voice that functions as a standardised rendering of the linguistically heterogeneous spoken dialogue that is simultaneously present. Generally, they all function as a cultural mediator that allows an Other audience to have access to the fictional representations of the source text and at the same time to the cultural space in which the film was produced. Meaning is prepared and structured, authorised and foregrounded, aestheticised and foreignised.

Like the other affordances of film making, subtitles contribute to the communication between collective senders and viewers. As textual agents (Cooren 2004), they are endpoints of chains of agencies, and they are constitutive for those agents that viewers infer further up the chain. The concept of the collective

sender describes the fuzzy conglomerate of agents that are understood to speak through the subtitled film. The film's sounds and images, the foreign dialogue and the presence of subtitles as such construct that collective sender's identity as Other to the viewers, and at the same time the viewers as Other to the collective sender. When revisiting the effects discussed in Section 3 in this light, the discrete appearance of subtitles does not only contribute to the authorisation of individual gestures (e.g. the presentation of a fairy-tale Switzerland), but also constructs the collective sender as an authoritative figure who oversees a cohesive narrative, structured not least by the rhythm of the subtitles. The foregrounding, aestheticisation and foreignisation effects are thus not simply achieved through the subtitles, but by the authoritative collective sender on whose behalf they communicate. In any film, the collective sender is a heterogeneous entity that communicates multimodally and on different levels. In the case of interlingually subtitled films, this heterogeneity is increased through the subtitles which speak about one cultural and linguistic space in the language of another. In other words, the collective sender in this case communicates from three different loci: the diegetic world of the narrative fiction, the film's place of origin, and the cultural space within which the audience is situated. With that, the audience of the subtitled film is not just simultaneously located on two levels of communication, as Brock (2015: 33) would have it, but on three: They are addressed as members of the target audience, as onlookers onto the fictional space, and as an outgroup seeking access to aspects of the cultural community of the film's place of origin.

The examples that were presented here have only offered a glimpse of the communication that is achieved through subtitles and of the cross-semiotic interaction between the different modes of film-making that are easily taken for granted. The theorisation of subtitled films that is outlined in this paper is a first attempt to broaden the research paradigms on the basis of which subtitles are analysed. While one way forward in this endeavour is the collection of further examples and the description of other communicative effects based on larger corpora, another promising direction is to approach the understanding of subtitle communication with the help of empirical reception studies.<sup>11</sup> Such experimental designs could determine to what degree subtitles and subtitled films lead to changed perceptions and attitudes to textual and cultural aspects in different viewer types.

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<sup>11</sup> For comparative empirical studies of film viewer inferences see Desilla (2012, 2014).



## Appendix. Transcription conventions

//	Line break in two-line subtitles
<i>italics</i>	Italics in subtitles
00:00:00	Start time of the subtitle, rounded to the next full second

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## Filmography

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**Methodological framework**

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<b>Focus</b>	Subtitles as communicative agents
<b>Underpinning theory</b>	Pragmatics of Fiction, Pragmatics
<b>Research questions/ underlying assumptions</b>	(1) How do subtitles and subtitled films communicate with their audiences? (2) What communicative functions are manifest in subtitles and in the subtitled film?
<b>Languages</b>	English, German (Swiss-German dialects)
<b>Type of study</b>	Explorative study of three fiction films
<b>Methodology</b>	Qualitative analysis of English subtitles in their multimodal context
<b>Data</b>	<i>Heidi</i> (2015), <i>Heimatland</i> (2015), <i>Der Goalie bin ig</i> (2014), 290 minutes of film, 2430 subtitles
<b>Experimental procedure/ Research instruments</b>	Qualitative analysis exploring the entire dataset in order to identify communicative effects of English subtitles.
<b>Data elicited/main results</b>	Analysing subtitles within the research paradigms of the pragmatics of fiction can highlight particular communicative functions. Subtitles as communicative agents structure and pre-process information, authorise and foreground meaning, and aestheticise and foreignise elements of the source text.
<b>Conclusions (main)</b>	The subtitles' communicative effects are achieved (1) as part of joint cinematic meaning-making that includes all other affordances of film-making, and (2) by the collective sender on whose behalf subtitles and other meaning-making modes communicate. The collective sender communicates from three different loci: the diegetic world of the narrative fiction, the film's place of origin, and the cultural space within which the audience is situated.
<b>Acknowledged limitations</b>	The study is explorative and offers a typology of communicative effects that is not exhaustive. No claims are made regarding the typicality of any presented communicative effect.
<b>Implications/uses</b>	The study attempts to highlight the contributions that can be made to the study of subtitles by including complementary research paradigms that do not primarily regard subtitles as translation products, but as an affordance in the communication between a collective sender and a linguistically and culturally other target audience.

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