

# Textual reduction in translated dialogue in film versus literary fiction<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

By exploring the correlation between textual reduction and length of utterance as well as surveying what grammatical elements are omitted to cause textual reduction, this paper seeks to establish what mechanisms are at play in the translation of dialogue in film vs. fiction. The need for economy of translation found in subtitling might suggest that textual reduction is more widespread in subtitles than in translated fiction.

On the basis of two small-size corpora, it is shown that the longer the utterance the greater the possibility for reductions in both modes of translation. However, and perhaps not surprisingly, there is less textual reduction in translated dialogue in fiction overall. Moreover, translated fiction seems to allow longer utterances than subtitles before reduction takes place.

With regard to the elements that are omitted, similar patterns can be found, although subtitles show a clearer tendency for interpersonal elements to be omitted.

## *1. Introduction and aims*

This paper explores some aspects of translated dialogue; more specifically, it focuses on dialogue translated from English into Norwegian, as found in subtitles and in texts of literary fiction. The aim is to point out similarities and differences between these two distinct types of translation. They are distinct in the sense that subtitling has been referred to as translation of dynamic multimedia texts in going from the spoken to the written mode, while literary translation could be defined as translation within the same mode, that of written text.

Furthermore, “[t]he most distinctive feature of subtitling is the need for economy of translation” (Díaz Cintas & Anderman 2009: 14); subtitles have even been defined as “condensed written translations of original dialogue” (Luyken as quoted in Georgakopoulou 2009: 21). Thus, to compare subtitles and literary translation with regard to textual reduction will shed light on the extent to which reduction takes place in

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the two modes of translation, and also what elements are typically left out.

The paper has three main parts. The first part gives an introduction to subtitles and subtitling and points out some of the characteristics of this particular form of translation. The second part discusses some aspects of dialogue. The third part starts by presenting a case study of what happens when translating film dialogue. The goal is to see if it is possible to point to certain patterns, particularly as regards textual reduction in the translation of film dialogue. Finally, a comparison with dialogue in fiction will be made.

In the case study I will make use of corpus linguistics techniques to explore to what extent there is a correlation between textual reduction and length of utterance.<sup>2</sup> It should be mentioned that the study of reduction, or condensation, in subtitles is far from a new area of interest. However, a corpus-based comparison as the one performed here does not seem to have been fully explored before. In addition, while it has often been the case in subtitling research to refer to the reduction/condensation rate in terms of a percentage of the original dialogue,<sup>3</sup> this paper seeks to investigate the correlation between the length of an utterance and reduction in terms of number of linguistic items. Although this is not explicitly related to the variation in condensation rates found as a result of the intensity of the dialogue (cf. Pedersen 2011: 138), it may be inferred that the longer the utterance, the more intense the dialogue.

It has been claimed that reductions in subtitles are far from random (cf. De Linde 1995) and it is my aim to find out what grammatical elements are omitted to cause this textual reduction and compare this to what happens in dialogue in fiction. By textual reduction is meant a reduction in content or message as a result of the omission of grammatical elements in going from original film or text to subtitles or translation.<sup>4</sup> Some examples are given in (1) and (2):

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<sup>2</sup> I.e. the paper will be seen to differ methodologically from investigations traditionally carried out within the paradigm of subtitling research.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. e.g. Pedersen (2011: 20-21, 138-139) and references therein.

<sup>4</sup> The term “textual reduction” should not be seen as evaluative; thus the derogatory flavour often attributed to “reduction” in subtitling studies, where “condensation” is often used, is not intended here.

- (1) Do you know what this is, *Lieutenant*? (BA4)<sup>5</sup>

Vet du hva dette er?

Lit.: Know you what this is?

- (2) *Yeah*, you *already* said that. (FO1)

Du sa det.

Lit.: You said that.

These are both short utterances and it is fairly easy to see in what way they have been reduced; in example (1) it is the vocative *Lieutenant* that has not been translated in the subtitles, while in example (2) it is what I have called a reaction signal *yeah* and the adjunct of time *already* that have been omitted in the subtitles.

Before we go into this at a more detailed level some background to the area of subtitles is in order.

## 2. *Subtitling*

When the decision has been taken to keep the original soundtrack and to switch from the spoken to the written mode, by adding text to the screen, the technique is known as subtitling. (Díaz Cintas & Anderman 2009: 4)

Subtitling has been around since the arrival of sound film in the late 1920s. And in Norway, where there is no long-standing tradition for dubbing – the other major method of film translation – subtitling has become the predominant practice in conveying foreign film to the Norwegian audience. According to Lomheim (1999), TV subtitles are, in fact, the kind of texts that, besides newspapers, are most widely read by the general public. In other words, subtitles play an important role in our daily encounter with text. See also Pedersen (2011: 1) for similar observations for Swedish.

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<sup>5</sup> The codes given in brackets refer to the film or novel where the example is taken from. See Primary Sources for an overview of these.

The number of studies of subtitles of foreign films and programmes for the general public bear witness of a thriving field. Some examples include case studies by e.g. De Linde (1995), Taylor (1999, 2000), Hjort (2009), Mattsson (2009), all of whom have been interested in the language produced in subtitles. The fact is that the study of subtitling is now considered a part of Translation Studies in general (cf. Mattsson 2009). Indeed, “audiovisual translation has evolved to the point where, as a discipline, it is now one of the most vibrant and vigorous fields within Translation Studies” (Díaz Cintas & Anderman 2009: 8).

The fact that I will concentrate on language-related issues in subtitles is not to say that the technical and practical sides of subtitling are of no importance to the end product. On the contrary, many aspects of the process are of great importance to the subtitles we see on the screen. And it is easy to come up with examples of this; the subtitles need to fit on the screen both physically and according to the time restrictions that are laid down by the interplay between dialogue and picture. So, space as well as time in the form of time codes for when the subtitles are to appear, and for how long they are to be exposed are very important practical matters that may have an impact on the final product – both as regards wording and syntax. The two elements of space and time are constraints that really set subtitling apart from literary translation, where such restrictions are not commonly an issue. Indeed, in addition to the constraint of subtitling that Pedersen (2011: 18-19) calls “the semiotic switch from spoken to written language”, he mentions “spatial and temporal constraints and the condensation that these bring with them”. In fact, according to Pedersen (2011: 20):

condensation [...] is not a necessary property of subtitles; it is just extremely common. So common, in fact, that it is virtually impossible to discuss the process of subtitling without discussing condensation.

So far we have taken subtitling to be a form of translation without hesitation. It should be mentioned, however, that there has been some discussion as to whether subtitling really could be called translation, most notably so perhaps by Catford who said that “[t]ranslation between media is impossible (i.e. one cannot ‘translate’ from the spoken to the written form of a text or vice versa).” (1965: 53). However, although some people would claim that translation equals translation within the written mode, we cannot deny the fact that the subtitling of film has

many of the characteristics of translation, not least in that it uses a target language to convey the meaning of a source language. Also, as pointed out by Mattsson (2009: 35) “[t]oday, most translation theories and scholars view the translatability of film as quite unproblematic, and subtitling, in spite of its many difficulties and constraints, as something well worth both practicing and studying”. Nevertheless, the nature of the media is such that both the source and target utterances are available to the public simultaneously, and therefore it is easy for people with knowledge of both languages to judge the success of the subtitles as translation. Often you will hear comments and jokes about the poor standard of subtitles, sometimes taking up a misinterpretation of a single word and sometimes subtitles are criticized for only giving us a shortened version of what was really said. Nonetheless, in most cases subtitles manage to convey the intended message supported by the images that are broadcast at the same time as the subtitles.

To return to the question of whether subtitling is a form of translation or not, I would argue that it most certainly is, precisely because it has an element of going from one language into another and that the message in the two languages should be the same. Obviously, there are cases that may be criticized for not being close enough to the original message, but this will also occur in literary translation. Consider examples (3) and (4), where (3) is from film and (4) is from literary fiction.

- (3) Two tins of Schimmelpennincks. And *throw in* a lighter *while you’re at it.* (SM1)

To esker “Schimmelpennicks” og en lighter.

Lit.: Two tins Schimmelpennicks and a lighter.

- (4) The Queen said, “I am not dressed. *I cannot receive visitors until I am dressed.*” (ST1)

“Jeg har ikke kledd meg *ennu,*” sa dronningen.

Lit.: “I have not dressed myself yet,” said the queen.

In example (3) it is easy to point to elements that have been omitted in the subtitles and similarly, example (4) shows literary translation where

elements have been omitted (and perhaps added?). And it could possibly be argued that in context, be it with accompanying pictures or between-the-lines information, the original meaning is somehow retained.

Both examples show what Baker (1992) has termed “translation by omission” and what Gottlieb (1994) has termed “deletion”. While Baker is concerned with translation theory and strategies within translation in general, Gottlieb is concerned with strategies within subtitling. If we compare their lists of strategies it can be seen that, to a great extent, they describe the same strategies seen from different angles.

First, if we consider Baker’s list (cf. Figure 1), “translation by omission” is one of her eight translation strategies connected with non-equivalence on the word level.

<b>Translation strategies connected with non-equivalence on the word level.</b>	
a)	Translation by a more general word (superordinate)
b)	Translation by a more neutral/less expressive word
c)	Translation by cultural substitution
d)	Translation using a loan word or loan word plus explanation
e)	Translation by paraphrase using a related word
f)	Translation by paraphrase using an unrelated word
g)	Translation by omission
h)	Translation by illustration

*Figure 1.* Baker’s translation strategies (1992: 26)

Gottlieb’s list looks slightly different (cf. Figure 2) and is a list of strategies that are involved in the translation process of subtitling; he says they are different techniques used in professional interlingual subtitling:

<b>Strategies involved in the translation process of subtitling</b>	
Type of strategy	Character of translation
1 Expansion	Expanded expression, adequate rendering (culture-specific references)
2 Paraphrase	Altered expression, adequate rendering (non-visualized language-specific items)
3 Transfer	Full expression, adequate rendering (slow unmarked speech)
4 Imitation	Identical expression, equivalent rendering ( proper nouns; international greetings)
5 Transcription	Non-standard expression, adequate rendering (dialects; intended speech defects)
6 Dislocation	Differing expression, adjusted content (musical/visualized language-specific items)
7 Condensation	Condensed expression, concise rendering (mid-tempo speech with some redundancy)
8 Decimation	Abridged expression, reduced content (fast speech; low-redundancy speech)
9 Deletion	Omitted expression, no verbal content (fast speech with high redundancy)
10 Resignation	Deviant expression, distorted content (incomprehensible or 'untranslatable' speech)

*Figure 2.* Gottlieb's subtitling strategies (1994: 294)

Gottlieb considers the first seven categories to be correspondent renderings of the source dialogue into the target subtitles. Strategies 8-10, on the other hand, are considered non-correspondent. This differs from Baker's view since all of her eight strategies are considered to involve non-equivalence. Nevertheless, I believe that the concepts presented by Gottlieb and Baker reflect overlapping strategies, with the exception of Gottlieb's strategy 3 – Transfer, and possibly strategy 4 – Imitation. These would be considered strategies of equivalence, however.

It could be argued that Gottlieb has a more semantic approach to both loss and reduction which implies that a direct comparison with both Baker and the present study will be difficult. However, I think there is

enough of a similarity to say that the strategies set up for subtitling do not diverge significantly from those set up for translation in general. This in turn suggests that the process is much the same for both modes of translation.

Since our main concern here is textual reduction the strategies that are at play are translation by omission and deletion, both of which may be seen to be simplifications, to use a more general term in translation theory. In this connection it will be interesting to see what type of elements undergo simplification of this kind.

Lomheim (1999) states that random tests show that we cannot determine beforehand what elements will disappear in going from film dialogue to subtitles – or what other means the subtitler will resort to. However, what such tests may reveal is that certain communicative elements are more prone to disappearing than others. According to Lomheim (*ibid.*), a more precise account of which specific elements are omitted is hard to give, but see e.g. De Linde (1995) and Pedersen (2011) for a discussion and some observations on the issue. Nonetheless, the focus here will be on what happens at a more detailed level: is it possible to see patterns as to what linguistic items are part of the process of reduction? The answer to this is probably ‘yes’, as De Linde (1995) concludes that reductions are not random, but systematic. Before this question is addressed in the case study, we will take a look at some of the characteristics of dialogue.

### *3. Dialogue*

It has been said about film dialogue that it is “written to be spoken as if not written” (Gregory and Carroll (1978) as quoted in Taylor 1999:1). Dialogue in fiction, on the other hand, is “written to be read, usually silently” (Page 1973: 9). It seems that we are dealing with two quite distinct modes of communication, although the dialogue in both film and fiction is pre-meditated and it tries to imitate everyday spontaneous speech.

It should also be mentioned that there exists no one uniform dialogue standard that film and fiction strive to copy. There is a large range of general and specific rules as to what is included in dialogue. According to Taylor (1999: 1), conventions regarding clause structuring, turn-taking, and the presence of features such as varying intonation in making

statements, asking questions, etc. are some of the general rules we have to be aware of when trying to reproduce human oral communication. Other sets of rules are specific to individual language communities or languages, and, according to Taylor (1999: 1), include conventions about “how information is organized in clauses, at what points turn-taking is considered acceptable, the particular tones used for different purposes, etc.” Moreover, the language produced in dialogue is also affected by the situation of the conversation, and in effect different speech genres, requiring different language strategies, may be resorted to according to what situation you find yourself in. With reference to Bakhtin, Taylor states that “Participants have developed co-occurrence expectations arising from previous interactive experience of such genres. Thus participants in particular situational contexts act (and speak) within prescribed and predictable limits”. These situational contexts also include individual factors such as age, sex, social standing, etc. As pointed out by Taylor “it is not easy [...] for a young white male to attempt to write dialogue for a group of elderly black females”.

In the dialogue imitations we find in film and fiction, then, we would expect these rules and strategies to be followed. If we relate this to the point about film and fiction being two different modes of communication, we would further expect that film and fiction differ in the ways in which they deal with these rules and strategies.

According to Baños-Piñero & Chaume (2009: 1), “creating fictional dialogues that sound natural and believable is one of the main challenges of both screenwriting and audiovisual translation”. Thus, “pre-fabricated orality”, imitating coherent conversation, is a key concept if the aim is authentic-sounding dialogue. In our context, it could be claimed that film has the advantage of both sound and moving pictures to accompany the dialogue, while fiction has to rely on the written word only. Film, then, not only creates the dialogue but also a fixed surrounding context, with intonation, facial expressions, etc. In literary fiction this is obviously very different; as readers we are exposed to the wording of the dialogue, accompanied in most cases by punctuation. Apart from this we have to rely on our interpretation of the text to create our own reality from the written word.

The purpose of dialogue in both film and literary fiction may be seen as a means of carrying the action and the progression of the plot of either the film or the book. An additional way of unfolding the narrative in film

is of course the moving pictures themselves. It has also been said about film dialogue that “it defines narrative genres and viewers” (Piazza et al. 2011: 5). While the former may be true for literary fiction as well, the latter would have to be modified to “engage readers”.

As pointed out by Page, although dialogue (in literary fiction) “will often serve to advance the plot, and in certain writers [...] will carry a large share of this function, its more customary role is to contribute to the presentation and development of character” (Page 1973: 14). This is also true of film dialogue, in the sense that the dialogue contributes to the portrayal of a character. In Piazza et al.’s (2011: 5) words: “the discourse of film [...] is a tool for characterisation, e.g. a way of entering the mind of a character”.

The most important features of invented dialogue, or characteristics of dialogue in fiction vs. film, are listed in Figure 3.

dialogue in fiction	dialogue in film <sup>6</sup>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>written to be read (Page 1973: 9)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>written to be spoken as if not written (Gregory and Carroll (1978) as quoted in Taylor 1999:1)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>invented / non-spontaneous</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>invented / non-spontaneous</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>written mode</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>spoken mode (speech incl. phonological features)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>used for character portrayals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>used for character portrayals</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>carries the story/plot</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>carries the story/plot</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>may define genre</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>may define genre</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>engages readers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>engages viewers</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>pictures accompanying speech</li> </ul>

Figure 3. Characteristics of dialogue in fiction vs. film

<sup>6</sup> For more indepth analyses of the nature of the language used in film, i.e. telecinematic discourse, see Piazza et al. (eds.) (2011).

These observations about dialogue in film and fiction lead us to the not so unexpected conclusion that there is a cline with authentic speech at the one extreme and dialogue in fiction at the other, with film dialogue somewhere in between. Yet another dimension is added with subtitles and translation. Due to space restrictions, omission or reduction will be expected to take place, and “the obvious solution is to do away with redundant elements of speech” (Georgakopoulou 2009: 25).

This brief discussion of differences and similarities between dialogue in film and fiction serves as a background for the following case study.

#### 4. *Case study*

In the case study, we will take a look at translated dialogue in film and fiction. We will be concerned with the following three issues:

- amount of textual reduction per utterance;
- amount of textual reduction vs. length of utterance;
- type of textual reduction.

It should be mentioned that in the field of subtitling it is “the character and not the word [that] is most often considered the basic unit” (Pedersen 2011: 19). Nevertheless, it is the word that is under scrutiny here.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, although it may not be a common way to measure reduction rate in subtitles per utterance, I believe it will serve the purpose of this paper in the comparison with literary fiction.

##### 4.1. *Material*

The material used in this study is a small corpus of subtitles, including the original film script, and a comparable amount of fictional texts taken from the *English-Norwegian Parallel Corpus*.<sup>8</sup> The corpus of subtitles comprises four films and one episode of a TV series; the films have a duration of one and a half to two hours, whereas the TV episode has a

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<sup>7</sup> See also De Linde (1995: 16), who uses units that may or may not coincide with a word, e.g. markers of interaction such as modals or expressions of the kind *tu sais quoi*.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.hf.uio.no/ilos/english/services/omc/enpc/>

duration of half an hour – altogether a total of 8 to 9 hours of viewing. As regards genre, two of the films could be broadly characterized as drama and two as thrillers, while the series is labelled comedy. (See list of Primary Sources for details.)

It should also be added that I got hold of the scripts in various ways; some were published versions of the films in book form, others were downloaded from the Internet, and one script with subtitles was acquired courtesy of Broadcast Text. Apart from that one film, the subtitles were taken from the video (VHS) versions of the films. This is not without significance as reading speeds have been shown to differ between TV and video subtitling, i.e. the viewer is exposed to subtitles at a higher speed on video (both VHS and particularly DVD) than is normally the case on TV.<sup>9</sup> I do not believe that it matters much for the purpose of the present study, as the data are fairly homous in being taken mainly from the same medium, viz. the video (VHS) versions. However, it should be kept in mind that the findings with regard to reduction in subtitles are true for the present material, but may vary somewhat for subtitling in general.

With regard to subtitling norms, Mattsson (2006), in her study of the subtitling of swearwords and discourse markers, finds that public TV channels and DVD versions follow similar norms.

Further, as regards the material for the study, I chose five texts from the *English-Norwegian Parallel Corpus* that, to the best possible extent, match the genres of the films used. Not only did the literary texts have to be more or less comparable to the films as regards genre, they also had to have a certain amount of dialogue in them.

For the case study proper 100 running utterances from each film and book were extracted, resulting in a total material of 1,000 original utterances with their respective subtitles and translations – i.e. 500 utterances from film and 500 from fiction. Even with these attempts at matching the two modes, there are obvious catches with the material that have to be taken into account when assessing the results. For instance,

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<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Díaz Cintas & Remael (2007) and Pedersen (2011) for observations regarding reading speeds. Furthermore, Díaz Cintas & Remael (2007: 96) note that the reason why “subtitles ought to be kept on the television screen longer than in the cinema or the DVD [...] is that the television has to address a wider spectrum of viewers who are usually at home, as opposed to the cinema or DVD which imply an active approach”.

none of the literary texts had 100 consecutive utterances. Moreover, in fiction there is often an element of reporting direct speech, as can be seen in example (4): *The Queen said...* This is a feature that is not present in film dialogue, and as a consequence such reporting clauses were disregarded in the analysis. These are but two diverging aspects that have to be kept in mind.

#### 4.2. Amount of textual reduction vs. length of utterance

First of all I was interested in the amount of reduction that really existed in the film material. This was measured by looking at how many reductions there are per utterance, i.e. how many lexical items have clearly been left out in the subtitles. By utterance I mean a stretch of speech usually corresponding to a turn, and, as already mentioned, textual reduction is a reduction in content or message in going from original to translated utterance. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of utterances in subtitles containing 0 -  $\geq 10$  reductions

	Film					Total
	SM1	MA1	SP1	FO1	BA4	
0 reduction	20	71	33	27	24	175
1 reduction	14	18	20	25	19	96
2 reductions	25	6	14	17	13	75
3 reductions	13	4	8	13	18	56
4 reductions	8	1	14	5	12	40
5-9 reductions	15	0	10	11	14	50
$\geq 10$ reductions	5	0	1	2	0	8
						500

Table 1 shows that there appears to be a cline here and most commonly we find 0 reduction, more exactly in 175 out of 500 utterances, followed by 1 reduction per utterance in 96 cases; 2 reductions per utterance in 75 cases, 3 reductions in 56 cases etc. The numbers show, to a large extent, what we would expect, i.e. there are more instances of 1 reduction per utterance than 3 reductions, for instance.

Let us take a look at some examples of 0, 1, 2, 3, etc. reductions per utterance. First, then, a case where no reduction has taken place is found in example (5).

- (5) Is everything in place? (MA1)

Er alt på plass?

Lit.: Is everything in place?

In example (6) we find an instance of a one-word reduction; the vocative *dear* has been left out in the subtitles.

- (6) Gentle women do not compare people to animals, *dear*. (SP1)

Pene damer sammenligner ikke folk med dyr.

Lit.: Nice women compare not people to animals.

In example (7), three elements have been omitted, the interjection *Ah*, the time adjunct *today*, and the discourse marker *I think*, which has been counted as one item.

- (7) *Ah*, excellent – short back and sides *today*, *I think*, please. (BA4)

Glimrende. Kort bak og på sidene, takk.

Lit.: Excellent. Short back and on the sides, thanks.

The most complex kind of reduction is found in utterances like the one in (8), where we have an instance of more than ten reductions.

- (8) *It's all set*. My guy in Miami *said he'd* have them within the next few weeks. *Are you sure* you don't want to go in with *me*? Five thousand dollars outlay, a *guaranteed* ten-thousand-dollar return. A *consortium of* Court Street lawyers and judges. *They're just* drooling to get their lips around some Cuban cigars. (SM1)

Ja, min mellommann i Miami leverer dem om et par uker. Vil du ikke være med? Vi investerer 5000 og får 10.000 tilbake. Advokatene og dommerne står i kø for å få tak i dem.

Lit.: Yes, my middleman in Miami delivers them in a couple of weeks. Will you not take part? We invest 5,000 and get 10,000 back. The lawyers and judges are queuing up to get hold of them.

In utterances such as (8), one problem of the reduction issue is brought to the fore, in that it illustrates that some translation shifts are hard to quantify. It is not always easy to point exactly to what textual reduction has taken place; nonetheless I have italicized the elements I believe have been left out in the subtitles, although there may be said to be some sort of semantic compensation, for instance with *Ja* for *It's all set*. *Intersemiotic redundancy*, i.e. “positive feedback from visuals and soundtrack” (Gottlieb 2005: 19), is a key concept in this respect, advocating the possibility of loss of elements without loss of meaning.<sup>10</sup> Even if reduction of this kind may prove hard to quantify, an attempt is made in the following sections.

#### 4.3. Amount of textual reduction vs. length of utterance

Next I will test the hypothesis formulated in the introduction that the longer the utterance is the more reductions there will be. Table 2 shows the mean length of each utterance in relation to number of reductions per utterance. The mean length is given in characters including spaces and punctuation.

Table 2 Mean length of original utterance in subtitles (in characters)

	mean length
1 reduction	36
2 reductions	66
3 reductions	84
4 reductions	90
5-9 reductions	178
≥10 reductions	294

<sup>10</sup> According to Gottlieb (2005: 19) “the intersemiotic redundancy [...] in subtitling often secures that audiences miss less of the film content than a merely linguistic analysis might indicate”.

Quite clearly a pattern emerges as regards mean length of utterance in relation to number of reductions; as hypothesized, then: the longer the utterance the more reductions. This is perhaps what we would expect given the time restrictions a subtitler has to deal with. Although time restrictions may have some impact, the numbers shown in Table 2 may also imply that the more textual content per utterance the easier it is to simplify through textual reduction and still retain the essential message, albeit not all the textual items. Let us consider example (9).

- (9) Permission to write home immediately, *sir - this is* the first brilliant plan a Baldrick has *ever* had. For centuries we've tried, and they've always turned out to be *total* pigswill. *My* mother will be as pleased as Punch. (BA4)

Tillatelse til å skrive hjem straks! Den første lysende plan en Baldrick har hatt! Vi har prøvd i århundrer, og det har bare blitt skvip. Mamma blir glad som en lerce!

Lit.: Permission to write home immediately! The first brilliant plan a Baldrick has had! We have tried for centuries, and it has only become hogwash. Mum becomes happy as a lark!

In example (9) five textual reductions (italicized) were found in an utterance containing 218 characters. Thus, this particular utterance was slightly longer than the average for five to nine reductions.

#### 4.4. Type of textual reduction in subtitles

The next step is to identify which types of items are omitted in going from film dialogue to subtitles. And to specify a bit more, when I say reductions this is meant to reflect omissions on the semantic or syntactic level that are not rooted in the restrictions laid down by the languages involved, i.e., as Øverås puts it, “shifts based on rule governed differences between the two languages, where identity would violate target rules” (Øverås 1996: 45). An example to illustrate this is given in (10), where the immediately preceding utterance is included:

- (10) (Looks like someone forgot a camera.) Yeah, I did. (SM1)  
(Noen har visst glemt kameraet sitt.) Ja, det har jeg.

Lit.: (Someone has apparently left their camera.) Yes, that have I.

To translate this directly into “Ja, jeg gjorde” (lit.: *Yes, I did*) would violate target rules, although we could possibly say “Ja, jeg har” (lit.: *Yes, I have*). Such shifts were not counted among the changes. An example of a kind of change that was recorded is given in example (11).

(11) *I'm carving* “Baldrick”, sir. (BA4)

Baldrick, sir.

Here there are no syntactic restrictions in Norwegian that require an omission of the subject and verb, even if it is the progressive aspect that has been used in English (where no corresponding verb form exists in Norwegian). A semantically similar, and grammatically sound, utterance in Norwegian would be: “Jeg risser (inn) Baldrick, sir” (Lit.: *I carve (in) Baldrick, sir*).

These and similar changes differ from Gottlieb’s (1994) categories of reduction and loss in that the changes include elements that would not be counted as loss in the ideational sense, i.e. loss of content that is rooted in “our interpretation of all that goes on around us” (Halliday & Matthiessen 1999: 511).

To get a notion of what elements are typically omitted, consider Table 3, which gives an overview of the ten most common types of omissions in the subtitle material; they are omissions that have been recorded in all five films. The number of utterances in each text where no omission has taken place, i.e. the Ø occurrences, have also been added. This is to say that, in the case of the film SM1, for instance, the omissions that were found are distributed across 80 utterances (i.e. 100 minus the 20 utterances where no reduction takes place).

Table 3. Elements omitted in subtitles

text \ syntactic element omitted	SM1	MA1	SP1	FO1	BA4	Total
S + V	51	7	21	38	27	144
A	48	4	14	37	14	127
V	25	5	14	10	15	69
conjunction	12	4	19	9	7	51
vocative	9	1	10	8	22	50
reaction signal	5	5	4	23	13	50
initiator	2	1	15	12	11	41
dO	13	2	10	7	5	37
interjection	6	3	13	3	6	31
S	9	3	6	7	5	30
∅	20	71	33	26	25	175

As regards the most common type of omission, it can be seen from Table 3 that subject + verb were omitted 144 times in the material; an example of this type of omission has already been given in example (11). Another common category is that of adverbial, and an example is found in (2), where there is no trace of *already* in the subtitles.

The overview in Table 3 suggests that elements with a typically interpersonal function, such as vocatives, reaction signals, and initiators, together account for quite a large portion of the omissions. This tallies well with what Taylor states about the language of subtitles in general: “in the Hallidayan terms of ideational, interpersonal and textual functions of language, subtitles favour the ideational – they are informative, whereas in dialogue, it is often the interpersonal that is important” (Taylor 2000: 9). And, as pointed out by Lomheim, it is often elements that have a particular communicative function that disappear (1999: 70). Similarly, Gottlieb points to the fact that the elements that are typically omitted include “redundant” or oral features such as pragmatic particles, repetitions and false starts (Gottlieb 2005: 19 and Gottlieb as referred to in Pedersen 2011: 21). Also, the type of subject that is omitted reflects the fact that the interpersonal function is under attack in subtitles, since

most of these are first and second personal pronouns, which according to Halliday & Matthiessen are typical elements in interpersonal communication: “if the ideational metafunction is language in its ‘third person’ guise, the interpersonal is language in its ‘first and second person’ guise; the interaction of a ‘me’ and ‘you’” (Halliday & Matthiessen 1999: 525).

The verbs that are omitted in going from film dialogue to subtitles are either typically conversational verbs which are part of discourse markers, such as *mean* in example (12), or, by far the most common verb to omit, *be*, as shown in example (13).

- (12) Amazing. I’m not sure I get it, though. *I mean*, what was it that gave you the idea to do this ... this project? (SM1)

Utrolig ... Men jeg vet ikke om jeg forstår det helt. Hvordan fikk du ideen til dette?

Lit.: Amazing ... But I know not if I understand it completely. How got you the idea for this?

- (13) *You’re* Jerry Lundegaard? (FO1)

Jerry Lundegaard?

Both (12) and (13) are typical examples in that it is a combination of subject pronoun + verb that has been left out in the subtitles.

More surprisingly, perhaps, items of more semantic content are also shown to be reduced. A case in point is example (14), where the direct object *the ransom* has been omitted.

- (14) Okay, it’s - see, it’s not me payin’ *the ransom*. The thing is, my wife, she’s wealthy - her dad, he’s real well off. Now, I’m in a bit of trouble – (FO1)

Det er ikke jeg som betaler. Kona mi er velstående. Faren hennes er rik. Men jeg sitter litt hardt i det.

Lit.: It is not I who pay. My wife is well-off. Her father is rich. But I am a bit hard up.

But if we look at some more context this is not so surprising after all since the discussion is about paying a ransom. An additional fact is that quite a few of the direct objects that have been omitted are not typical content words; many are pronouns, as in (15).

- (15) Freeze! Police! Hands behind your head! Do it! Do *it* now! (MA1)  
Ikke rør deg! Politi! Hendene over hodet! Gjør det! Med en gang!  
Lit.: Do not move yourself! Police! Hands over the head! Do it! At once!

On the other hand, adverbials realised by content words, in particular time and place adjuncts, disappear relatively often, e.g. (16).

- (16) Well, call me Old Mr Unadventurous, but I think I'll give it a miss *this once* ... (BA4)  
Kall meg gjerne kjedelig, men jeg står over.  
Lit.: Call me by all means boring, but I pass.

To sum up so far, we have found, on the basis of the subtitle material used here, that on average textual reduction occurs in about 65% of all utterances. Further, as regards the number of reductions per utterance, it was found, not unexpectedly, that there is a cline where we find a preference for zero reductions and relatively few occurrences of more than ten reductions per utterance.

We have also established that there seems to be a connection between the number of reductions per utterance and the length of the utterance – the longer the utterance the stronger the possibility of more reductions.

Finally, we had a look at what specific elements commonly disappear in going from original film dialogue to subtitles. That it was typically interpersonal elements that were left out was not unexpected. These are findings that have also been noted elsewhere, e.g. De Linde (1995) and Díaz Cintas & Remael (2007). However, the fact that items such as adverbials and direct objects, which may be seen to carry more of the ideational content, were reduced to the extent they were came more

as a surprise, although in some cases their content can be inferred from the context.

Let us now move on to a comparison with what happens in dialogue in literary fiction.

##### *5. Comparison with literary fiction*

First, if we take a look at Table 4 we can immediately observe a clear difference between the two modes of translation. We only find omissions in 99 of the 500 utterances in translated fiction, which amounts to about 20% compared to the 65% we found in the subtitles. Although the books also vary quite a lot, with AH1 containing only 44 utterances where no omission occurs, they appear as a more homogeneous group, where the majority of the books seem to allow only a small amount of reductions.

*Table 4.* Number of utterances in fiction containing 0 -  $\geq 10$  reductions

	Number of reductions per utterance per text					
	AH1	BC1	RDO1	ST1	DL2	Total
0 reduction	44	87	95	89	86	401
1 reduction	35	12	3	9	10	69
2 reductions	15	1	2	1	4	23
3 reductions	5	0	0	1	0	6
4 reductions	1	0	0	0	0	1
5-9 reductions	0	0	0	0	0	0
$\geq 10$ reductions	0	0	0	0	0	0
						500

If we now take a look at the amount of textual reduction vs. length of utterance in Table 5, we see a clear similarity between translated film and fiction; here too there seems to be a connection between textual reduction and length of utterance: the longer the utterance the greater the possibility for more reductions. The fact that the pattern does not seem to fit with regard to four reductions should be put down to the small number of utterances in this category – the one utterance with four reductions happened to have only 92 characters in it, and could be disregarded.

Table 5 Mean length of original utterance in fiction (in characters)

	mean length
1 reduction	78
2 reductions	150
3 reductions	183
4 reductions	92

At the same time as we find this similarity between the two modes, they also quite clearly diverge with respect to length of utterance. While in the subtitles the mean length of the utterances with one reduction was 36 characters, the fiction translations had 78. We see the same tendency in the case of both two and three reductions, where we have 66 vs. 150 characters and 84 vs. 183 characters, respectively. These figures show that not only do we find less textual reduction in translated dialogue in fiction, but also the utterances are on average longer in translated fiction than in subtitles before reduction takes place.

Finally, let us compare the actual items that have been omitted in the two modes. Table 6 shows the same categories that were listed as the most common ones in Table 3.

Table 6 Elements omitted in translated dialogue in fiction

text	AH1	BC1	RDO1	ST1	DL2	Total
syntactic element omitted						
S + V	7	3	0	1	0	<b>11</b>
A	10	2	3	1	2	<b>18</b>
V	0	0	0	0	1	1
conjunction	3	2	1	0	2	<b>8</b>
vocative	15	0	0	1	0	<b>16</b>
reaction signal	1	0	0	0	0	1
initiator	4	0	0	2	0	<b>6</b>
dO	4	0	1	1	0	<b>6</b>
interjection	2	0	0	1	1	4
S	4	1	1	1	1	<b>8</b>
Ø	44	87	95	89	86	401

Interestingly there is an overlap of seven categories, i.e. seven of the most common types of element subject to reduction in the subtitles are found as the most common ones also in literary fiction (figures in bold face in Table 6). An example including the two most common types of reduction in fiction is given in (17), where the vocative *Miss de Grey* and the adjunct *when you came in here* have been left out in the translation.

- (17) Look, I know you mean well, *Miss de Grey*, and I'm sorry about the way I spoke *when you came in here*. But the unfortunate fact is, it's too late...(AH1)

Hør her! Jeg vet De mener det godt, og jeg beklager oppførselen min. Men det er dessverre for sent nå...

Lit.: Listen here! I know you mean it well, and I am sorry about my behaviour. But it is unfortunately too late now...

However, as can be seen from Table 6 it is very much this particular text that contributes to the total and although it is tempting to say that the same elements are subject to reduction in both subtitles and translated fiction, I would rather conclude that there is less of a pattern as to what items are omitted in fiction than was the case in the subtitles. There is a more even distribution in fiction so to speak.

One factor that may influence this result is that dialogue in fiction probably incorporates fewer interpersonal elements than film dialogue to start with. Since these are the elements that first and foremost are reduced in the subtitles, we could speculate that it is rather the nature of the original film script and fiction text that is different than the translation of the two modes. It should also be borne in mind that, although the time and space restrictions that hold for subtitling have not been under study here, they are crucial factors that inevitably lead to more reduction in subtitles overall (cf. Díaz Cintas & Remael 2007).

#### 6. Concluding remarks

This study has shown that there is a very strong correlation between length of utterance and number of textual reductions, not only in subtitles but also in translated fiction. The study has also shown that there is a tendency for the same types of elements to be omitted in both subtitles

and translated fiction. The elements that are omitted are in some way felt to be redundant; however, they may be so for different reasons as subtitles accompany actual images (cf. Gottlieb's 2005 *intrasemiotic redundancy*), while fictional dialogue accompany imaginary images.

The fact that it is typically interpersonal elements that disappear in subtitles could be seen as the main factor contributing to subtitles going from a spoken to a written style. This discrepancy is not noted to the same extent for literary fiction. Interestingly, in an article on audiovisual translation, Chaume (2004) studies the translation, or indeed non-translation, of a selection of interpersonal features, viz. discourse markers. His conclusion is that the loss of discourse markers "does not seriously affect the target text in terms of semantic meaning – whereas it does in terms of interpersonal meaning" (ibid.: 854).

To conclude, at a more general level, we could say that, although there may be more reduction in subtitles than in translated fiction, similar processes are at work in both translation modes.

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