



Teaching with Movies: German Films and Grammar Contents

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Abstract

This contribution aims at focusing on the perspectives offered by the use of cinema in foreign language learning – particularly in its grammar and morph syntactic structures.

I have always used films in my lessons at school and university, in order to better convey to pupils and students the contents of a particular aspect of the foreign - more specifically German - literature or culture occurred in the course.

Celluloid material is well-known all over the world as an efficient didactic possibility in order to implement students' motivation and curiosity about a specific topic of a whatever subject, not necessarily involving a foreign language. Moreover it is an efficient teaching method when applied to foreign language learning: films in their original versions are often included in didactics to let students and pupils hear the correct pronunciation of the target language, get them used to its sound and see how it is actually employed in everyday life. But cinema can especially be considered to be a powerful tool for developing social consciousness and historical approaches.

Personally I have always used films to make the class aware of the real context of use of German in specific periods in the history of the country (e.g. Berlin Wall history). Nevertheless, during the viewing of such material, I also realized how interesting it could turn out to be, if used as a resource for grammar and morph syntactic purposes as well. This can be made in different ways and from different points of view. In the present paper I will try to suggest some possible ways of analyzing film in order to find out important grammatical contents in it and conversely of dealing with specific linguistic structures, tracing them out in different movie segments.

1. The use of movies in foreign language teaching

I have conceived this paper as the continuation of the discussion presented last year at the 7th edition of the International Conference ICT for Language Learning [3]. It can be seen as the second chapter of a more general discourse about the perspectives offered by the use of multimediality in foreign, more specifically German, language and literature teaching and learning. *Multimediality* in education, although often fittingly associated to the other important concepts of *interactivity* and *hypertextuality*, must not necessarily be understood as the only use of the modern information technology in the didactics of foreign languages. In both cases I focused on - both based on experience - it takes into account two means of communication that nowadays can already be considered 'outdated', if compared with the unlimited possibilities offered by the web or social networks, but still efficiently work in the classroom, because strongly able to arouse an essential educational factor: students' intrinsic motivation [4]. If the previous article was about music and its importance in knowledge process development, this focuses on the 'seventh art': cinema. Obviously, as for songs, a successful use of full-length or short films is largely allowed by the most innovative computer technologies and this is the reason why the three above mentioned concepts are strictly connected to one another.

Lots of scholars have already explored the wide range of possibilities offered by cinema as a didactic resource, with regard both to linguistic structures and to some cultural aspects of the context in which that language is spoken [2,3].

I am passionate about films and I often propose the viewing of significant movies in their original language to my pupils, not only to make them aware of its everyday use, but mostly to convey important information about a specific historical or literary period. German, in particular, boasts a long list of film adaptations of notable novels as well as many titles about German history or society. The teacher has to choose the right one, according to his specific aim. If a movie like *Goodbye Lenin* lends itself very well to educational purposes related to the knowledge of a particular moment in the history of the twentieth century – moreover presented in a new brilliant ironic way -, it can, on the other hand, turn out to be a wrong choice if students are supposed going to hear High German (*Hochdeutsch*). The film is set in East-Berlin and the language spoken by its characters is not simplified. For the correct pronunciation of German, I would for example recommend Tom Tykwer's *Die Kaiserin und der Krieger* (*The Princess and the Warrior*) [10], where Franka Potente's German sounds incredibly clear and intelligible, rather than the beautiful sequences of *Hannah Arendt* [8], masterly directed by



Margarethe von Trotta and perfect to learn about such an important and discussed philosopher and political theorist, but very difficult to understand for non-native speakers or not advanced German learners. For this reason in language teaching a quality film is not necessarily a usable film: its quality is in fact strictly connected with its conceptual and linguistic possibility.

An important prerequisite is of course the presence of subtitles in the same language as the audio track, in order to let students get the most of the dialogue information and better understand the syntactic structures, by relating the written words with their sounds. The success of such a didactic action mostly depends on the learners' level in the target language. That of utility of captions in film-plot comprehension and language learning is a largely discussed topic. Personally, I am not able to express an opinion about their efficacy and more in general about the use of full-length films for fixing phonetic and vocabulary, since I usually prefer short videos or listening exercises to carry on this precise aim. Nevertheless, as already pointed out, I have found cinema particularly helpful in foreign culture learning for the development of a social and historical awareness, and it was just while I was using it this way, that I also got conscious of its potentialities as a grammar and morph syntactic resource, if cleverly used.

2. Grammar contents in German films: an example from *The Lives of Others*

There are different possible ways of analyzing films in order to find out relevant inputs about their grammatical contents. One first method could be that of dealing with a specific linguistic structure, tracing it out in segments from different movies. To do so, you must have seen a great amount of films and be able to trace a map that leads through them to one specific topic. This is a very difficult procedure which is likely to take a lot of time and energies and therefore quite hard to put into practice. An easier way of doing could be, conversely, to choose some significant sequences of a same movie, actually able to help students to better understand the application of a particular grammar construction or rule. In this case, after a first film-viewing – when learners are no more distracted by the rising action of the plot, for having already watched the movie once -, the teacher can draw their attention to the selected sections. This can turn out to be very useful to get the actual employment of particular German structures, missing in the source language and for this reason harder to apply and to understand by non-native students. For Italian learners, for example, these could be identified in the use of the flavouring particle *doch*, or in the different field of application of the modal verbs *müssen/sollen*, translated with the same Italian word *dovere*, or in the hard choice between *es gibt* or *sein* for the translation of the construct *there is/are*.

As Italian teacher of German language and first of all as non-native speaker, I have found a particularly effective instance to draw the line between the phrases *das Gleiche/dasselbe*, whose difference causes problems to both Italian and English speakers – just to mention some -. In both idioms they seem to refer to the same concept and are consequently translated with a unique phrase: respectively *la stessa cosa/lo stesso* and *the same thing/the same*. But *doch* there is a difference - actually not so intuitive and therefore often hard to grasp for the above mentioned learners: in plain terms, *dasselbe* refers to two or more identical things, *das Gleiche* means that they only resemble perfectly. Don't you find the following dialogue from the touching *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*) [9] extremely pregnant?

Stasi University: The Stasi Captain Gerd Wiesler, at the very beginning of the film, lets his students listen to an all-day long draining questioning of a defendant suspected of being involved in one of the many escape attempts over the Berlin Wall. Then he asks to his audience:

WIESLER: Fällt Ihnen etwas auf an seiner Aussage?

LEHMANN (student): Er sagt *das Gleiche* wie am Anfang.

WIESLER: Er sagt *dasselbe* wie am Anfang, Wort für Wort. Führen Sie immer ein wortgenaues Protokoll. Wer die Wahrheit sagt, kann beliebig umformulieren und tut es; ein Lügner hat sich genaue Sätze zurechtgelegt, auf die er bei großer Anspannung zurückfällt. 227 lügt. Wir haben zwei wichtige Indizien. Jetzt können wir die Intensität erhöhen.[6]

[WIESLER: Do you notice anything about his statement?

LEHMANN: It's the same as at the beginning.

WIESLER: Exactly the same. Word for word. People who tell the truth can re-formulate thing, and they do. A liar has prepared sentences, which he falls back on when under pressure. 227 is lying. We have two important indicators and can increase the intensity.]

The defendant had in fact repeated not merely the same concept, but exactly the same identical words in the same order from the beginning to the end. Don't you find this scene illuminating?



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