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## **Between marketing and cultural adaptation: The case of comedy film titles in Italy**

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### **Film titles as paratexts and marketing tools**

When in October 2004 *Se mi lasci ti cancello* (Gondry Michel, 2004) was released in Italian theatres, it sparked outrage from moviegoers and film critics alike, who mostly considered the Italian title (which roughly translates as “If you leave me I’ll erase you”) as an abomination if compared with the more poetic English title *Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind*, taken from Alexandre Pope. One critic opened his review for one of the major national newspapers by stating that “certain Italian titles should be fined” (Nepoti 2004, my translation). Nepoti captures the essence of the criticism levelled against this title by stressing that, while being a good summary of the plot, *Se mi lasci ti cancello* activates specific expectations for a straight-up comedy and not for the tonally original and nuanced dramedy by director Michel Gondry. The general indignation was such that when the film was later released on DVD the title on the cover was changed back to the English original, with *Se mi lasci ti cancello* only appearing underneath it and in smaller print. This particular title is still frequently mentioned as one of the worst in the history of title adaptation in Italy, perhaps only second to *La donna che visse due volte* [The woman who lived twice], which, contrary to the original *Vertigo* (Hitchcock Alfred, 1958), offers crucial plot spoilers. Italians are not new to controversial film titles, which were comically exposed, among others, by the FACEBOOK page *L'imbarazzante e insensata traduzione dei titoli dei film in italiano*.<sup>1</sup> There seems, however, to be a fundamental disconnect between what the general public considers well-translated film titles and the factors that affect the distributors’ choices of these titles. One of the most relevant misconceptions is that we are observing the result of a “translation” process, while in reality translators have little to nothing to do with the selection of a target-language film title, which is instead assigned to the distribution companies’ marketing departments. Therefore, from now on the word “adaptation” will be used to discuss this process.

As much as attentive and dedicated members of the audience would like to think of films as predominantly cultural – albeit entertaining – objects, similarly to most commercially produced audiovisual materials they are marketed as part of an industrial mechanism that is designed to provide revenue. The paramount aim in creating a marketing campaign for a film consists in positioning that film on the target market in a way that facilitates its success, i.e., in the case of theatrical releases, to get potential movie-goers to buy the admission ticket. Together with posters, trailers, and other transmedia paratextual elements such as social media campaigns, one of the chief weapons at the distributors' disposal is still the film's title (Kerrigan 2017). A well-chosen title can make a film's success, just like a poorly chosen one can determine a film's less than positive outcome, with all the financial consequences for the distribution company. In this sense, the choice of a target-language film title should be looked at predominantly as a marketing strategy, as part of the process of distribution and cultural mediation (Barra 2009) but separate from the translation of the film itself (Tahir-Gürçağlar 2011), and, ultimately, as more similar to the transcreation of multimodal texts such as advertising campaigns or videogames (e.g. Munday 2004; Torresi 2010; Katan 2016). In essence, the adaptation of film titles seems practically to fall into the purview of dynamic rather than formal equivalence (Nida 1964) or communicative vs. semantic translation (Newmark 1975), with target-language choices being informed by considerations regarding not so much the "faithfulness" to the original title as much as the consumers' ability to be exposed to and enjoy the product through the activation of specific associations and expectations, which in turn conform to target-culture genre conventions and norms (Toury 1995).

Despite its importance for the circulation of audiovisual products, the study of titles – "titrologie" or "titology" (Hoek 1981) – has not attracted much academic attention. Even in the field of Media Studies, in which the study of paratexts (Genette 1997) has proliferated in recent years (e.g. Gray 2010, 2017; Grainge 2011; Bucaria 2014; Grainge and Johnson 2015; Pesce and Noto 2016; Barra and Scaglioni 2017; Johnson and Weissmann 2017), scholars seem to focus more frequently on other forms of paratextual information – such as promotional material – and less on

titles as a particular type of “entryway” paratext (Gray 2010), whose role is to provide “a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it” (Genette 1997: 2). Furthermore, much scholarship has emphasized the ephemeral nature of paratexts, which often makes them transient and difficult to capture and archive. However, film titles seem to escape the risks of ephemerality as they continue to remain in the public conscience as long as the films circulate (and even beyond that) and therefore they enjoy a much more permanent status than other forms of paratextual information. Batchelor (2018) hints at this aspect in her discussion of the hierarchy among paratexts and their varying proximity (and therefore permanence) to the core of a text.

Research on paratexts in the field of Translation Studies has also been relatively scarce (e.g. Matamala 2011; Tahir-Gürçağlar 2011; Batchelor 2018, 2019, 2020), with only some studies focussing on titles (Nord 1995; Viezzi 2004; Bucaria 2010; Leonardi 2011; Ross 2013, 2019; Iannelli 2015; Gabric et al. 2017). Based on the considerations put forward in the previous paragraphs, the most relevant approach for the adaptation of film titles as part of the distribution process seems to be Christiane Nord’s version of functionalism, which advocates that “the source text is no longer the first and foremost criterion for the translator’s decisions; it is just one of the various sources of information used by the translator” (Nord 1997: 25). Particularly, in her study on titles and headings (Nord 1995), she identifies the six main functions of titles in general as distinctive, metatextual, phatic, referential/informative, expressive, and appellative. Whereas all these functions could be present in film titles, the most significant ones in light of what has just been discussed here are the informative/referential function, according to which “the information given in the title has to be comprehensible and acceptable for the recipients” (Nord 1995), the phatic function, which demands short and memorable titles paired with the use of “familiar patterns and other forms of intertextuality” (Nord 1995), and the appellative function, which “is intended [...] (a) to read (or, at least, to buy) the co-text and/or (b) to read and interpret it in a specific way”. According to Nord, the appellative function also executes two subfunctions that efficiently encapsulate the work performed by distributors, i.e. “definitely attracting the reader (a kind of

advertising function) and that of guiding the readers' interpretation (a kind of persuasive function)" (Nord 1995).

Finally, although not much scholarship has been devoted to the study of humorous film titles as a genre, the discipline of Humour Studies has contributed to the debate on what the concepts of equivalence and translatability mean when applied to humorous texts. Particularly, Chiaro (2005, 2006, 2017) has stressed the possibility to look at humour translation not as the impossible task that is sometimes described to be but as having the ability to produce a target-language text that maintains the perlocutionary effect of the source text and "trigger[s] the same emotional, physical and behavioural response in the translation" (Chiaro 2005: 36). Clearly, the adaptation of comedy titles aims to do just that, i.e. to offer target-language consumers titles that ideally retain not only the ability to literally reference the plot and storylines of the film but also to convey genre elements through the exploitation of target-language conventions and associations.

The study presented in this chapter proposes to look at the ways in which comedy film titles are adapted from English into Italian. Through the creation of a database including comedy titles from the last ten years (2009-2018), the analysis will explore the strategies used by distributors to convey the markers of the comedy genre and possible diachronic changes in the transposition of this crucial type of paratexts. The analysis of titles as the products of this adaptation will be combined with an ethnographic approach (semi-structured interviews) aimed at incorporating the process of adaptation as well through the point of view of the Italian distributors and marketing experts that are responsible for choosing the target-language titles.

### **Comedy film titles in Italy**

As previously mentioned, the task of choosing a title for the Italian market falls on the distribution companies that buy a film from international sales agents (see Ross 2019 for a more detailed explanation of this process) and then proceed to linguistically and culturally adapt said film and to launch it through a marketing campaign aimed at successfully positioning the film for its perceived

target audience. In order to shed light on the criteria followed in the adaptation of comedy titles for Italian viewers, a sample was collected consisting of comedy titles distributed in Italy in the last ten years (2009-2018). The ten-year span was selected in order to provide a reasonable enough timeframe for possible observations on recent diachronic changes. An advanced search for the “comedy” and “comic” tags was entered into three of the main film databases available to Italian audiences – The Internet Movie Database (IMDb)<sup>ii</sup>, Comingsoon<sup>iii</sup>, and MyMovies<sup>iv</sup> – and the results were cross-referenced between the three websites for accuracy. This process yielded a total of 798 English-language feature films whose titles were therefore originally in English. It is to be noted that this number includes films that were tagged as comedies or comic movies in the databases mentioned above, which implies that different variations of the comedy genre are included, such as romantic comedies, dark comedies, and action comedies. Parallel to the creation and analysis of the database, semi-structured interviews were carried out with marketing and distribution executives at eight Italian distribution companies, which were specifically selected to cover the spectrum from small (Academy Two, Cinema, Teodora Film) to medium (BIM, Eagle Pictures, Lucky Red) to major international conglomerate (Universal Pictures, Warner Brothers).

Since one of the main purposes of this study was to identify possible diachronic differences in the adaptation of comedy film titles with respect to the employment of English titles for circulation on the Italian market, the 798 titles were divided into the two macro-categories of titles in English (EN) and titles in Italian (IT). Following a taxonomy used in previous studies (Bucaria 2010, 2011) and slightly modified from Viezzi (2004), these two macro-categories were then divided into the following:

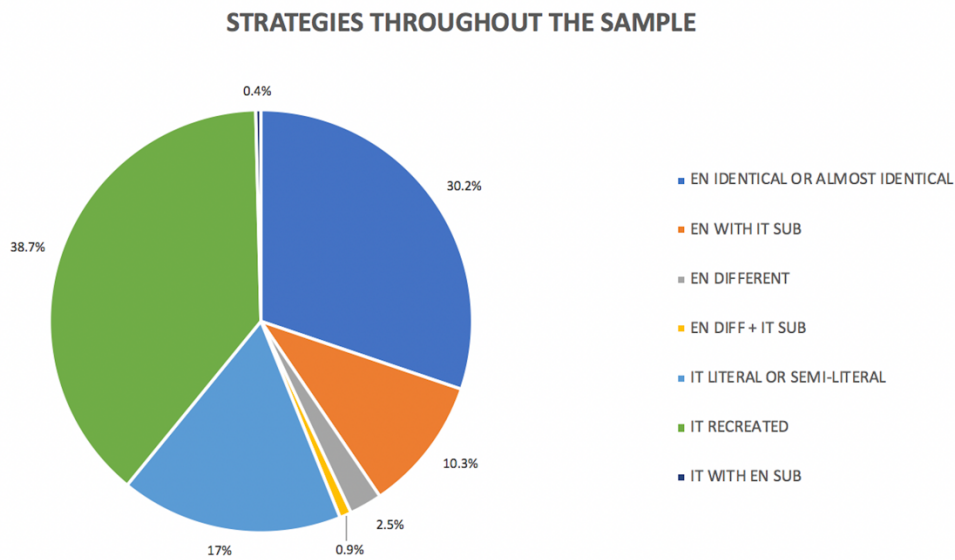
#### **TITLES IN ENGLISH**

- EN identical or almost identical
- EN with IT subtitle
- EN different
- EN different + IT subtitle

#### **TITLES IN ITALIAN**

- IT literal or semi-literal
- IT recreated
- IT with EN subtitle

As opposed to similar studies with other language combinations (e.g. Gabric et al. 2017, Ross 2019), our categories were kept purposely fuzzy, since, based on the interviews with distributors who confirmed that they regard each movie as a case in and of itself, it did not seem particularly advantageous to make all these different cases fit into a preconstituted grid.



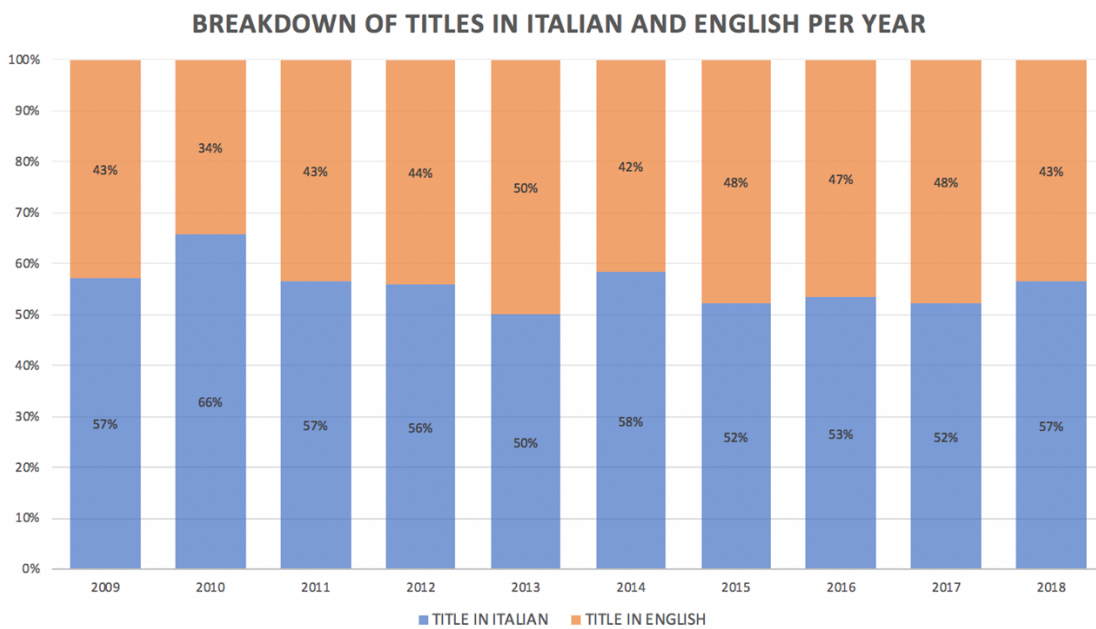
**Figure 3.1. Strategies throughout the sample**

Figure 3.1 shows the percentages for the seven different strategies. Recreation in Italian (38.7%) and adaptation with an identical or almost identical title in English (30.2%) were found to be the most common strategies throughout the sample. The next subsections will comment on the two macro-categories of titles in English and titles in Italian and on each of the respective subcategories found in the sample. The analysis will be integrated with observations from the semi-structured interviews with distributors with the aim of offering further insights into the reasons for the adoption of specific criteria.

### *Titles in English*



Out of a total of 798 titles, 448 (about 56%) were distributed with an Italian title and 350 (about 44%) with an English title. A look at the breakdown of the percentages of English and Italian titles per year within the ten-year period taken onto consideration for this study (Figure 3.2) shows that the rate has had a few significant peaks and dips but seems to have stabilized close to the overall percentage (56%–44%) in the last few years.



**Figure 3.2. Breakdown of titles in Italian and English per year (2009-2018)**

If we compare these results with the data collected for previous studies by this author on the adaptation of comedy titles and their subgenres (Bucaria 2010, 2011), it becomes apparent how the gap between the number of English vs. Italian titles seems to have reduced quite significantly. An analysis of 156 English-language dark comedies released in Italy between 1941 and 2008 (Bucaria 2010) had revealed that a combined 63.5% of them had been distributed with an Italian title, whereas 36.5% had maintained a title in English. A further unpublished study (Bucaria 2011) found that, for the 2009–2010 two-year period, a combined 78% of comedy films were distributed with an Italian title. The shifting in the proportion of English vs. Italian titles in a diachronic perspective intuitively seems to be justified by certain aspects of globalization, such as the increased familiarity

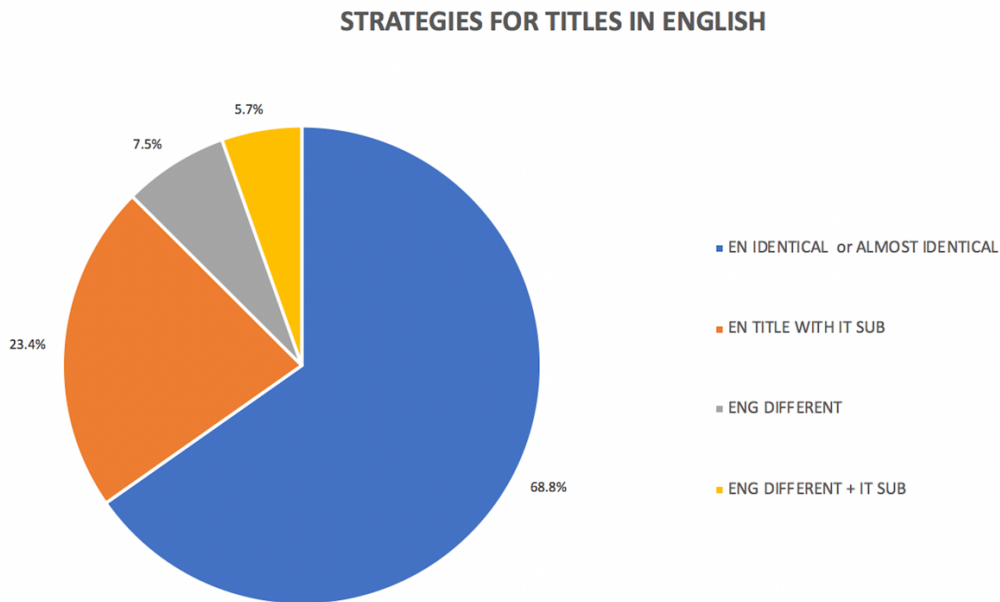
of the Italian audience (or at least of some segments of it) with both the Anglo-American language and culture, in turn achieved through increased exposure to more cultural products in the original language. As mentioned by several of the interviewees, factors that might have contributed to an increased familiarity with the English language include the increased availability of films and other audiovisual products in their original version, first through DVDs and then via streaming and on-demand platforms, which have made it easier to access multiple viewing options such as subtitled or even fansubbed versions.

A clear example of this change in the use of titles in English can be seen in the fact that the titles of some sequels were left in English in their second iteration. For example, the title *Hot tub time machine* (Pink Steve, 2010) was adapted as *Un tuffo nel passato* [A dive into the past] but *Hot tub time machine 2* (Pink Steve, 2015) was left in English. The same strategy was adopted for *Pitch perfect* (Moore Jason, 2012), which became *Voices* in its first incarnation, but was distributed with its English title for its second and third episodes – *Pitch perfect 2* (Banks Elizabeth, 2015) and 3 (Sie Trish, 2017).

Ostensibly, the viewers' increased appreciation for more authenticity in the consumption of fictional audiovisual products might presuppose a concerted effort on behalf of distributors to offer more English original titles for theatrical release. However, from the interviews with Italian distributors it becomes apparent that English titles could very concretely hinder a film's box-office revenue if they happen to be too difficult to understand or even to pronounce (hence becoming an obstacle for word-of-mouth recommendation) for the target audience. As a consequence, companies that distribute films targeting older viewers will most probably think twice about using an English title if it is not transparent or easy to remember for the Italian audience. However, on the other hand, a film targeting a younger audience might rely on younger people's familiarity with English to create a successful marketing campaign revolving around an English title. According to the interviewees, exceptions to this general rule can happen when a film's international hype has already been so prevalent that potential viewers will already be acquainted with the original title,

and therefore changing the title would actually be detrimental to the success of the marketing campaign in that it would confuse the audience. This is the case, for example, with films that won major awards at international film festivals, highly anticipated films by famous directors or starring A-list celebrities, or even films adapted from books whose title had been previously left in English.

The next sections will detail the strategies used for titles in English in order of frequency.



**Figure 3.3. Strategies for titles in English**

#### *Identical or almost identical English title*

The subcategories of identical and partially identical English title (which, as Figure 3.3 shows, account for a combined 68.8% of cases for all titles in English in the sample) will be commented on jointly, as they effectively operate on similar strategies and underlying considerations on the part of distributors.

In general, when asked about the factors that determine whether a title is left in English or adapted into Italian, the most common parameter mentioned by the interviewees is its transparency. In other words, if a title is thought to be easily understood by the audience segment that is the specific target of the film and its use is not considered as potentially detrimental to its success then

the English title is maintained in its identical or almost identical form. To these, the interviewees added other considerations based on how transparent a title can be for the specific audience segment served by their own distribution company. For example, some of the small and medium distributors self-identified as targeting an older segment, which – albeit more acculturated in the distributors’ perception – simply because of their age is not familiar enough with the English language to understand (and, most of all, retain) complex English titles.

Some identical or almost identical titles from the sample include:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| (1) <i>Funny people</i> (Apatow Judd, 2009)                        | (4) <i>Las Vegas</i> (Turteltaub Jon, 2013)                        |
| (2) <i>The big wedding – Big wedding</i><br>(Zackham Justin, 2013) | (5) <i>Thor: Ragnarok – Thor Ragnarok</i><br>(Waititi Taika, 2017) |
| (3) <i>Lady Bird</i> (Gergwig Greta, 2017)                         |  |

Quite unsurprisingly, most titles left unchanged or almost unchanged in English rely on single, short words that can be reasonably considered to be widely understood by Italians, e.g. (1). In some of these cases the change is as small as the omission of the definite or indefinite article (2), which is intended to make the title more streamlined for Italians. Alternatively, names of people (3) or places (4) that are easily identifiable are also maintained, as are titles based on previous material, such as successful TV series, books or comic books/graphic novels (5). This strategy is obviously preferable for distributors because these films come with an in-built, global audience, which, in contrast, could potentially be misdirected by a modified title.

No specific comments were made by the interviewees concerning whether the genre of a film affects the choice to leave a title in English, with the exception of horror films, which seem to be universally considered as good candidates for English titles. The factor that seems to be prioritized above all others is who the target audience is; therefore, a niche, more sophisticated comedy seems to presuppose an older audience segment, one which could potentially be discouraged by an English

title. By contrast – and perhaps somewhat counterintuitively – a broader comedy might allow for foreign elements in its title, specifically because its (wider) target audience could potentially include segments of the population that are familiar with English or that at least do not mind an English title. What was clear from all the interviews, however, is that, in general, leaving a title in English can be somewhat risky in the Italian market, therefore each film needs to be evaluated case by case.

#### *English title with Italian subtitle*

The second most common sub-category is the use of an English title followed by an Italian subtitle or expansion. This strategy accounts for 23.4% of cases in the macro-category of titles in English.

(6) *Bad teacher* (Kasdan Jake, 2011)

*Bad teacher: una cattiva maestra*

[Bad teacher: a bad teacher]

(8) *My bakery in Brooklyn* (Ron Gustavo, 2016)

*My bakery in Brooklyn – Un pasticcio in cucina*

[My bakery in Brooklyn – A mess in the kitchen]

(7) *Krampus* (Dougherty Michael, 2015)

*Krampus – Natale non è sempre Natale*

[Krampus – Christmas is not always Christmas]

The subtitle sometimes appears after a colon, other times after a dash. The analysis of the database supported by the interviews with the distributors confirms that the main function of a subtitle is better to direct potential movie-goers towards the content of the film (what Ross 2019 calls “amplification” and others call “addition”) and, ultimately, to attract and amuse audiences, as expressed by Nord’s appellative function (1995). In some cases, this is done by creating a subtitle

that provides a quasi-translation of the English title. In (6) above, for example, “una cattiva maestra” literally translates “bad teacher” from the main title and at the same time adds the gender (female) information about the main character played by Cameron Diaz.

In other instances, the subtitle adds information about the genre (or even subgenre) of the film in question, in our case unequivocally skewing titles towards the comedy end of the spectrum. As the subtitle suggests, (7) *Krampus – Natale non è sempre Natale* (“Christmas is not always Christmas”) adds the reference to Christmas as the thematic setting of the film, perhaps even hinting at the dark comedy genre by signalling that what is portrayed on screen is not a typical Christmas family story. Similarly, example (8) *My Bakery in Brooklyn – Un pasticcio in cucina* (“a mess in the kitchen”) makes the culinary setting of the film more explicit by also humorously playing with the word “pasticcio” in Italian, which has the double meaning of “mess/trouble” and “pie.”

When asked why subtitles are sometimes seen as necessary in marketing campaigns, distributors commented that Italian audiences need to be guided in their choices, especially the ones who do not clearly plan what film to see until they arrive at the movie theatre. Subtitles are therefore seen as an aid for movie-goers who go to the cinema once a week or month and would not be happy spending their money to go see something that disappoints their expectations.

### *Different English title*

The subcategory of English titles that were changed to a different English title for the Italian distribution includes 7.5% of cases in the sample. What might seem like a bizarre marketing choice is justified – similarly to the other categories – by the need to clearly identify the genre of the film but at the same time presumably exploiting the exoticism and appeal of an English title (Viezzi 2004). Most distributors agreed on the fact that sometimes a different English title is chosen because the English language manages to convey meaning in a more compact and immediate way than Italian. Referring to the dark comedy *Death at a funeral* (Oz Frank, 2007), one of the

interviewees commented that the title for the Italian distribution, *Funeral party*, had probably been chosen because it was successful at conveying the tone of the film by associating two semantically contrasting words in a very condensed way – something that a literal translation of the original English title, e.g. “Morte al funerale” or “Delitto al funerale,” would not have achieved, because it might have been construed as a detective story or a thriller.

(9) *Stan Helsing* (Zenga Bo, 2011)

*Horror Movie*

(11) *Away we go* (Mendes Sam, 2009)

*American life*

(10) *A haunted house* (Tiddes Michael, 2013)

*Ghost movie*

(9) and (10) above are clear attempts at boiling down the genre of each film for their potential (young) viewers, particularly by capitalising on the success of the parody genre in the *Scary movie* franchise (Wayans Keenen Ivory, 2000, 2001; Zucker David, 2003, 2005; Lee Malcolm D. 2013) and by sidestepping the more complex references in the original titles: the wordplay on the name Van Helsing in the vampire parody *Stan Helsing* and the reference to a trope of horror movies in *A haunted house*. Incidentally, Marlon Wayans, one of the Wayans brothers responsible for the *Scary movie* series, produced and starred in *A haunted house*, which obviously facilitates the viewers’ associations with the parodic genre. *American life* in (11) is undoubtedly more memorable for Italian ears than the idiomatic expression “*away we go*,” while at the same time creating associations with another extremely successful film, *American beauty* (Mendes Sam, 1999), which was also marketed as a dramedy.

Finally, a small percentage of the titles in our sample (5.7% of all titles in English) was adapted with a different English title followed by a subtitle in Italian. (12) illustrates one of these cases:

(12) *Rough night* (Aniello Lucia, 2017)

*Crazy night – Festa col morto*

[Party with the dead guy]

Similarly to the other titles in this section, *Crazy night – Festa col morto* replaces the adjective “rough” with the more recognisable “crazy” to make sure to convey to Italians the outrageous and quirky character of this comedy, while at the same time doubling down on the associations with previous box-office successes. As a matter of fact, the subtitle implicitly references the Italian title of the 1989 comedy *Weekend at Bernie's* (Kotcheff Ted, 1989), *Weekend con il morto* [Weekend with the dead guy], presumably in the hope that the audience would be attracted to a similar plotline consisting in the cover-up of an accidental death.

To conclude this section, it can be noted that while the percentages for the different English title with or without a subtitle in Italian do not seem to show a significant pattern in the course of the ten years covered by the sample there seems to have been a steady increase in the use of an identical or almost identical English title for comedies distributed in the 2015-2018 four-year period, accompanied by a steady decrease in the use of titles in English with an Italian subtitle in the last three years. When asked if they had seen any recent changes in the use of titles in English, distributors tentatively hypothesised a slight increase but could not offer more precise information.

### **Titles in Italian**

A look at the strategies adopted to render comedy titles in Italian reveals that the vast majority of them (about 69%) were recreated – i.e. the Italian title is inspired by the film but is a rephrasing or reinterpretation of the English original – a combined 30% underwent a literal or semi-literal adaptation, and a small percentage of about 1% was distributed with an Italian title followed by a subtitle in English. Table 3.1 shows the relative percentages side by side with the absolute percentages for the whole sample of 798 titles: the data confirm that recreation was the most



common strategy used during the ten-year period analysed (38.7%), while literal and semi-literal adaptation combined were the third most common strategy (17%) and an Italian title followed by an English subtitle was the least commonly used strategy of all (0.4%).

**Table 3.1. Most common adaptation strategies for titles in Italian**

STRATEGY	% FOR TITLES IN IT	% FOR THE WHOLE SAMPLE
RECREATION	69%	38,7%
LITERAL/SEMI-LITERAL	30%	17%
IT TITLE WITH ENG SUBTITLE	1%	0,4%

### *Recreation*

As mentioned above, the adaptation of film titles is a process similar to transcreation (Katan 2016), in that the titles resulting from this process should be intended as a reinterpretation of the spirit of the film that is only partially based on the original title. The recreation category gathers together cases in which distributors opted for titles that aimed to convey the storylines or core of the film rather than the literal meaning of the original. After watching the film, possibilities are formulated by the marketing team based not only on the original or international title but on what elements in the film are considered as potentially most appealing for the Italian audience. Other crucial factors that distributors value in the choice of a target-language title are how the new title positions the film on the market – for example in terms of genre – and what segment of the audience the title might be appealing for. This functional approach is paramount and prioritised as opposed to a literal translation that might penalise the film in terms of box-office revenue. All interviewees confirmed that independent distribution companies enjoy more freedom in choosing titles for the target-language markets than do the majors' local branches (Ross 2019), although all titles are subject to the production's or director's approval if contractually required.

In general, when asked how they select a title in Italian, distributors claimed that their aim is usually to avoid completely distorting the original title and, even when they have to recreate a title in Italian, they try to keep as close as possible to the original. Some of the interviewees from small and medium distributors also mentioned that this policy might be more common with companies that distribute “quality products” (“prodotti di qualità”, i.e. art-house films by known directors that are usually considered to be more sophisticated) than with majors or other independent companies that deal with more commercial fare. The assumption is, therefore, that companies that distribute products that are considered broader might also have a wider margin to replace a title with a less sophisticated reinvention.

In this sample, recreation was the most common strategy used for titles in Italian (69%). In general, titles are recreated in Italian when a literal or semi-literal adaptation is considered inefficient in conveying the essence of the film. There could be a number of reasons for why a proposed literal adaptation does not work, among others because the marketing department feels that a literal adaptation would not “flow” in Italian, would be difficult to pronounce and hence to remember. In other cases, the original contains cultural references that are too specific or wordplay.

(13) *The DUFF* (Sandel Ari, 2015)

*L’A.S.S.O. nella manica*

[The ace up the sleeve]

With a considerable creative effort, in (13) the acronym DUFF (“Designated Ugly Fat Friend”) was recreated in Italian with A.S.S.O. or “Amica Sfigata Strategicamente Oscena” (“Strategically obscene loser friend”), which in turn plays with the idiom “l’asso nella manica” (“to have an ace up one’s sleeve”). The interviewees confirmed that creating funny, playful or clever titles is a common strategy used in order to make comedy titles more memorable. In a similar vein, the Italian title in (14), *Parto col folle*, creatively adds a humorous layer by employing a double meaning for both

words “parto” (“birth/delivery” but also the first person singular of the verb “partire”, to leave) and “folle” (a deranged, lunatic person but also the neutral gear in a car). The birth/delivery angle references the main theme in the film, i.e. Zack Galifianakis’ character’s trip back to Los Angeles to witness the birth of his first child, while the “folle” element foregrounds both the role of Robert Downey Jr’s character as a dysfunctional, aspiring actor with whom the protagonist is forced to drive to the West coast and the road trip comedy genre of the film.

(14) *Due date*

*Parto col folle*

[Birth/delivery with the lunatic person] but also [I leave in neutral]

In other cases, considerations regarding the appropriateness of a literal adaptation may be at the root of the choice to recreate title in Italian. For example, *Moana* (Clements Ron and Musker John, 2016), which would inescapably have created unwanted associations with a very well-known Italian porn star, Moana Pozzi, was changed to *Oceania*, thus bypassing what would have been an unfortunate connotation for an animated children’s movie.

The examples previously discussed have already anticipated one of the most apparent macro-strategies adopted in recreating a title for the Italian market – disambiguation. This could take the form of explicitation (Vinay and Darbelnet 1958) of the comedy genre in general – for example through linguistic markers or through the skilful use of intertextual references to other successful titles – or the form of an addition of elements of the plot that were not present in the original title. All of these strategies ideally work together to offer a reinterpretation of the film that is hopefully enticing for the audience and therefore financially profitable for the distributor.

Linguistic markers aimed at highlighting the comedy genre go from the use of ellipsis and exclamation marks that were not present in the original title to the use of lexically charged words (“trigger words” in Leonardi 2011: 194).

(15) *Labor pains* (Shapiro Lara, 2009)

*Incinta... o quasi*

[Pregnant...or almost]

(16) *Snatched* (Levine Jonathan, 2017)

*Fottute!*

[Screwed!]

(15) illustrates the use of ellipsis within the title, while in (16) we can observe the addition of an exclamation mark at the end of the title, which presumably functions as a further intensifier of an already comedic (and slightly taboo) title.

Lexical markers are also often used to prime expectations for comedy. Phrases or expressions such as “per caso” (“by chance”), “per finta/finto/finta” (“fake”/“pretend”), “all’improvviso” (“suddenly”/“all of a sudden”), “...ma non troppo” (“but not too much”), “probabilmente” (“probably”), “indovina chi...?” (“guess who...?”) were both found in the sample and commented on by the interviewees, who confirmed that they consciously exploit these words and expressions’ potential associations with previous successful films – both Italian and international – in order to attract moviegoers. When asked how these genre markers originated, several interviewees referred to conventions adopted as far back as the post-war period in Italy (starting with the 1950s and 60s), which still seem to inform the choice of title patterns. For example, the pattern “come + X” (“how to + X”) appears to be quite productive, particularly when coupled with the indirect pronoun “ti,” which does not necessarily translate literally but often only adds an informal tone. (17) and (18) are cases in point.

(17) *Horrible bosses* (Gordon Seth, 2011)

(18) *I feel pretty*

*Come ammazzare il capo...e vivere felici* (Kohn Abby and Silverstein Marc, 2018)

[How to kill your boss and live happily]

*Come ti divento bella*

[How I become beautiful]

Precursors to this pattern are easily found in *How to succeed in business without really trying/Come far carriera senza lavorare* [How to be successful without working] (Swift David, 1967) and *The survivors/Come ti ammazzo un killer* [How I kill a killer] (Ritchie Michael, 1983) among others.

Lexical markers are often found to prime expectations for a specific comedy subgenre.

According to interviewees, some of the most common for a rom-com, for example, appear to be nouns or verbs such as “amore” (love) or “innamorar/si” (to fall in love), “cuore” (heart), “matrimonio” (wedding), and “incinta” (pregnant), depending on the storylines. Findings from the sample support these statements, with 36 recreated titles containing “amore” in Italian, only 8 of which included the word “love” in English. (19) and (20) are two examples of the insertion of the “love” element.

(19) *Larry Crowne* (Hanks Tom, 2011)

*L'amore all'improvviso*

[Love all of a sudden]

(20) *Seeking a friend for the end of the world*

(Scafaria Lorene, 2012)

*Cercasi amore per la fine del mondo*

[Seeking love for the end of the world]

This is not to imply that expectations for the rom-com genre are not set up in the original English title – especially when they interact with their respective posters and paratextual elements – but it is undeniable that Italian distributors consciously chose to emphasise these elements. Similar choices – presumably aimed at enticing more viewers – can be noticed with references to sex, even when the Italian equivalent “sesso” is not explicitly stated. For example, *The sitter* (Green David Gordon,

2011) was adapted as *Lo spaventapassere* [The pussy scarer], which plays with the word “spaventapasseri” (scarecrow), and *The starving games* (Friedberg Jason and Seltzer Aaron, 2013), a parody of *The hunger games*, was transposed with the title *Angry games – La ragazza con l’uccello di fuoco* [The girl with the fiery cock]. It seems appropriate to note at this point that a few of the interviewees remarked that this kind of “heavy” intervention would certainly not be possible for more sophisticated comedies by established directors/producers or for dramas or auteur films. The clear implication is that substantially modifying titles belonging to these latter categories – which tend to find themselves at the receiving end of the critics’ praises more often than other genres – usually spurs more indignant reactions than when this is done with more commercial features, including broader comedies.

Disambiguation through addition is a common trend in the sample, with (21) and (22) being only two of the numerous examples. Similarly to the strategy employed by English titles with an Italian subtitle, titles in this category tend to disclose either elements of the plot, or locations and characters around which the film revolves. This strategy has been criticised in the past as patronising towards audiences (e.g. *Nepoti* 2004, *Cavalla* 2015, *Vicario* 2017, *Bonizzato* 2018), however distributors seem to believe that these are necessary clarifications to put potential viewers on the right path when deciding if they might be interested in watching a given film.

(21) *Get him to the Greek*

(Stoller Nicholas, 2010)

*In viaggio con una rock star*

[On a trip with a rockstar]

(22) *Just go with it* (Dugan Dennis, 2011)

*Mia moglie per finta*

[My fake wife]

It should be clear at this point how intertextuality – intended here as the inclusion of more or less explicit allusions to previous film titles – is widely exploited by distributors to create a complex web of associations in the potential viewers’ minds, which draws on and interacts with both

autochthonous Italian titles (old and new) and international films (Leonardi 2011: 194–195). A famous example is *Mamma, ho perso l'aereo* [Mum, I missed the plane] (*Home alone*, Columbus Chris, 1990), which since its release has spurred a multitude of Italian titles modelled on this pattern, e.g. *The maid/Mamma, mi compri un papà?* [Mum, will you buy me a dad?] (Toynton Ian, 1991), and *Son in law/Mamma, ho trovato un fidanzato* [Mum, I found a boyfriend] (Rash Steve, 1992). This particular pattern has “bled” outside the comedy genre as well with the drama *My girl/Papà, ho trovato un amico* [Dad, I found a friend] (Zieff Howard, 1991), which capitalises on Macauley Culkin’s global celebrity status from *Home Alone* but in doing so misleadingly repackages the film as a straight-up comedy. Other productive patterns in Italian are “X più pazzo/a di...” (“the craziest X in...”) from *Airplane/L'aereo più pazzo del mondo* [The world’s craziest plane] (Abrahams Jim et al., 1980) but also previously *The belles of St Trinian’s/Il collegio più pazzo del mondo* [The world’s craziest boarding school] (Lauder Frank, 1954) and “tutti pazzi per” (“everyone’s crazy for/about...”) from *There’s something about Mary/Tutti pazzi per Mary* [Everyone’s crazy about Mary] (Farrelly Peter and Farrelly Bobby, 1998), on which most recently were modelled *Tutti pazzi in casa mia* [Everyone’s crazy in my house] (*Une heure de tranquillité*, Leconte Patrice, 2014), *Tutti pazzi per Yves* [Everyone’s crazy for Yves] (*Yves*, Forgeard Benoît, France, 2019), and *Tutti pazzi a Tel Aviv* [Everyone’s crazy in Tel Aviv] (*Tel Aviv on fire*, Zoabi Sameh, 2019). Incidentally, these two patterns and other examples from the sample also speak to the frequent use of the semantic area of “craziness” and quirkiness to connote comedic content (see also example 14 above), for example through the Italian lexical markers “pazzia”, “follia” (“madness”), “pazzo/a/i/e” and “folle” (“crazy”/“mad”).

Intertextual title patterns in the sample include (23) alluding to the successful Italian comedy *Tre uomini e una gamba* [Three men and a leg] (Baglio Aldo et al., 1997) and (24) starring Nia Vardalos, which exploits her big hit *Il mio grosso grasso matrimonio greco* (*My big fat Greek wedding*, Zwick Joel, 2002). Finally, (25) starring Robert De Niro, is a not so subtle reference to

one of the actor's most famous films *Toro scatenato* (*Raging bull*, Scorsese Martin, 1980), despite the fact that the latter was clearly not a comedy.

(23) *A Few Best Men* (Elliott Stephan, 2012)

*Tre uomini e una pecora*

[Three men and a sheep]

(25) *Dirty Granpa* (Mazer Dan, 2016)

*Nonno scatenato*

[Raging granpa]

(24) *My Life in Ruins* (Petrie Donald, 2009)

*Le mie grosse grasse vacanze greche*

[My big fat Greek vacation]

All the markers of comedy and adaptation strategies discussed above make it possible for potential viewers swiftly and unquestionably to identify the films as comedies and therefore, from the point of view of distributors, they represent successful strategies that skilfully contribute to activate the desired expectations. However, Italian adapted titles are more often than not criticized on social media and blog posts (see above) because they appear to patronise and infantilise the audience that they are meant to target, often by spelling out elements of the genre or plot according to well-oiled strategies that mostly worked in the past.

#### *Literal and semi-literal adaptation and Italian title with English subtitle*

Literal and semi-literal adaptation accounts for a combined 30% of cases of titles in Italian, which points to the fact that distributors still consider it one of the most effective strategies. Because of the sometimes very permeable boundaries between the two categories they are here analysed jointly. Similarly to identical English titles, literal and semi-literal adaptations tend to retain the place or proper names around which the film revolves, e.g. *Zombieland/Benvenuti a Zombieland* (Fleischer



Ruben, 2009). In other cases, there are only slight variations in the use of articles (26) or plurals (27), probably because of reasons linked to the ease of pronunciation/fluency in Italian.

(26) *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*

(Heller Marielle, 2015)

*Diario di una teenager*

[Diary of a teenage girl]

(28) *All about Steve* (Traill Phil, 2009)

*A proposito di Steve*

[About Steve]

(27) *The Men Who Stare at Goats*

(Heslov Grant, 2009)

*L'uomo che fissa le capre*

[The man who stares at goats]

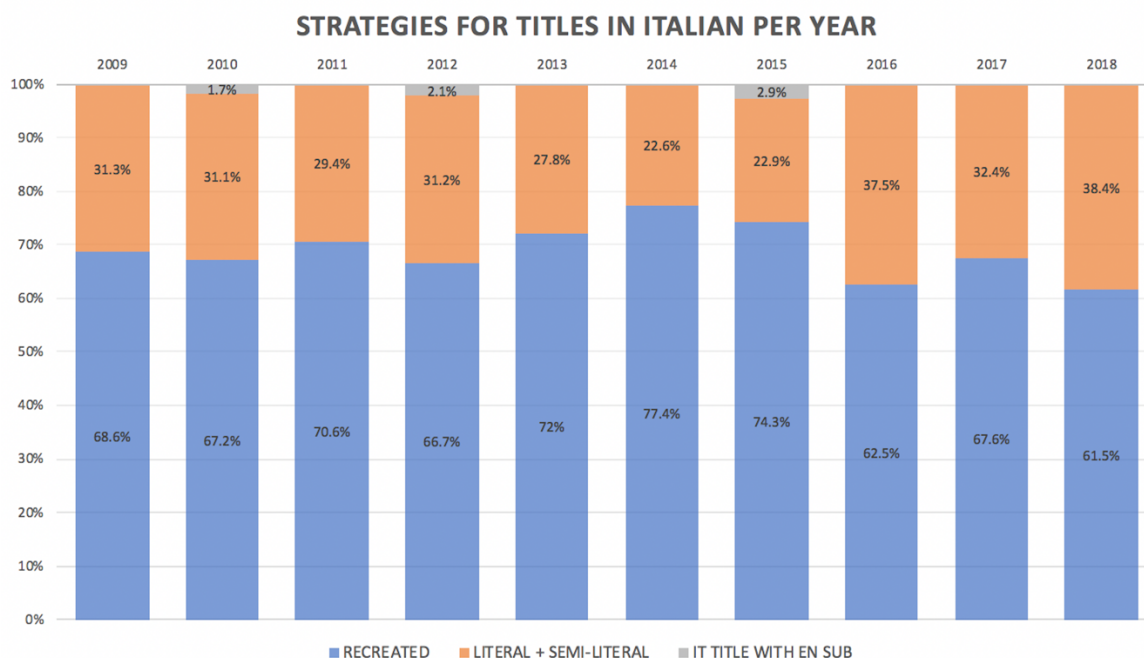
(28) is an interesting case in that the more or less literal adaptation in Italian is close to the original English title but fails to pick up on the play on the classic 1950 film *All about Eve* (Mankiewicz Joseph L., 1950), which was rendered as *Eva contro Eva* [Eva vs. Eva] in Italian. Undoubtedly, however, in this case the choice was informed by the very productive title pattern “a proposito di X,” which had been previously used multiple times (e.g. *Regarding Henry/A proposito di Henry*, Nichols Mike, 1991; *About Schmidt/A proposito di Schmidt*, Payne Alexander, 2002).

Finally, very few of the titles in the sample of titles of Italian (1%) were adapted with an Italian title followed by a subtitle in English. For example, (29) uses the Italian title of the book that inspired the film, *Il lato positivo*, followed by the film’s original title. This strategy seems to accomplish the goal of drawing in both the viewers who might have already read the book in Italian and those who might have heard about this highly publicised dramedy with its English title.

(29) *Silver Linings Playbook* (Russell David O., 2012)

*Il Lato Positivo – Silver Linings Playbook*

[The positive side – Silver Linings Playbook]



**Figure 3.4. Strategies for titles in Italian per year**

As Figure 3.4 illustrates, the general trend for Italian titles in the ten-year period between 2009 and 2018 seems to show a slight decrease in the use of recreated Italian titles as opposed to literal/semi-literal adaptations, which might be interpreted as somehow mirroring the increase in the use of identical or almost identical English titles as a way to remain closer to the source material.

### **Concluding remarks**

This chapter has summarised the findings of a study on the adaptation of comedy titles from English into Italian that combined the more traditional comparative analysis of a title database to a field-study approach utilising semi-structured interviews with Italian distributors. Results show that the majority of titles in the sample were adapted with an Italian title (56%) as opposed to a title in English (44%) and that the most common strategies were the recreation of a title in Italian (38.7%)

and the use of an identical or almost identical title in English (30.2%). A breakdown of results for every year in the sample (2009–2018) reveals a steady increase in the use of an identical or almost identical English title for comedies distributed in the 2015–2018 four-year period, which goes hand in hand with a decrease in the use of titles in English with an Italian subtitle in the last three years. This trend seems to be echoed by a slight drop in the use of recreated Italian titles as opposed to literal/semi-literal adaptations.

Interviews with small, medium, and major distributors have stressed the importance of looking at the transposition of film titles not merely as a product of a translational process but as part of the cultural mediation activity that film distributors perform in adapting filmic products for local markets. Therefore, the strengthening of distinctive elements of the comedy genre and the explicitation of storylines are to be seen as strategies aimed at attracting viewers by offering a reinterpretation of the spirit of a film according to the perceived conventions of the target culture and of target audience needs. Furthermore, the reiteration of title patterns and tropes from previous successful films points in the direction of the prioritisation of financially safer choices rather than more creative – if riskier – options. It could be argued, however, that this has created a vicious circle in which Italian moviegoers are offered sometimes quite patronising, repetitive titles that spoon feed them a simplified, less nuanced idea of these films. Comedy titles seem to be particularly prone to more substantial intervention in the adaptation process since, according to distributors, the comedy genre (particularly for more commercial films) grants a greater amount of leeway and generates less outrage on the part of viewers if titles are manipulated. This clearly might be seen as confirmation of the lower status that comedy traditionally enjoys as opposed to other genres such as drama or, in general, auteur cinema.

For reasons of time and space the present study could not include comparisons with titles belonging to other film genres, such as dramas and thrillers, or even sub-genres such as sophisticated vs. broader comedies. These might reasonably highlight possible differences in the amount of reworking in the Italian adaptations, as might comparisons between the choices operated

by independent vs. major distributors (as hypothesized by Ross 2019). Moreover, further insights could be gained from cross-cultural analyses of film titles from and into other lingua-cultural contexts, not just for marketing purposes in countries where different languages are spoken but also, and perhaps even more interestingly, across markets that use varieties of the same language, such as France and Canada and Spain and South-America. Finally, further studies on title adaptation might want to expand the analysis to other areas in which the rules of marketing potentially clash with considerations on the intrinsic value of the cultural objects being transposed, such as the publishing industry, which also heavily relies on the exploitation of crucial forms of paratextual information.

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<sup>i</sup> “The embarrassing and nonsensical/stupid translation of film titles in Italian”

<https://www.facebook.com/Limbarazzante-e-insensata-traduzione-dei-titoli-dei-film-in-italiano-503527949697773/>  
(inactive since 2016).

<sup>ii</sup> The Internet Movie Database - <https://www.imdb.com>

<sup>iii</sup> Coming Soon - <https://www.comingsoon.it>

<sup>iv</sup> My Movies - <https://www.mymovies.it>