

END-USER PERCEPTION OF SCREEN TRANSLATION: THE CASE OF ITALIAN DUBBING

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RESUMO: Apesar da falta de atenção dada pelo mundo acadêmico à percepção e satisfação do público em relação à Tradução Audiovisual, é claro que vários elementos lingüístico-culturais de textos dublados podem ser problemáticos para os espectadores estrangeiros e, dessa forma, merecem ser considerados. Por exemplo, como os espectadores lidam com as numerosas referências culturais em textos dublados? Eles estranham as expressões em italiano que soam pouco naturais e que obviamente são calques de outras línguas? E senão estranham, por que os toleram? Este artigo pretende preencher uma lacuna no campo da pesquisa em Tradução Audiovisual ao fornecer dados sobre a percepção do usuário final de programas dublados na televisão italiana. Com o intuito de esclarecer algumas destas questões, um estudo experimental foi conduzido. Um *corpus* de *clips* de uma série norte-americana de televisão dublada em italiano foi coletado e mostrado para grupos de espectadores formados por especialistas em cinema e tv, lingüistas, tradutores, dubladores bem como membros do público em geral. Cada um dos clips continha um exemplo dos elementos problemáticos descritos acima, com ênfase particular nas referências tipicamente culturais e exemplos de “*dublês*”. Após assistirem aos *clips*, os participantes responderam a um questionário que mediu a compreensão e a satisfação de cada seqüência. Os resultados apontaram para uma bai-

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xa compreensão de referências culturais e um grau variado de tolerância ao “*dubbese*”.

UNITERMOS: percepção do público; usuários finais; pesquisa empírica; tradução audiovisual; dublagem televisiva.

ABSTRACT: Despite the lack of attention that has been so far devoted by the academic world to audience perception and enjoyment of Audiovisual Translation, it is clear that several lingua-cultural elements of dubbed texts might be problematic for foreign viewers and, as such, deserve further consideration. For example, what do viewers make of the numerous culture-specific references in dubbed texts? Are they disturbed by the unnatural sounding Italian expressions which are obviously calques from other languages? And if not, why do they tolerate them? This essay sets out to fill a gap in the field of research in Screen Translation by providing data on end user perception of dubbed programmes on Italian tv. In order to shed light on some of these issues, an experimental study was set up. A corpus of clips from American tv series dubbed into Italian was collected and shown to samples of viewers made up of cinema and tv experts, linguists, practitioners working in the field of dubbing, as well as lay members of the general public. Each of the clips contained an example of the problematic elements described above, with particular focus on highly culture-specific references and examples of dubbese. After watching the clips, respondents were asked to fill out a questionnaire which set out to measure their understanding and enjoyment of each excerpt. Results displayed widespread poor comprehension of culture-specific references and a varied degree of tolerance to dubbese.

KEYWORDS: Audience perception; end-users; empirical research; audiovisual translation; television dubbing.

1. Introduction

The field of Audiovisual Translation has only recently started to attract the attention of academics and translation

scholars. Following the increase in the amount of work carried out by professionals in order to ensure that foreign language audiovisual products may be enjoyed by speakers of other languages, some of the first publications concerning multimedia translation mainly report on the technical aspects of the profession and on the differences between the dubbing and subtitling modes of AVT (e.g. Luyken, 1991). Although some early publications on the translation of foreign audiovisual texts still focused on the different approaches to AVT involved in dubbing and subtitling in an attempt to support the supremacy of one over the other, more recent studies have abandoned this sterile debate and started to pay closer attention to the end results of the dubbing and subtitling processes. Such research mainly took the form of case studies focusing on a comparison between source and target texts, analyzing weak and strong points in the translation, and commenting on the overall efficacy of the adaptation from one lingua-cultural context to the other. Examples of such an approach, which have been applied to numerous combinations of languages, can be found in Baccolini *et al.* (1994); Heiss *et al.* (1996); Gambier (1998, 2004); Bosinelli *et al.* (2000) and, Gambier & Gottlieb (2001). Although these kinds of studies are valuable in that they draw attention to the polysemiotic nature of audiovisual texts, thus highlighting the many difficulties involved in AVT, they tend to remain anecdotal and quite narrow in scope.

It is clear, however, how the approach described above cannot be but a part of a phenomenon that is destined to become more and more common in our everyday lives. Indeed, in a world in which new technologies and digital supports now allow viewers to be ever more in control of the translation mode they prefer when watching foreign audiovisual materials it is extremely important to bring end-user perception and satisfaction into the picture. Yet, despite the fact that the need for more end-user oriented research has been frequently emphasized in the literature (most recently in Gambier, 2003), scholarly work on viewer perception of dubbed and subtitled programs are still limited. Although a few exceptions to this trend have been published (Karamitroglou, 2000; Fuentes Luque, 2001; Antonini, Bucaria

& Senzani, 2003; Antonini & Chiaro, 2004; Bucaria, forthcoming, Chiaro, 2004), much still remains to be done in order to explore more issues concerning the end user perception of translated audiovisual texts, such as viewers' awareness of the kind of language used on the screen and their level of tolerance towards it. The present study sets out to be a tentative contribution in this direction.

2. Dubbed products in Italy: the state of the art

During the third week in February 2005, Italy's main TV channels broadcast roughly 562 hours of dubbed programmes.

The privately owned "Mediaset" group alone broadcasts 475 hours and 42 minutes, thus qualifying as the most significant sponsor of the TV dubbing industry in Italy.¹

Programmes which undergo the process of dubbing in Italy are mainly films and tv series, for a total of over 2000 minutes airing on weekdays. Most dubbed products are in the form of feature films and tv films, including series. Cartoons account for a significant proportion of dubbed tv and even if until the early nineties soaps and Latin-American *telenovelas* also occupied a prominent position, nowadays, possibly on account of the advent of home grown Italian soap operas, fewer imported soaps tend to be screened. As might be expected, programmes imported from the USA hold the lion's share of dubbing, while Austrian and German programmes occupy second position.²

But what do we know about the perception of the translation of such programmes? In an era of instant communication with any location on the planet, ever more discerning audiences

¹ These figures are rough calculations based on information from the weekly *Film TV* and refer to the three state owned channels *Radio Televisione Italiana (RAI1)*, the three privately owned *Mediaset* channels *RETE 4*, *CANALE 5* and *ITALIA UNO* and *LA 7*.

² According to a European Observatory press release, the five major EU states (i.e. France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the UK) import over 70% of tv fictional products and full length films for the cinema, from the USA (Press Release 28 January 2003).

must surely be aware of the myriad of “culture bumps” (Leppihalme, 1997) with which they are presented and that screen translators have had to deal with prior to airing. In extreme cases audiences are even witness to a radically different text from the source text (see 3.2.2.b). And what of *dubbese*? Many varieties exist throughout Europe, but are audiences aware of this or do they think that they are hearing real language? Are audiences conscious of the fact that the language they hear is more artificial than the customary artificiality of tv talk (Goffmann, 1981)? And even if they are, does this matter? After all, if a programme is a huge commercial success, is it of any importance if it is lacking in linguistic nuances or if it is culturally impenetrable in places? Moreover, should audiences be left to work things out independently as is traditionally the case, or could screen translations somehow assist audiences in understanding target texts to the full?

Even if dubbing cannot be considered in terms of an economic good, it can certainly be examined in terms of a service. Without it, the inhabitants of at least four EU member states (*i.e.* Austria, France, Germany and Italy) would not be privy to the majority of fiction on terrestrial tv. And if we combine tv dubbing, feature film dubbing and dubbing for the home video market across the so-called ‘dubbing countries’ we find that we are surely dealing with a multi-million Euro industry³. Thus it would not be unfair to ensure that end-users are getting a square deal in terms of quality. And like it or not, end-user perception is inextricably linked to the issue of quality control, something which is sadly lacking in such a significant public service in Europe.

³ The term ‘dubbing countries’ is used to refer to the central/southern European block made up of Germany, Austria, France, Italy and Spain which tends to be placed in opposition to the block of subtitling countries consisting of Scandinavia and Benelux. However, this distinction may well be becoming spurious with the ever-growing DVD market which prefers subtitling for economic reasons.

3. The investigation

3.1 Aims and objectives

Having established that Italian viewers are witnesses to vast quantities of imported television programmes which are mainly mediated linguistically by means of dubbing, the present authors set out to examine exactly how sensitive audiences felt with regard to what they were watching⁴. Of particular interest to this study were two fundamental aspects of audiences' perception of dubbed programmes:

- what they actually *understand* regarding the culture-specific aspects with which they are constantly presented and
- how far, if at all, they are aware of the fact that the language adopted in such programmes is, to a certain extent, quite unlike naturally occurring Italian.

3.2 Methods and tools

The study was carried out by means of two inter-dependent instruments:

- a) a questionnaire and
- b) a videotape containing twenty significant excerpts recorded from a selection of TV programmes dubbed into Italian.

3.3 The videotape

Preparing the tape was a crucial aspect of the study. Materials recorded onto the tape were selected according to the following categories, which are presented in the literature on

⁴ The present paper is based on Chiara Bucaria (2001) *La percezione del testo filmico doppiato in TV: uno studio empirico*. Unpublished dissertation, SSLiMIT (Advanced School in Modern Languages for Interpreters and Translators), University of Bologna. at Forli, Italy supervised by Delia Chiaro.

dubbing as some of the most prominent obstacles in the adaptation of audiovisual texts from one language into another:

1. highly culture-specific references (e.g. to food, drink, sports, famous people etc.);
2. culture bumps (i.e. translated idioms, allusions, puns etc.);
3. unnatural utterances in naturally occurring Italian which have become the norm in dubbed texts (Pavesi, 1996).

Mismatches between the verbal and visual code, translational lapses and mistakes were ignored; in other words, the odd translational *faux pas* was of no interest to the survey, while fixed conventions within dubbed Italian – or dubbese – were indeed of great concern. Furthermore, it was of vital importance that examples were representative of dubbed Italian *tout court*.

As the original versions of the bulk of dubbed programmes in Italy occur in US English, a decision was taken to limit the contents of the cassette to excerpts from North American products. Consequently, the first stage of the investigation was to record roughly a hundred hours of programmes translated from US English and dubbed into Italian. Recordings included cartoons, soap operas, sitcoms, series and serials, which, with the exclusion of both feature films and TV films essentially cover the complete range of dubbed programmes in Italy. Furthermore, these recordings were limited to the three state-owned national channels i.e. RAI 1, 2 and 3 and the three private “Mediaset” channels CANALE 5 RETE 4, and ITALIA 1 although some programmes were also recorded from CANAL JIMMY a digital Satellite channel. All the material was recorded over a period of three months. These recordings were then examined bearing in mind references to the following features.

Culture specific references

The recordings were examined for conspicuous examples of references to any culture specific features which may not have been perfectly clear to someone unfamiliar with North American culture. Particular attention was paid to references from the US institutions such as the legal system and the police department, education (the semantic field of high schools: cheer leaders;

proms; nerds; colleges; dorms; grades etc.); food and drink; holidays (July 4th etc.) as well as references to events, festivities, famous people, and personalities.

Language specific features

The contents of the tapes were examined in view of their naturalness in Italian. Where the original scripts were not available, in proximity of unlikely sounding Italian forms, back translations provided credible source versions, although resorting to lip-reading was sometimes necessary. Language specific features include:

- Linguistic variation: geographic varieties, slang and sociolects. How are they marked in Italian if at all?
- Politeness: how does Italian, a language which requires a polite form in conversation, cope when translating dialogues from a language which does not possess such a form?
- Conventional calques: terms of endearment; taboo language; 'vague' language etc.

Borderline features

Certain features in the material gathered clearly did not fit into any of the two categories above and required end-users to be *au fait* with a number of particular "Knowledge Resources" (Attardo, 1994) which clearly crosscut both language and culture. These were metaphors, idioms and allusions; Verbally Expressed Humour (wordplay; jokes; irony etc.); songs, poems and rhymes and gestures. We decided to label these elements "Borderline Features".

3.4 The focus group

After close examination of all the excerpts, the cassettes were reduced to a single 60 minute tape containing roughly 60 clips which included what were considered to be the most significant examples of the characteristics we were looking for.

A focus group consisted of seven final year students from the University of Bologna's Advanced School in Modern Languages

for Interpreters and Translators. All of the students, as well as being proficient in English and familiar with North American culture, had also been trained in multimedia translation for the screen and were thus familiar with the phenomena at issue. The group was asked to watch the tape and comment at the end of each single clip.

Discussion which followed the viewing of the clips ranged from the indication of unnatural and unlikely dialogues and mismatches between verbal text and visual text to cultural references of which the average viewer may have no encyclopaedic knowledge. Such debating was extremely useful in allowing us to reduce the tape to twenty clips lasting a total of sixteen minutes.

3.5 The final cut

Care was taken to ensure that the clips included in the final version of the tape were as varied as possible, not only from the point of view of features under scrutiny, but also with regard to the programmes chosen. Thus excerpts were chosen both from a mixed selection of programmes, as well as a wide variety of television genres. The single excerpts were then ordered according to their content. Thus the final tape was organized in the following way:

Section One: five sequences each containing culture-specific references;

Section Two: six sequences each containing what was loosely defined as "Borderline Features";

Section Three: nine sequences each containing examples of unnatural Italian;

Once the individual clips were systematically ordered, the tape was digitalized and edited.

3.6 The questionnaire

A questionnaire was elaborated based upon the clips chosen for inclusion on the cassette. This instrument was divided into three blocks of questions in exact correspondence to the

contents of the cassette. In fact, each block of questions was based respectively upon the three varieties of clips contained on the cassette.

Multiple-choice and yes/no questions were preferred throughout the instrument, so that the answers which would be obtained would be as clear-cut and as easily classifiable as possible. A few open-ended questions were employed when it was necessary for respondents to provide unbiased and individual judgements. Similarly, in the final block of the questionnaire, graphic metric rating scales⁵ were utilized to assess the likelihood of certain Italian expressions occurring in the same type of linguistic event in real life situations.

The questionnaire thus elaborated was consequently piloted with the help of a restricted number of self-selected respondents who were asked to watch the clips and then answer the relative questions, commenting on whatever incongruities and/or ambiguities they might find.

3.7 The sampling frame

The final version of the questionnaire was administered to three different samples of viewers who were instructed to watch the recordings and answer the relative questions.

Sample 1 consisted of self-selected respondents from the general public chosen from the area of Cesena and Forli. By self-selected sample we refer to respondents who were chosen by the researchers by way of personal networking. This sample was considered to be representative of an average Italian tv audience regularly exposed to dubbed programmes with no particular notions regarding the process of multimedia translation and dubbing.

⁵ Metric graphic rating item scales are used when researchers need to evaluate the intensity of respondents' opinions. Such a scale consists of a 10cm long horizontal line which indicates two polar opinions at each extremity i.e. 'Not at all likely' and 'Extremely likely'. Respondents must place a cross on the line in a position which most closely responds to their feelings or attitudes.

Sample 2 consisted of respondents who work in the field of dubbing *i.e.* screen translators, dubbing/translators, dubbing scriptwriters, dubbing actors etc. Their participation was considered necessary in order to include the point of view of some of the people responsible for the Italian adaptation of many tv programmes, and precisely because their perception of dubbese is likely to be different from that of the general audience.

Sample 3 consisted of 'experts' and included cinema critics, journalists and academics working in the fields of linguistics, translation and media studies.

The respondents which made up *Sample 1* were contacted personally in the areas of Forli-Cesena while professionals in *Sample 2* were all contacted in Milan and Rome, the two main areas where the dubbing industry is concentrated in Italy. Respondents in *Sample 3* came mainly from the areas of Bologna, Reggio Emilia and Genoa. Whenever possible, the questionnaires were administered face to face. However, due to the impossibility of reaching every single respondent, a considerable number was sent and collected by post. A total of 150 questionnaires were equally distributed to the three sample groups.

3.8 Results

A total of 87 questionnaires were returned; 40 were returned from *Sample 1*, 21 from *Sample 2* and 26 from *Sample 3*.

The sample

The typology of the complete sample was made up as follows: 46% general public, 30% experts and 24% dubbing industry professionals. The sample of experts consisted mainly of film critics and journalists (73%) as well as linguists and language experts (27%); while 76% of the professionals were polyvalent figures, in other words respondents who covered at least two different roles in the dubbing process (Figure 1). Furthermore 83% of the total sample had studied English for varied lengths of time. Only 37% of the total sample had visited the USA. All respondents were asked to evaluate their command of English:

64% declared that they had a command of English that ranged from excellent to sufficient; while 36% declared that they had either a poor command or little or no knowledge of English at all.

A large proportion of the sample tended to watch either only dubbed programmes (39%) or only dubbed and Italian fictional programmes (37%). The remaining respondents claimed that they watched only Italian products.

End-user responses to culture-specific references (Tape Section / Questionnaire Block A)

Block A of the questionnaire contained 5 questions each of which referred to a single clip in Section 1 of the tape. Multiple-choice questions set out to identify what audiences understood of American culture-specific references which are absent in Italian culture. Subsequently, responses were grouped into three clusters according to the way in which answers coalesced in terms of end-users' understanding.

The clip which the highest number of respondents across the three samples had understood best of all, was labelled in terms of "high familiarity", the clip(s) which scored middling recognition were labelled "average familiarity" and those which were poorly understood "minimal familiarity".

High familiarity

Much North American produce is interspersed with shots of the city of in which the programme is set. For example, *E.R.* and *Frasier* contain frequent views of the respective skylines of Chicago and Seattle, while the opening credits of *The Bold and the Beautiful* juxtapose close-ups of the actors with views of Beverly Hills. In fact, many programmes open with skylines which do not necessarily contain world famous landmarks but which must obviously be recognizable to North American audiences. Are non-Americans as familiar with such geographic references as autochthonous audiences?

The clip on which all three sub-samples scored highest and therefore revealed the closest degree of cultural comprehension contained the opening credits of the series *Charmed* (Italian title: *Streghe*). This clip showed assorted views of San Francisco

– the Golden Gate Bridge, the colourful Victorian houses etc. Respondents were asked to name the location in the clip. Although the vast majority of the sample (82%) recognized San Francisco, many respondents wrongly confused the city with New York. In fact, only 60% of the lay sample gave the correct answer. Further investigation revealed that those who had recognized the city correctly tended to be graduates who knew English and who had, furthermore, visited the USA.

Average familiarity

Historical figures

Respondents were shown a clip from the satirical cartoon series *The Simpsons* which is notorious for the quantity of culture-specific references in each episode. The chosen excerpt shows Homer Simpson being adjudicated by a panel of jurors all of whom have been literally damned. Lucifer, the judge, in fact, presents Benedict Arnold⁶, Lizzy Borden⁷, Richard Nixon, John Wilkes Booth⁸, Blackbeard the Pirate⁹, John Dillinger¹⁰ and the front line of the Philadelphia Flyers team of 1976¹¹. Although it is evident from both the context and the visual code that the jurors were guilty of some kind of serious crime, we hypothesized that the total irony of the scene would escape most Italian viewers, who would probably only recognize Richard Nixon.

Respondents were given the list of names of the cartoon criminals and were asked to mark only those with whom they

⁶ Benedict Arnold (1741-1801) betrayed the American people during the War of Independence by spying for the English. In the USA today he is considered the political traitor *par excellence*.

⁷ Lizzy Borden (1860-1927) was condemned for the brutal murder of her father and stepmother.

⁸ John Wilkes Booth (1838-1865) assassinated Abraham Lincoln in 1865.

⁹ Blackbeard the Pirate: an 18th century pirate especially well known for his treachery and cruelty to prisoners.

¹⁰ John Dillinger (1902-1934), a gangster from the thirties who was declared "Public enemy number one" by the FBI in 1934.

¹¹ Philadelphia Flyers: a well known hockey team who were particularly violent with their opposing teams.

were familiar. However, the names of Saddam Hussein, Jack the Ripper and Adolf Hitler were also among the options given, not to catch respondents out, but rather to test their truthfulness in answering. Findings show that out of seven villains, most respondents were *au fait* with only between one and three of the characters and, predictably, these were Richard Nixon, probably because of the mass media coverage of the Watergate scandal, and Blackbeard the Pirate who we can safely hypothesize that has now passed from being a strictly North American figure to an internationally recognizable personality. Seeing that such a high proportion of respondents did not recognize most personalities in the scene, we can tentatively deduce that most of the irony went amiss, as it was strictly linked to the cultural information associated to the lives of the villains in question. Such non-recognition cannot be imputed to poor translation as the translators and dubbing-scriptwriters were surely obliged to adhere to the original personalities rather than localize them for the Italian public due to the restrictions of the visual code.

Interestingly, the three sub-samples *i.e.* laypeople, experts and professionals, progressively recognized a greater number of personalities; in other words, those working in the dubbing industry recognized more people than the other two groups of respondents, while the lay sample recognized fewest of all, although we feel we should highlight the fact that the professionals were also those who 'recognized' more personalities who did not appear on the clip at all.

A mixed-denomination wedding

In the Italian version of the sitcom *The Nanny* (Italian title: *La Tata*), a Jewish nanny is transformed into a Southern Italian Catholic and consequently all references to Kosher culture are adapted and localized to fit into an Italian immigrant in New York rather than a Jewish woman born in Queens¹². The scene

¹² For a full discussion of the Italian version of *The Nanny* see Chiara Frezza (1998) *The Adaptation of an American Sitcom: the case of The Nanny/La Tata*. Unpublished dissertation, SSLiMIT (Advanced School

chosen portrays a wedding between the Jewish nanny and her gentile groom. The ceremony is celebrated by the mayor and a rabbi, but in the dubbed version both are transformed into city councillors. At a certain point in the proceedings, the rabbi breaks out in song in Hebrew. It would appear that dubbing-translators and adaptors considered that predominantly Catholic audiences in Italy would have accepted two officials celebrating a wedding for civil rather than religious reasons.

The aim of the question was to verify whether audiences were able to establish the real role of the Jewish councillor even though the dubbed version makes no reference to a rabbi. When asked why one of the officials sang during the ceremony, respondents were asked to choose from the following options: a) because the programme was a musical; b) because the person singing was a rabbi; c) because singing at weddings is an American tradition and d) to celebrate the couple. 77% of the total population chose the correct answer and a further 13% came very close to the correct answer by guessing that the couple was somehow being celebrated (answer d).

It is evident from the responses that the translational strategy of trying to 'hide' the real identity of the characters fails if, in spite of this, audiences recognized the real role of the official. Clearly, in a series which had been heavily localized from the start, adaptors had no option but to continue along the lines which excluded Kosher culture. Nevertheless, the profound discrepancy between verbal text and situation clearly stands out to audiences.

Minimal familiarity

The sitcom *That '70s Show* is characterized by the use of numerous visual stimuli which refer to the iconography of that decade. In the chosen excerpt, husband and wife are drinking at a diner when suddenly the frame freezes and changes into *Nighthawks*, the well known painting by Edward Hopper (1945). This painting must be well known to US audiences, otherwise it would not have been included in such a popular

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sitcom. In the original dialogue, as the image freezes and the woman becomes part of the image itself, she utters “Isn’t this familiar?”, while in Italian, the utterance becomes, *Red, vuoi farmi ubriacare?* (“Red, are you trying to get me drunk?”), thus the text undergoes a drastic semantic shift, and above all loses in ironic content.

Respondents were given four options regarding *Nighthawks* and asked whether it was a) a scene from a film; b) a painting; c) a view of New York and d) an advertisement. 48% of respondents correctly guessed that the image was a painting. However, once again, there was a clear correlation between level of education, knowledge of English and experience of the United States and correct answers. Clearly, the inadequate translation contributed to a loss in significance, and even those who *did* recognize the intertextual reference were deprived of a further chunk of meaning contained in the ironic utterance.

End-user responses to “borderline features” (Tape Section 2 Questionnaire Block B)

Block B of the questionnaire contained 6 questions each, of which referred to a single clip in Section 2 of the tape. The questions set out to identify what audiences made of the inevitable ‘flattening out’ of features such as linguistic variety, gesture and verbally expressed humour, which we have labelled “borderline features” (2.2.1.3). Responses were grouped appropriately in terms of high, low and zero awareness according to how closely interviewees understanding matched the underlying source text.

High awareness

Music and songs which accompany feature films and tv products more often than not add meaning to the text as a whole (Chiaro, 1996). The object of including a clip containing a song was to ascertain how far audiences were able to grasp the significance of background music/songs. The clip in question (*Friends*) is void of dialogue with the camera simply focussing in turn on two friends, Joey and Chandler. Both are patently sad and obviously miss each other. The situation is, however, ironi-

cally commented by the sentimental song “All by myself” (Eric Carmen, 1976). Respondents were first asked whether they had understood the meaning of the song, and secondly, those who had not understood were asked whether the complete appreciation of the scene was compromised by their lack of understanding of the song’s lyrics.

70% of the total sample had understood the lyrics of the song. Most of those who had understood it were professionals from the dubbing industry (81%) followed by experts (69.2%) while the general public had understood least of all (65%). Moreover, the variables which influenced understanding most of all were once again education and proficiency in English. Of the remaining 30%, 64% claimed that an inability to link song and scene made no difference whatsoever to the appreciation of the scene as a whole. In other words, they were convinced that their perception of the clip was the same as someone who did recognize the song.

Songs are rarely subtitled in Italy, thus relegating their importance as a whole. Consequently, our data should not be too surprising. If audiences’ attention is not normally drawn to the words of a musical score, the fact that there is a tendency to simply interpret it as background music should come as no surprise.

Low awareness

In another episode of the sitcom *Friends* one of the characters gesticulates in a typically American way – he holds his hand to his forehead forming the letter L with his forefinger and his thumb. Respondents were asked whether they recognized this gesture and if so to freely interpret its significance. Only five respondents out of the entire sample actually knew that the gesture signifies ‘loser’ (i.e. L for loser) although an assortment of interpretations were put forward. Predictably, all five respondents had spent time in the USA and four of them were graduates, (two experts, one dubbing industry professional and one layperson) all of whom claimed to have an excellent command of English. Moreover, these five respondents were aged between 20 and 38.

Zero awareness

a) Verbally Expressed Humour

Translating Verbally Expressed Humour (VEH) is an arduous task *tout court*, but when it occurs on screen the translator's difficulty increases manifold if the object of the humour is contained in the visual text (Chiaro, 1992, 2000a, 2000b, 2004, and forthcoming; Zabalbeascoa, 1996). Thus it is no wonder that professionals claim that it is the hardest challenge with which they are faced¹³.

To test the efficacy of translated VEH on screen, respondents were asked to watch three examples of wordplay and questioned on their understanding of the humour contained in the respective utterances. All three examples were taken from the sitcom *Friends*.

Example 1

- a) It's so hard. I can't decide whether to have lamb or duck.
- b) Lambs are more scared or they would have called the film "The Silence of the Ducks".
- c) Yeah.

This example of VEH clearly plays on the title of the well known film *The Silence of the Lambs*. The Italian translators opted for a literal *mot à mot* translation of the original joke, *i.e.* *Il silenzio delle anatre* even though the original Italian title was *Il silenzio degli innocenti*, literally 'The silence of the innocents'.

Example 2

At a party for ophthalmic surgeons, the host holds two glasses up to his eyes and says to his guests "*Do you know what glasses are for?*" In Italian the term for drinking glasses ("*bicchieri*") is not homophonous with the term for eye glasses ("*occhiali*"), so the translators opted for the term "*vetro*" a general term for the substance glass: "*A chi servono dei vetri?*", literally 'Who needs glasses?', thus creating a

¹³ See Benincà, *op.cit.*, p. 58-59 and 83-86.

mismatch between the utterance and the gesture made by the speaker.

Example 3

Rachel: No, see this isn't about the movie theater, this is about you stealing my wind.

Ross: Excuse me, your, your, your wind?

Rachel: Yes, my wind. How do you expect me to grow if you won't let me blow?

Ross: You, you know I, I don't, have a – have a problem with that.

Here too, translators chose a literal translation of the word 'blow', *soffiare*, thus doing away with the reference to fellatio which is present in the source text.

Somewhat unpredictably most of the respondents claimed to have understood all three jokes. However, many respondents belonging to the sub-samples of experts and professionals glossed their answers with extra comments, all of which were surprisingly similar. They claimed, in fact, that they had understood the wordplay because their knowledge of English allowed them to carry out a back translation which led them to the source texts. Indeed, an elaboration of the data does in fact reveal that acknowledge of English not only correlates with an understanding of the *VEH* at issue, but also the appreciation of the humour it contains. The more proficient the respondents were in English, the more they tended to 'get' the jokes. The difference is particularly striking with regard to example 3, which undeniably requires a sound knowledge of English in order to be understood.

b) Linguistic variety

One of the most difficult problems faced in screen translation regards adapting linguistic variety. Substituting a regional variety in the source language with a regional variety in the target language makes no sociolinguistic sense, so in general, regional variants in the source texts tend to be replaced with the Standard variety of the target language. This practice results in a general flattening out of the target text not only in aesthetic/acoustic terms, but above all in semantic terms. In Italy, the absence of regional-

isms in dubbed programmes has led to a somewhat artificial variety of Central-Standard Italian which probably only exists at the cinema and on television. Coping with social variety is harder still, although it would appear that, by and large, dubbing scriptwriters and adapters tend to opt for ungrammatical Italian blended with slang to signal a character belonging to a low social class or an underprivileged group (Pavesi, 1994).

Respondents were presented with a clip in which the source text contained a character who displayed both a regional and social variety of English. In an episode of *ER* (*ER – Medici in Prima Linea*) Scottish actor Ewan McGregor plays the part of a bandit who holds a number of people hostage in a supermarket. In the source text it is clear that he is both Scottish and working class. The corresponding question required respondents to indicate their perception of the social class to which the villain belonged out of a choice of a) working class, b) middle class, c) upper class and d) 'I don't know'.

A large part of the sample placed the villain in a middle social class, rather than the working class to which he belonged. Of course, this could well have been because of *what* he says rather than *how* he says it. In fact, in the excerpt he describes the small Scottish town in which he grew up, thus possibly conjuring up romantic images, despite the references to his father working on an oil rig.

Language-specific features (Tape Section 3 Questionnaire Block C)

Block C of the questionnaire contained 9 questions each of which referred to a single clip in Section 3 of the tape. This block of the instrument aims at examining audience awareness and perception of Italian dubbese which is heavily marked with formulaic features commonly adopted in dubbed produce. The expressions upon which respondents were questioned were the following:

- *già* – conventionally used as an agreement gambit in place of “yeah”;
- *sono molto spiacente* – a superpolite apologetic form;
- the polite form *Lei* accompanied by a person's first name;

- *tesoro* – as a term of endearment between female friends;
- *amico* – in substitution for the interjection “man”;
- *lo voglio* – literally “I want it” to replace the marriage vows “I do” which in Italian weddings are actually “sì”;
- *dannazione* – for the expletive “damn”;
- *fottuto bastardo* – unknown in natural Italian but a calque for the taboo form “fucking bastard”;
- *rammenti* – high register “do you recall/remember”.

Each of the expressions above was illustrated in nine different clips and the nine corresponding questions were couched in terms of a series of 10 cm long graphic item rating scales. Respondents were required to place a cross along the scale in a position which corresponded to their perception of naturalness of each expression.¹⁴

The scores given by respondents for each expression were summed and the means were calculated according to their General Perception of Likelihood of Occurrence or GPLO (Figure 2). Although the mean of the three sub-samples differed, overall respondents considered that the nine expressions were fairly unlikely to occur in naturally occurring spoken Italian. As might be expected, the general public seemed to judge the expressions more positively than the other groups of respondents. If we consider that the highest mean score was 5.9 given by experts for the likelihood of occurrence of the term “*già*”, then we can say that, generally speaking, respondents judged the expressions as more unlikely than likely to occur in natural speech.

The results regarding these expressions will now be listed beginning with the expressions thought to be most likely to occur, progressively through to those considered to be the least likely to occur in spontaneous conversation. For reasons of space we will only comment on one or two expressions for each group.

¹⁴ The term used in the instrument was *spontaneità* corresponding to the English ‘spontaneity’ although what researchers were really looking for was the likelihood of a certain expression being used in naturally occurring Italian. The term was preferred to *naturalzza* ‘naturalness’ so as to avoid the complex issue of naturalness in language.

Expressions which are considered likely to occur in spontaneous spoken Italian

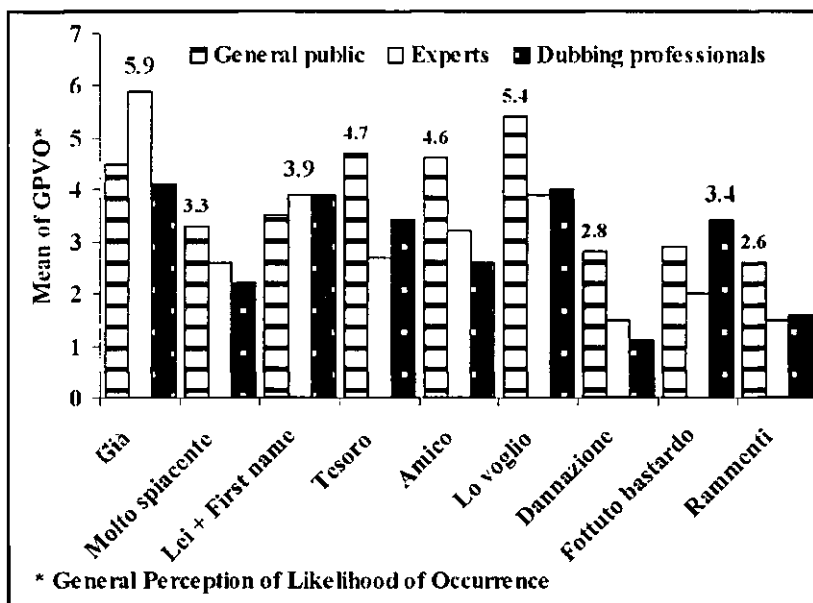


Fig. 1: End users' perception of the General Likelihood of Occurrence (GPLO) of nine dubbed expressions.

Già

The results which emerge illustrate just how accustomed audiences have become to dubbing conventions. This term, which is commonly used in dubbed produce to replace the agreement 'Yeah', has very different functions in naturally occurring Italian (Pavesi, 1996: 137). Notably, the sample of experts were those who perceived the term with a high GPLO, in other words this group considered the expression likely to occur in the given context (see Fig. 2). Indeed, one might have expected the general public not to notice that the term jarred and for professionals to argue that for reasons of lip synchronization the use of "già", albeit unnatural and unlikely, was the only true alternative. Yet, these were the very groups who found it most likely.

Subsequently, respondents were given a set of alternatives for the term, which included “yes”/”sì” and two variants of “sure” – “*sicuro*” and “*certo*”. The results are contradictory. Having previously rated the term “*già*” as rather unlikely, a third of the sample subsequently went on to rate the term as the most spontaneous of the given choices in naturally occurring conversation. These contradictory results seem to reveal certain lack of attention and sensitivity to the language of dubbed dialogues.

Expressions which are considered fairly likely to occur in spontaneous spoken Italian

Tesoro

It would appear that terms of endearment such as ‘honey’, ‘sweetie’, ‘pet’ and so on are more common amongst English speaking female friends than Italians (Pavesi *op.cit.*: 29-36). Furthermore, the repetition of names in English conversation appears to be not only more frequent in English than Italian, but also seems to have a different function (*ibid.*: 29). Thus screen translators and adaptors need to Italianize this substantial use of explicit terms of address. In the clip in question, the source text contains no term of endearment but simply a person’s name, *i.e.* “sorry, Phoebe” which is translated to our data, acceptability of this term seemed to be age related. 30-40 year old respondents rated the term more likely to occur than other age groups and at the same time were those least irritated by its use.

Expressions which are considered unlikely to occur in spontaneous spoken Italian

Rammenti

The verb “*rammentare*” is frequently adopted to substitute the English ‘remember’ because of its excellent match in terms of lip synch. However, in present day Italian, the term is unusual and outdated (D’Amico, 1996: 214). The excerpt from the sitcom *Caroline in the city* illustrates the expression in a conversation between present day twenty-something young women. In fact, the expression was widely considered unlikely with a general GPLO rating of 2 out of 10.

Expressions which are considered highly unlikely to occur in spontaneous spoken Italian

Dannazione! & fottuto bastardo!

These two expressions illustrate how Italian tends to handle the translation of taboo language on screen. Audiences are likely to be familiar with forms which have become conventional transpositions of stock English swear words but which are totally non-existent in naturally occurring Italian (Pavesi and Malinverno, 2000: 77-78).

With regard to "*dannazione!*" ("damn!"), results reveal a significant difference between the perception of the term by the general public and the two groups of experts. In fact, while the former group gave the term a score of 2.8, the experts awarded it 1.5 and dubbing professionals (the very people who use the form!) only 1.1. Yet, "*fottuto bastardo!*" ("fucking bastard!") was assigned a generally higher GPLO rating. In fact, it was assigned 2.9 by the general public, 2.03 by the experts and 3.4 by the group of professionals. Could the group of professionals be convincing themselves that the expression really exists?

By crossing the nine expressions of dubbese with the genre of programmes respondents watched most, it would appear that GPLO scores vary according to viewing habits. In other words, respondents who tended to watch mostly dubbed products and those who watched both dubbed and home made produce, were most inclined to recognize the expressions as being unlikely to crop up in spontaneously occurring Italian. On the other hand, respondents who mainly watched Italian products tended to rate the expressions more positively.

Thus our data suggests that a greater exposure to dubbed programmes produces more linguistically aware audiences. On the other hand, it is evident that our sample did not consider any of the nine expressions particularly natural, especially if we consider that no expression was assigned more than an average of 5 points. However, data reveal a pretty clear twofold dimension amongst end-users who are actually admitting that, in a sense, they are not only suspending disbelief in terms of the filmic content to which they are exposed, but also with regard to the language in which it is couched. In other words, could Ital-

ian viewers be suffering from a syndrome of linguistic bipolarity? Just as reality shows leave audiences wondering how real what they are watching actually is, could not the same be said of tv language, i.e. “We recognize it, accept it, but would never really use it ourselves”?

4. Conclusions

One significant factor which has emerged from this study is that while on the one hand the general public in Italy appears to be becoming more familiar with cultures other than its own partly as a result of the pervasiveness of dubbed tv, on the other hand this familiarity is often distorted, or at least slightly off target. At the same time, however, it is undeniable that such massive exposure to *dubbese* appears to be numbing people’s sensitivity to what is and is not *real* spoken Italian.

Moreover, another noteworthy issue which transpires regards audiences’ encyclopaedic knowledge. Could it be feasible for screen translations to be integrated with extra information to make up for possible gaps in sociocultural knowledge? Indeed the technological know-how to do so exists. Just as much literature contains annotations to aid the reader, surely verbal and audio glosses for audiovisual texts should be equally feasible. As for *dubbese* itself, further studies would do well to explore whether, and if so, how far the kind of expressions we have discussed have filtered into autochthonous Italian fiction. After which it is surely simply a matter of time before the expressions invade the language proper, if they have not done so already.

However, studies such as this one can certainly help operators working in the dubbing cycle. After all, if an end-viewer misses out on a cultural reference owing to a gap in his or her mental schema and/or encyclopaedic knowledge, nothing much can be done. But if an end-user doesn’t get a joke or hears an expression which jars, something can indeed be done. And that something entails improving quality.

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