The Concepts of Ambiguity and Equivalence in Interlingual Japanese-Italian Subtitling
How the Semiotic Coexistence of Iconic Elements, Soundtrack and Written Language Influences the Interlingual Translation Process

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Abstract   This study focuses on the concepts of *ambiguity* and *equivalence* in the field of interlinguistic subtitiling of feature films from Japanese into Italian. Feature films often present us with a context that is revealed not only through language, but also through various iconic components (such as different geographic locations, local symbolic signals, body movements, urban environments, social and historical trends); this illustrate how complex is the relationship between the original spoken dialogues and extraverbal elements. In particular, given the increasing demand for Japanese films subtitled in languages other than English, this study underlines how the intercultural and interlingual translation of the above assets requires the future subtitlers' generations to have a solid AVT theoretical background.

In the past ten years, audio-visual translation (AVT, henceforth) has attracted the attention of scholars from all around the world. Initially, the topic was born as a collateral branch of translations studies, especially in the Anglophone field. Today, the research on AVT is considered in all its manifestations – technical and amateur subtitling, dubbing, voice-over, localization of electronic games, subtitling for the theatre, reversed subtitling, audio-visual description for the hearing impaired – and expanding its field of action in several other non-European languages. This study focuses on the concepts of *ambiguity* and *equivalence* in the field of interlinguistic subtitling of feature films from Japanese into Italian. Several ideas were elaborated during a graduate course of audio-visual translation (AVT) from the Japanese language, taught by the author of this article at Ca' Foscari University in Venice. Feature films often present us with a context that is revealed not only through language, but also through various iconic components (such as different geographic locations, local symbolic signals,

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body language, urban environments, social and historical trends); this illustrate how complex is the relationship between the spoken dialogues and extraverbal elements. In particular, given the increasing demand for Japanese films subtitled in languages other than English, this study underlines how the intercultural and interlingual translation of the above extraverbal aspects requires the present and future subtitlers' generations to have a solid AVT theoretical background.

1 Definition Of Ambiguity in Translation

It is not uncommon for non-experts to define translations as *ambiguous* or *equivalent*. However, within the field of translation studies, the use of these words find so precise an application that it does not leave room for any kind of misinterpretation. Provided that the translator understands the *ambiguity* of a translation while confronting the original prototext, and that he or she has to produce an *equivalent* metatext during the phase of interlinguistic passage, it is necessary to introduce some theoretical references, in order to better frame the meaning of the two aforementioned concepts within the field of translation studies.

In the context of translation from Japanese, the term *ambiguity* appears for the first time in Hasegawa's (2012) study. Here the word ambiguity is not appraised either positively or negatively. As far as Japanese and English are concerned, the definition provided by the scholar regards the concepts of *ambiguity* as applicable not only to the lexical field but also to the grammatical, pragmatic, cultural, referential, and metaphoric ones.

As far as lexical field is concerned, Hasegawa underlines, as an example, how translation from Japanese often puts the translator in the difficult position of disambiguating the nature of some verbs directly from the intertextual context, without managing to reach a widely shared interpretation. In this respect, a good example is the verb 'to meet' (*au*, 会う), which in the Italian translation covers such a vast semantic spectrum ("*incontrare*" - 'to meet'; "*imbattersi*" - 'to meet by chance'; "*vedere*" - 'to see'; "*vedersi*" - 'to see each other') that it remarkably complicates the interlinguistic passage. At the same time, the lexical relationship of hyponymy-hypernymy (e.g. *kome, gohan, raisu*: "riso") and hypernymy-hyponymy (e.g. *ashi*: "gambe", "piedi") within the same translation pair often hightens the interlinguistic difficulties, especially if there is a lexical *gap* in the *target* language. Words such as *jōsha-ken* 乗車券 or *nyūjō-ken* 入場券,[1] for instance, will not find any other translations than "biglietto" (ticket) in Italian. In other cases, the

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[1] *Jōsha-ken* is a kind of ticket (-*ken*) for *jōsha* 'to get on (a vehicle)', while *nyūjō-ken* for *nyūjō* 'to enter (a structure)'.

translated words will often require an explanatory gloss in order to be more effective, as illustrated by the following nouns within an interlinguistic relation of hyponymy-hypernymy, where the insertions are underlined below:

> *kome* 米, *gohan* ご飯, *raisu* ライス: respectively, "**riso" (**rice <u>not yet cooked</u>), "**riso**" (<u>steamed</u> rice) and "**riso**" (rice <u>cooked and served according to foreign tradition</u>);

> *uchiwa* 団扇, *sensu* 扇子: respectively, "**ventaglio"** (non-folding fan <u>with one central stick</u>) and "**ventaglio"** (folding fan <u>in a half circle shape sectioned by movable sticks</u>);

On the contrary, if there is a relationship of hypernymy-hyponymy, the translation will become ambiguous due to the presence of more corresponding words in the *target* language:

ashi	足	→	**gambe** ('legs'), **piedi** ('feet')
heya	部屋	→	**stanza** ('room'), **casa** ('house'), **appartamento** ('flat')
suki	好き	→	**amare** ('to love someone romantically'), **volersi bene** ('to love someone', not romantically)
kuruma	車	→	**automobile** ('automobile', 'car'), **veicolo** ('vehicle'), **macchina** ('car'), **auto** ('car')

Such an ambiguity is similar to what Franco Aixelá (1996) defines as the phenomenon of *cultural asymmetry* between linguistic communities and the texts produced by them. Within the lexical field, in fact, there are typologies of vocabulary bound to particular cultures (such as toponyms, names connected to institutions, proper names and names of historical personalities, magazines, newspaper and artworks titles) that produce *gaps* in the *target* languages. These are transposed through strategies of interlinguistic translation, which range from conservation to substitution. In other studies, the same lexical typologies are defined as *realia*[2] (Osimo 2011) and extend to far larger categories (metereology, biology, ethnography, work, politics, religion, fashion, currencies) implying several translation solutions, which Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) and Faini (2008) have defined as 'direct' (loans, loans with insertion, calques, explicitation)

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2 In translation studies, **realia** (plural noun) are words and expressions for culture-specific material elements. The word *realia* comes from medieval Latin, in which it originally meant "the real things", i.e. material things, as opposed to abstract ones.

or 'oblique' (modulation, equivalence, cultural substitution).

What follows are some examples of direct and oblique lexical translation from Japanese that show cultural asymmetry:

1   *kamidana*   →   **altare domestico shintoista**
    神棚   'domestic shintoist altar'
                        (direct translation with explicitation)

2   *rōnin*   →   **studente che non ha passato gli esami**
                        di ammissione all'università
    浪人   'student who failed admission tests for university'
                        (direct translation with explicitation)

3   *Tōdaiji*   →   **tempio buddista Tōdai**
    東大寺   'Tōdai Buddhist temple'
                        (direct translation with insertion)

4   *Nō*   →   **teatro Nō**
    能   'Nō theatre'
                        (direct translation with insertion)

5   *manshitsu*   →   **camere esaurite**
    満室   'no vacant rooms'
                        (oblique translation through modulation.
                        The first Chinese character lit. means 'full')

6   *bōzu atama*   →   **taglio a zero**
    坊主頭   'cut to zero'
                        (oblique translation through modulation.
                        Lit. trans. 'buddhist monk head')

7   *hisashiburi*   →   **è molto tempo che non ci si vede!**
    久しぶり   'it's a long time since we last saw each other'
                        (oblique translation though equivalence. Lit. trans. 'ancient modality')

8   *asameshimae*   →   **è un gioco da ragazzi!**
    朝飯前   'it's a breeze!'
                        (oblique translation through equivalence.
                        Lit. trans. 'before breakfast')

9   *geta*   →   **zoccoli**
    下駄   'clogs'
                        (oblique translation through cultural substitution)

10	*kasutera*	→	**torta al pan di Spagna**
	カステラ		'sponge cake'
			(oblique translation though cultural substitution)

The cultural asymmetry illustrated in the aforementioned examples draw attention to the phenomenon of ambiguity, producing case by case solutions from 'high translatability' (direct solutions) to 'low translatability' (oblique solutions). As Osimo suggests (2011), oblique solutions such as cultural substitution should be avoided as not to hide the intracultural elements of the original vocabulary producing an illusion of homologation which would result in a simplification of the intercultural depth for the *target* receiver.

I would argue that this idea also applies in the case of minor linguistic pairs such as the Japanese-Italian one. Moreover, the adequacy deriving from direct solutions, thanks to the presence of metatexts or explicative insertions, helps preserve spaces of reflection for the final receiver.[3] The aforementioned issues in the field of interlinguistic subtitling will be analysed and discussed in the following sections.

1.1 Ambiguity in Subtitling

It is necessary to define more precisely the issues of the translation of the aforementioned lexical typologies, in order to understand their problematic nature within the audio-visual context. In particular, this study focuses on the characteristics of ambiguity in subtitling from Japanese to Italian.

As suggested by Osimo, subtitling consists in a prototext with the addition of a metatext containing an interlinguistic interpretation of the verbal text (2011, 190). The semiotic complexity that characterizes the coexistence of the original soundtrack and subtitles – an unavoidable element in the reception of the subtitle itself – forces the translator to adopt a holistic interpretation of each and every audiovisual input that falls outside the mere verbal context. Marleau (1982) underlines how the information filtering through the unbreakable relation of word and sound/image stimulates phenomena of *anchoring* (written text completing the audio-visual mes-

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[3] The two concepts of "high translatability" and "low translatability" can be traced back to what Gottlieb (2014) defines as "foreignization" and "domestication". According to the scholar, the following factors play a role in the choice of these options: 1) status of the prototext (author, language, culture); 2) knowledge of the source language-culture by the *target* audience; 3) types and frequency of localisms in the prototext; 4) composition and preference of the *target* audience; 5) linguistic policies of the *target* country; 6) attitude of the translator and/or of the customer (2014, 36).

sage) and *redundance* (written text and iconic input conveying the same message), guaranteeing semiotic cohesion manifested on more interpretative levels.[4]

Yet, the audio-visual text does not always speak for itself. In fact, in some cases, *realia* (i.e. expressions for culture-specific elements) require particular strategies of expansion of the metatext to disambiguate the translation in the *target* language. Figure 1, a scene from the feature film *Shikeidai no erebētā* (2010, Ogata Akira), for instance, shows how, for the toponym "Hakone" (a famous Japanese spa resort), the subtitler should choose to place a central *pop up* saying "famosa città termale a sud di Tokyo" (literally 'famous spa resort south of Tokyo') to make sure the Italian audience associates the toponym to its main tourist destination. As suggested by Katan (1999, 175), the explicitating intervention of the translator aims at balancing the lack of cultural context for the *target* audience, passing from an implicit context (Hakone) to a more explicit one ("*famosa città termale a sud di Tokyo*").

In other situations, the presence of the iconic channel acts as a disturbing element in the decoding of the implicit context in some spoken expressions. Figure 2, another scene from the above-mentioned feature film, shows a security guard talking to some plants situated at the entrance of a company: in doing so, he utters the leave-taking expression *otsukaresama deshita,* generally used in Japanese with interlocutors who are about to finish a certain job. On the interlinguistic and symbolic competence level, the previous knowledge of the implicit context (plant → placed in a working place → shares the hardworking nature of the humans → *otsukaresama deshita*) helps the subtitler in the disambiguation of the content of the aforementioned line in Italian, where a lexical gap is evidently present.

In this case, the oblique solution responds to the technique of low translatability ("*anche oggi siete state brave, eh?*"; 'you've been good today as well, right?'), making the socio-pragmatic aim of the leave-taking formula in the *source* language implicit to the Italian viewer. Yet, it communicates the sense of caring interest of the speaker towards the plant and the dedication that he transmits in watering it without risking to present it as a stereotype to the *target* audience. In such a case, the task of the subtitler, disguised as cultural mediator, will consist in being able to handle what Katan calls the "*impression management*" (italics mine) in translation on the reference audience:

> what really matters in intercultural communication is "impression management", and to what extent one's intentions are being successfully

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4   In fact, even in passages without dialogues, it is always possible to extrapolate the connotative intratextual value of the screenplay only from the movement of the body and without the help of subtitles.

Figure 1. Cultural explicitation by a pop up on the screen

Figure 2. Oblique translation through equivalent subtitle

interpreted. […] if we are serious about the translator as cultural media-
tor, then it is his or her role to account for this impression management,
and to intervene in the text (and any other semiotic resource), so that
the impression received by the target language viewer is congruent with
that of the original viewer. (Katan 2014, 62-3)

Nonetheless, in some cases, the audio-visual text can remain ambiguous
even when very clear iconic and semiotic hints are included. This is the
case of some play on words in the translation pair Japanese-Italian, as well
in others, can lead the subtitler to a difficult compromise between the
terms of the hyponymy-hypernymy relation. An example of this phenom-
enon can be found in the feature film *Air Doll* (Koreeda Hirokazu, 2009).
In one scene, the protagonist Nozomi (an inflatable doll who comes alive
without realising it) uses the hypernym *sen* 線 (line) while handing a facial
cream to a woman she meets by chance next to her workplace and whose
telephone call she had previously overheard (fig. 3). Innocently, Nozomi
thinks the cream can make the back lines of the stockings of the other
woman disappear. Hence, the misunderstanding in the screenplay wants
to convey a subtle pun based on reality. In fact, in Japanese, the word *sen*
can also indicate *wrinkles*. In this case, in order to maintain translation
acceptability (Osimo 2011) and the associated comic effect, the Italian
subtitle can maintain the hypernym "linee" ('*lines*'), rather than an oblique
translation hypernym-hyponym (*sen* → "*rughe*" - '*wrinkles*'). In spite of the
evident phenomenon of anchoring of the scene (the protagonist passes a
facial cream to her interlocutor uttering the word *sen*), the ambiguity of
the previous scene represents a typical example of linguistic anisomor-
phism. In fact, the lexical *impasse* created in the subtitle by the play on
words reveals how cultural specificity of semantic spectra can influence
the potential meanings of the Japanese word (*sen*) and its potential Italian
translations (→ "*rughe*" - 'wrinkles'; "*retta*" - 'straight line'; *"linea geo-
metrica*" - 'geometric line'; "*linea ferroviaria/telefonica*" - 'train/telephone
line'; "*tratto*" - 'trait'; "*contorno*" - 'contour', etc.).

   In spite of the coherence of the interlinguistic level, reached through
translation solutions that are sometimes oblique and other times direct,
the theme of lexical ambiguity addressed in the above-mentioned examples
refers to *equivalence* - another fundamental concept of subtitling – which
is the subject of the next paragraph.

2   Definition of Equivalence in Translation

As shown by the aforementioned cases, for the translation pair Japanese-
Italian, the imperative to be coherent with the original soundtrack in the
target text confronts problems of lexical ambiguity. These derive from a

Figure 3. Example of lexical *impasse* created by a play on words

more or less marked degree of cultural asymmetry manifested through the translation of *realia*, idiomatic expressions and puns.

In particular, since the language of feature films presents a symbolic-metaphoric *highly connotated* content (Faini 2008), the translator has to become responsible for the interlinguistic transposition of the so-called *rich points*, that is to say the obstacles created every time the cultural distance between two languages increases. In these cases, as suggested by Katan (2009), the translator needs to maintain both a double vision on the cultures between which he is called to act, and a critical responsibility with respect to the choices he or she will have to make. The aim of this intercultural operation, besides its linguistic aspect, will mainly concentrate on the ability to remain *equivalent* to the original prototexts the translator has to confront.[5]

Lomheim (1999), who has discussed the concept of equivalence in the audio-visual field already at the end of the nineties, has suggested that the process of reproducing lexical-syntactic expressions in a *target* language should be as close as possible (both in form and in content) to the corresponding terms of the *source* language This process is based on equivalence understood as a reflexive, symmetric and transitive relation between mathematical objects for which it is possible to apply the principle

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[5]　In this regard, a bright example is provided by the handling of socio-linguistic variations in translation, which can be embarrassing when languages rich in diaphasic registers, such as Japanese, are translated into Indoeuropean languages such as Italian, above all in the audio-visual landscape.

of commutation. Yet, many scholars have objected to the abuse of the term *equivalence*. Among these, Osimo (2011) has theorised the abolishing of the word *equivalence* in favour of *creation of diversity* (2011, 63), thus recalling the concept of "dynamic equivalence" theorised by Nida (1964). According to Osimo, since natural languages have to mediate with the phenomenon of cultural asymmetry, they create, with no possibility of commutation, multiple metatexts. When these are translated from the *target* language into the *source* language, it could be that they do not produce the same prototext of the beginning.[6]

Reconnecting to this critique of equivalence, Katan (2009) also underlines how the "acceptation of diversity" needs to stimulate interpretative sets. These must be *comparable* to the *target* public, thus rebutting the myth of a 'correct' translation (Who for? In what kind of context? According to what criteria?) and, bearing in mind, how the translator always has to trade solutions which satisfy the needs of both the prototext and the metatext. It is noteworthy that the risk of wanting to reach a formal equivalence at all costs might stimulate a reaction of elimination-distortion-generalization on the subtitler's side. It would do nothing but domesticate the prototext and prevent the perception of the "difference" of the intrinsic intercultural aspects that in Hall's theories are compared to the submerged part (therefore invisible) of the culture/iceberg (Katan 2014, 67):

> what the subtitler, as minded mediator, should be striving for is to reduce any defensive reaction which only serves to strengthen stereotypes about the other. […] some scholars believe that subtitlers themselves are more like dubbers, strengthening the domestic at the expense of the foreign. […] However, if we are to consider expanding the viewer's world, towards further understanding of "difference", then we need to consider how to make some of the hidden part of the iceberg available. (Katan 2014, 66-7)

Therefore, the search for equivalence means to operate a cultural synthesis, which, especially in the audio-visual field, includes both the individual attitudes of the characters on screen, and all the connotations of the language (Díaz Cintas, Remael 2007, 185). In particular, this can be found when dealing with sociolinguistic variations that, in the case of Japanese-Italian translation, seem rather problematic due to the presence of several diaphasic registers in the *source* language. In respect to this, one may think about the translation of expressions of courtesy and formal

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6   The same principle applies to the concept of synonymy, focused on an isomorphic conception of natural codes: in fact, bilingual dictionaries are not able to provide absolute biunivocal correspondences.

language when the speakers are teenagers or relatively young people, or about the translation of profanities signaled by an evident lowering of the register and in the absence of any evident dysphemic expressions in the *source* language (Fay 2010). At the same time, on a diastratic level, it could be useful to reflect on the rendition of female and *gay* language in Italian translation, due to the lack of the pronominal richness of Japanese, or of suffixes, caused by obvious syntactic differences between the two languages. It is understandable that the equivalence the translator wants to obtain through the rendition of sociolinguistic elements aims at a heightening of the quality of the translation that cannot be ignored. Also in the case of subtitling, as suggested by the majority of scholars in this field, since quality will have to be the result of a deep technical and intercultural effort defined as *symbolic competence* by Kramsch (2006), it is not always possible to provide a clear-cut definition of this concept (Díaz Cintas 2014). Therefore, the concern for the scarce quality of subtitles (and for the consequent non-equivalence in translation) becomes today a theme of great relevance, in a society where exchanges (communicative, ludic, informative, commercial and educational) acquire an increasingly audio-visualised and multilingual nature (2014, 310).

2.1   Equivalence in Subtitling

The current trend in audio-visual translation shows how idiosyncrasies and geographic and sociocultural markers of the spoken language need effective transposing in subtitles to provide actual translation *equivalence*. As already suggested in the previous section, the mediation of subtitling is not limited to the consideration of the linguistic features of the soundtrack of the source language. In fact, the transposition of sociolinguistic variations plays a crucial role to achieve equivalence during the interlinguistic phase of subtitling.

The following passages show a scene from *Maison de Himiko* (Inudō Isshin 2005), a particularly relevant feature film for its marked diageneric variation manifested in the effeminate talk (comparable to *gayspeak* and called *onē kotoba*).[7] Being particularly characterised by a sarcastic and

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7   The register *onē kotoba* often uses lexical prefixes of courtesy such as *o/go* (*o-hana* 'flower'*, o-cha* 'tea'*, o-kaban* 'bag') and is characterised by the absence of verbal imperative forms (*tabero* 'eat', *taberu na* 'don't eat'), and by the refusal to use vulgar language, often used by men only (*umai* 'delicious'*, dekai* 'big'*, kuu* 'eat'*, oyaji* 'father'). On the contrary, it is characterised by the exclusive use of feminine first personal pronouns (*atashi, atai* o *uchi*) and second personal singular (*anata,* with the partner), the use of typically feminine linguistic items such as sentence-final particles/SFPs (*-kashira, -wa* in raising tone in its forms *-wane* e *-wayo)* or interjections (*maa, arama, araa, kyaa*). Besides, it is worth noting how the same female language often tends to eliminate the copula *-da* after the adjectives in *-na*

crude tone and by the use of sexually connotated dirty words, if compared to the genuine feminine spoken language, it contributes to a peculiar break of the register of the dialogues. As suggested by Santipolo (2002), the analysis of diageneric variation reveals the anthropological and socio-cultural schemes of the societies under investigation, and the roles the two sexes play within them. On a verbal level, the aspects that influence the aforementioned variation to a greater extent are phonology, lexis and morphosyntax (Santipolo 2002, 129). In the following scene (28.53 min.), the old transgender Ruby tells his friend Chavie about his son and grand-daughter from whom he had had no news for many years. The subject of these lines focuses on an unexpected postcard addressed to Ruby. Though there is no specific sender, Ruby knows that the postcard was sent by his granddaughter.

Line	Speaker	Captions	Subtitles
1	Ruby	あのね、あたしこう見えても 結婚したことあんのよ *Anone, atashi kō mietemo kekkon-shitakoto anno yo!*	Sai, anche se ho questo aspetto una volta ero sposata.
2	Haruhiko	うわ！もうその話100回聞い たんだけど *Uwa! Mō sono hanashi hyakkai kiitandakedo*	Noo! È la centesima volta che sento 'sta storia!?
3	Chavie	僕は500回聞いたね *Boku wa gohyakkai kiita ne*	Io la cinquecentesima!?
4	Ruby	若気の至りってやつね *Wakage no itari tte yatsu ne*	Follie di gioventù!
5	Ruby	どうにか男としてやっていけ んじゃないかって *Dōnika otoko toshite yatteikenjanaika tte*	Credevo di potermela cavare come uomo…
6	Ruby	頑張ってみたことがあってさ *Gambatte mita koto ga atte sa*	…e ci ho provato.
7	Ruby	子どもも無理矢理一人作って 息子よ *Kodomo mo muriari hitori tsukutte musuko yo!*	Alla fine ho fatto un figlio… un bambino!
8	Ruby	息子とはね　5歳ん時っきり *Musuko to wa ne gosaintoki kkiri*	Ma da quando aveva cinque anni non l'ho più visto.
9	Ruby	だけど前の奥さんがたまに様 子を聞かせてくれてね *Dakedo mae no okusan ga tamani yōsu o kikasete kurete ne*	Però ogni tanto la mia ex moglie mi teneva informato.

and the nouns, making it followed by the particle *ne* (*kirei ne / omoshiroi eiga ne*), or replac-ing the suffix *-nodesu* (or its masculine version *-ndayo*) with *–noyo*. See also Gottlieb 2005.

Line	Speaker	Captions	Subtitles
10	Ruby	あの子大学を出て市役所に就職したのよ *Ano ko daigaku o dete shiyakusho ni shūshoku shitanoyo!*	Il ragazzo si è laureato ed è diventato un dipendente pubblico comunale.
11	Ruby	お役所さんよ　偉いでしょう？ *Oyakushosan yo erai deshō?*	Un dipendente pubblico! Eccellente, no?
12	Ruby	ちゃんと結婚もして子供生まれて *Chanto kekkon mo shite kodomo umarete*	Si è anche sposato e ha avuto un bambino.
13	Ruby	女の子らしいわ　ハハハハ *Onna no ko rashii wa ahahah!*	Anzi, una bambina, pare!
14	Ruby	笑っちゃうわよねえ　あたしの孫よ *Waracchauwayonē atashi no mago yo*	Buffo, no? La mia nipotina!
15	Ruby	小っちゃなおててに小っちゃなあんよよ *Chicchana otete ni chicchana an'yo yo*	Con delle manine piccoline e dei piedini piccoli piccoli!
16	Ruby	そりゃ可愛いのねえ *Sorya kawaiino nee*	Che amoree!!
17	Kijima	あんた見たことないんだろう？ *Anta mita koto naindarō?*	Ma tu non l'hai mai vista, giusto?
18	Ruby	ないけど子供だから小っちゃなおててに小っちゃなあんよに決まってんでしょう？ *Naikedo, kodomo dakara chicchana otete ni chicchana an'yo ni kimattendeshō?*	No, ma è una bambina: è normale che abbia manine e piedini piccolini!
19	Ruby	だけどおととしその嫁さんも死んじゃってさ *Dakedo ototoshi sono oyomesan mo shinjatte sa*	Comunque due anni fa la mia ex moglie è morta…
20	Ruby	そん時　あたし　ああこれで終りねって思ったわ *Sontoki, atashi aa korede owari tte omottawa*	…in quel momento pensai che tutto fosse finito…
21	Ruby	縁が切れちゃったのよね… *En ga kirechattanoyone…*	…che il legame si fosse interrotto…
22	Ruby	なのにさ　なのにね *Nanonisa nanonine*	…e invece!

Line	Speaker	Captions	Subtitles
23	Ruby	去年の１１月１２日よハガキが届いたのよ *Kyonen no jūichigatsu jūnigatsu yo hagaki ga todoitanoyo!*	L'anno scorso, il 12 Novembre mi è arrivata una cartolina!
24	Ruby	急に届いたのよ *Kyūni todoitanoyo!*	All'improvviso!
25	Ruby	でねそのハガキいっぱいにピキピキピッキーって書いてあんのよ *Dene sono hagaki ippaini piki piki pikkī tte kaiteannoyo!*	E in quella cartolina c'era scritto: "Picky Picky Picckye!
26	Chavie	差出人の名前はなかったんでしょう？ *Sashidashinin no namae wa nakattandeshō?*	Ma non c'era scritto il nome del mittente, giusto?!
27	Ruby	可愛いお孫ちゃんからに決まってるわよぉ *Kawaii omagochan kara ni kimatteruwayō!*	Sì, ma non poteva essere se non dalla mia nipotina! Però io sono sicura che fosse della mia nipotina!

From a sociolinguistic perspective, Japanese is characterised by a far more marked diageneric dichotomy than Italian that shows a far weaker variation at the lexical and grammatical level (Gottlieb 2005, 13). Nonetheless, in order to produce a suitable linguistic characterization in Italian for every actor in this scene, difficulties in the translation are inevitable. First of all, from the first line of the sequence, there is the problem of translating Ruby's gender into Italian. The interlinguistic solution offered in the subtitles of line 1 (→ *It:…una volta ero sposata*; once I was married) includes the whole of Ruby's dialogue during the film, and the personal story surrounding this character.[8] In fact, it is only at the end that it will be revealed that Ruby is actually a transgender and not a transvestite. But that's not all. On an intralinguistic level, the analysis of the character's dialogues makes his willingness to linguistically be a woman particularly evident. The use of the emphatic SFP -*noyo* in line 1 makes this even clearer (*…kekkon shita koto annoyo!*). A similar effect is found in other parts of the segment: line 10 (*…shūshoku shitanoyo!*), 21 (*en ga kirechattanoyone*), 23 (*…hagaki ga todoitanoyo!*), 24 (*kyūni todoitanoyo!*) and 25 (*…kaite annoyo!*). In addition, this is emphasised by the use of the feminine SFP -*wa* agglutinated in different forms in lines 13 (*onna no ko rashii wa!*), 14 (*…waracchauwayonē!*), 20 (*…tte omottetawa!*) and 27 (*…kimatteruwayō!*),

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8   In the case of line 1 (*…kekkon-shitakoto anno yo!*), the feminine form of 'married' in Italian, i.e., *sposata,* is used for the first personal singular in Ruby's speech in order to realise the best equivalent translation of his *onē kotoba.*

and by the suffix -*ne* also used in line 8 (*musuko to wa ne...*) and 9 (*...kika-sete kurete ne*). Even if it is not very evident from a lexical point of view, some elements that allow us to qualify the dialogue as typically 'feminine' are present in the scene. For instance, the use of the word *otete*, specific of motherese language (Hyams 2008), instead of the plainer use of *te* (hand), clearly shows the psychological position of the speaker, who is imagining himself as a grandmother of the female child he is referring to. From the point of view of translation equivalence, it is interesting to remark how such variations can be translated into Italian through the use of hypoco-rism expressing endearment or diminutives, aimed at a disambiguation of the language, making it emotionally closer to the speaker. In this scene, for instance, the aforementioned noun *otete* has been translated in lines 15 and 18 with the diminutive term *manina* (pl. *manine*; 'little hand') instead of the base form *mano* ('hand'), using a transcriptive strategy (Gottlieb 1992). In addition to this, the scene also shows the expansion of the adjec-tive (*piccolo* 'small') in its diminutive acceptation *piccolino* in line 15 (→ *con delle manine piccoline...*; 'with tiny small hands...'). At the same time, the Japanese word *an'yo*, recurrent in lines 15 and 18, and translatable with *piedi* ('feet') has deliberately been translated with the diminutive *piedini* ('little feet') to be coherent with the maternal language used by the speaker. In addition to this, in this case as well, the noun has been ac-companied by the same adjective in its diminutive acceptation in line 18 (→...*è normale che abbia le manine e i piedini piccolini!*; 'it's normal she has cute little hands and cute little feet!'), or through the reiteration of the same neutral adjective in line 15 (→ *...dei piedini piccoli piccoli!*; ...tiny little feet!). Anyway, in the case of diageneric variation, a translation loss during the interlinguistic phase is inevitable, due to the impossibility of translating into Italian the first personal pronouns typical of the female style of spoken Japanese (*atashi, atai, uchi*), not to mention the contrasts that occur every time male personal pronouns appear in the same dialogue. In this sequence, for instance, *boku* – one of the first male personal pro-nouns in Japanese – is used by Chavie contributing to connote the mas-culine character in contrast to Ruby, who uses the feminine first personal pronoun *atashi*. In spite of these difficulties, as suggested by Paolinelli and Di Fortunato (2005), the dominant translation strategy will have to keep into account the narrative pattern of the translated works and the marked connotations of their characters. As revealed by *Maison de Himiko,* the linguistic connotation of characters such as Ruby is particularly relevant because in the film, unlike what happens to characters in books, he is visually reachable (he has a face, a body, specific clothes and attitudes which leave no room for the imagination). Consequently, because of this multimedial reacheable presence, in the interlinguistic phase, the subtitler will have to be able to connect the verbal pattern of the characters with the sociocultural elements of the *source* language. The translator should

then think about how that character would speak in the same situation if he was talking in the subtlitler's language culture. This happens because, on the intercultural level, besides the verbal expression, subtitles have the aim to transmit the ethnic, social and geographic identification of the speakers as well, according to the principles of acceptability and communicability (Osimo 2011; Katan 1999). Thus, they overcome the limits imposed by mere transpositive translation. Even though it does not pertain directly the commonly quoted variations of sociolinguistic literature, in order to provide an exhaustive definition of the concept of equivalence, in the field of subtitling it is important to refer to the *diamesic variation*, meaning the intersemiotic passage from orality/iconicity to writing. The process of reconstruction of the pragmatic environment realised through the treatment of the diamesic variation is inevitable for the subtitler, because on the intercultural level similar communicative events are often connoted in a different way within the specific cultures producing them (Balboni, Caon 2015). As suggested by Berretta (1994), in the translation process it is necessary to consider that in the spoken language a large part of the meaning is implicit, not said or said implicitly with reference to the context, the participants and their shared knowledge. With respect to this, Osimo adds:

> It is not always easy to be aware of the implicit meaning of our own culture. We are so used to taking for granted everything that surrounds us and has always surrounded us, that it is difficult even to just imagine how it could be if that was different, or to imagine that it might be different. The cultural non-said is a sort of collective unconscious […] that only a relation with different cultures can force to emerge. (Osimo 2010, 100)[9]

In the case of subtitling from Japanese it is often difficult to interpret the role of: 1) silences, because these can acquire diametrically different connotations according to the context (from implicit agreement to total disapproval); 2) the handling of eye contact that, if too long and referring to people who are high in the hierarchy, can be a synonym of rudeness and irreverence; 3) gesticulation developed through the different use of the hands and the body; 4) the turns of the speakers, because they might be poorly divided and interrupted by several overlaps and feedback, which carry a specific sociolinguistic role (Vitucci 2015). The aforementioned elements refer, above all, to previous knowledge of the subtitler about an entire social structure, fundamental for the re-codification of the original protomessages into the *target* language-culture. In fact, *semiotic cohesion*, which in the audio-visual field can be created with the interaction of

9   Author's translation.

dialogues and audio-visual input, is manifested in the decoding of a local kinesic specificity the actors are unconscious bearers of. In this respect, Tassan (2005) reminds us how some representational signals (such as agreements and denial gestures in various languages) are to be placed in specific geographical, cultural and social areas. This role can also be applied to some symbolic signals. Both representational and symbolic signals are deprived of sense when they are exported outside the languages in which they are used (Tassan 2005, 47). In Japan, for instance, people often touch their noses with the tip of their index finger to refer to themselves, they form a circle with their hands to refer to money, they beat their belly with their fist to imitate ritual suicide, or they slide the thumb from the upper part to the lower part of their cheek to indicate belonging to the criminal association *yakuza.*

To confirm these statements, a brief dialogue from the feature film *Kagi dorobō no mesoddo* (2012, Uchida Kenji) is included here. The protagonist, Mr. Kondō asks his interlocutor, Mr. Sakurai, if his psychological problems and his attempt to commit suicide are not caused by a previous romantic relationship. The dialogue, highly concise and connotated, is not easy to decode, because it implies previous intercultural knowledge of the meaning of the lifted pinkie within Japanese communication.

Line	Speaker	Captions	Subtitles
1	Kondō	じゃ、なんでだ？ *Ja, nandeda?*	E allora? Perché l'hai fatto?
2	Sakurai	…もっと情けないんだよ、俺は… *…motto nasakenaindayo, ore wa…*	…se ci penso, mi vergogno ancora di più…
3	Kondō	もしかして…これか？ *moshikashite… koreka?* (**symbolic gesture**)	Non sarà forse… per **una donna**?

On an intralinguistic level, the dialogue is *ambiguous*, because it is characterised by an evocative quality justified by the pragmatic use of gesture and by the consequent linguistic void (Vitucci 2016a). On the contrary, on the interlinguistic level, the Italian metatext can remain *equivalent* only where the gesture is verbalised and deliberately disambiguated from its implicit context (Katan 1999). In this case, as the subtitle of Figure 4 suggests, the Italian translation → (*per*) *una donna?* '(for) a woman?' corresponds to *koreka* in line 3*,* the combination of the Japanese demonstrative pronoun *kore* 'this' to the interrogative suffix *-ka*, which is accompanied with a gesture indicating the (relevant) movement of the pinkie. The proposed subtitle aims at clarifying the meaning of the gesture for the *target* audience, as this cultural element is not understandable for Italian viewers.

Figure 4. Interlinguistic ambiguity produced by local symbolic signals.

3   Conclusions

This article aims at defining the concepts of *ambiguity* and *equivalence* within the field of interlinguistic Japanese-Italian subtitling, focusing on problems of semiotic cohesion which, in the audio-visual field, arise with the interaction of soundtrack and audio-visual input. First, the concept of *ambiguity* in translation studies as it results from the research of Hasegawa (2012) was illustrated. Moreover, some strategies of lexical translation of the interlinguistic relation of hypernymy-hyponymy and hyponymy-hypernymy between Japanese and Italian were also explored. The definition of the concept of *ambiguity* has been connected to the concept of *cultural asymmetry* (Aixelá 1996; Osimo 2010, 2011), i.e., the *gap* between linguistic communities and the texts produced by them in relation to other cultures. In the specific case of Japanese subtitling, it has been explained how, even though the information filtering from the close relation between word and sound/image stimulates the phenomena of anchoring and redundance (Marleau 1982), the audio-visual text is not always able to guarantee the disambiguation of the message. In fact, as confirmed by some examples from recent Japanese feature films, as far as *realia* and culture-specific expressions are concerned, it is often necessary to use particular expansion strategies for the metatext, in order to disambiguate the translation in the *target* language. Secondly, a definition of *equivalence* in the audio-visual field that differs from former theoretical positions has been provided. A more dynamic interpretation of equivalence based on the concept of *crea-*

tion of dynamic equivalence-diversity, as explained in intercultural studies (Katan 1999; Osimo 2010, 2011; Díaz Cintas, Remael 2007; Venuti 2013), has been noted and tested through the analysis of sociolinguistic variations of interlinguistic subtitling. In particular, this case study has briefly analysed the diageneric variation of Japanese *gay speak*, explaining the difficulty of its translation into Italian. In addition to this, it has also argued that a good level of previous knowledge of the socio-cultural (Balboni, Caon 2015) and gestual-pragmatic (Tassan 2005) assets of the *source* langua-culture is essential in order to facilitate the interlinguistic recoding of the subtitles. In particular, in order to improve the quality of Japanese-Italian subtitling and to train translators, this study has suggested how AVT theoretical teaching can also benefit from the recent experiences in the field of Japanese language teaching that seem particularly interested in exposing learners to original multimedia texts (Vitucci 2016b).

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