Dubbing is the New Black? Exploring the notion of voice

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1. Introduction

The Covid19 pandemic witnessed a surge in viewing TV series as lockdowns around the world pushed millions of people to rely on their small screens for both companionship and entertainment. Viewing habits changed as the public turned more and more towards streaming providers such as Netflix that offer on demand services and consequentially began producing more in order to deal with the higher demand for novelty. Although it had already begun to do so before the pandemic, albeit almost surreptitiously, with the contagion, Netflix not only presented viewers with a wider variety of international products created in languages other than English, but it also began *dubbing* these products into English. For the first time ever, English-speaking viewers did not have to rely on subtitles alone to watch products in languages other than English, but were provided with the novel choice of experiencing them via English dubs.

As I have argued on several occasions (e.g. 2010, 2021), dubbing has a bad reputation. It is also a subject that polarizes public opinion. Juxtaposed with its sister subtitling, dubbing provokes either/or attitudes as audiences seem to either love it or hate it with no middle ground. You are either for subs or for dubs, with seemingly no space for appreciation of both. Furthermore the very thought of dubbing provokes strong emotions in many viewers, who display unusually exaggerated reactions towards what is simply a translational modality. In reality, both dubbing and subtitling are equally valid methods for conveying translations

of audio-visual products, each with its advantages and disadvantages, so there is really nothing to get excited or angry about. Nevertheless, Borges (1945) who famously defined dubbing "a malign artifice" and a "phonetic-visual anomaly"; Fielden-Briggs (in Nornes 2007: 222) who claims that dubbing is both "a lie […] from beginning to end" and a "complete invention", and Fraser (2010) who considers it as a "mode of intercultural appropriation (or misappropriation)", exemplify the extreme negative emotions that dubbing awakens. As far as I know, while some devotees of dubbing may dis-prefer subtitling, never does this predilection stir up the angst produced by the notion of dubbing in those who prefer subtitles.

Dubbing is undeniably a form of deception as it attempts to lead viewers to believe that the voices that they hear are the actors' true voices and that they are really speaking in the language of the audience. Yet surely such trickery is for a common good that enables viewers who would otherwise not have access to audio-visuals in languages other than their own, to engage in entertainment by removing language barriers through an easily accessible channel – dubbing does away with having to make the effort of reading while simultaneously watching and listening and allows viewers to multitask too. Additionally, the pursuit of a level playing field leads me to adopt the same and much used falsehood metaphor to subtitling. Fictional products begin their life in writing. Paradoxically, dialogues for audio-visuals boil down to an imagined orality born in writing. The term script itself says it all as it derives from the Latin word *scrībĕre* meaning to write. In a sense, subtitles are twice as untruthful as dubbing considering that scripts for audio-visuals consist of writing that is written to be spoken. Actors subsequently learn their lines thereby transforming them from words on a page to sounds travelling through the airwaves. This orality, spawned from writing, is converted back once more into writing in the subtitles. Can it only be that replacing a voice is seen as dishonest trickery, but not so to engage in the complex exercise of subtitles – not to mention the default necessity in subtitles to exclude a large portion of original dialogue so that viewers have enough time to read them while concurrently watching the action? Furthermore, subtitles invade the visuals, although this argument is rarely upheld. As wisely pointed out by the so-called grandfather of subtitling, Jan Ivarsson, audiences get used to what they see and hear and by and large accept it simply because "viewers are creatures of habit" (1992: 66). In

other words, the popular "down with dubbing" argument boils down to much ado about nothing.

I would like to argue that what seems to irritate viewers who dislike dubbing may well be connected to the issue of voice. Although it is likely that dubbing is disliked, especially in English speaking countries, because of its link to the totalitarian regimes of the 1930s, as well as to poorly dubbed horror and Kung-Fu movies, South American telenovelas and porn – none of which are the stuff of cultural capital, at the end of the day the problem with dubbing seems most likely to lie with the replacement of the original actors' voices. When Borges talks about the phonetic-visual anomaly of dubbing, he is presumably thinking of the imperfect synchronization of the actor's lip movements to the sound of his or her voice. He is not taking issue with the translation. As for accusations of cultural appropriation, once more, this too is connected to voice. It would appear that opponents of dubbing do not necessarily question translation itself, but the *performance* of the translation. Yet to date, scholars have almost exclusively examined issues pertaining to translational felicitousness, from lexical-syntactic fidelity to the original to the ability to successfully translate a film's sociocultural features, humour, taboo, terms of endearment etc. into another language, overlooking the fact that dubbing is first and foremost a translation modality that is centred on the voice. The closest that research has come to investigating voice are studies based on the translation of language variation, socio and ethnolects and, of course accent. But again in these studies the issue of voice itself is noticeably absent.

This article explores the notion of voice in what can be arguably considered the three major turning points in screen translation, namely the birth and worldwide circulation of Hollywood movies in the 1920s and 30s, the heyday of US movies and television series, roughly from the 1970s to the 1990s and the present-day upsurge of non-linear platforms such as Netflix and Prime Video. All three eras necessitated the translation of countless products. However. The notion of voice is crucial in dubbing and, especially in the latest turn in audio-visual translation in which products that were not originally recorded in English are now available with English voices. Not only are audio-visuals now dubbed into English from widely spoken languages such as Arabic, French, German, Hindi, Italian, Japanese,

Korean, Mandarin, Russian, Spanish and Turkish, just to name a few, but also, albeit far less so, from lesser considered languages such as Icelandic. Of course these are a mere handful of languages if we consider the 7000 odd languages that exist around the world. Nevertheless, screen products that were previously unknown to a wider audience are now able to compete on a par with English language products, especially from the USA, that had hitherto dominated the audio-visual market.

2. The notion of voice

The extensive literature that is available on dubbing is mainly concerned with the bricks and mortar of the phenomenon, in other words research predominantly consists of countless case studies that focus on the comparison of translational choices in specific language pairs, one of which will typically be English (see, for example Pavesi *et al*. 2021). From the translation of terms of endearment, discourse markers and politeness strategies through to how to deal with thorny problems related to culture-specific references, humour and taboo, researchers appear to be continually dissecting the same old frog. As new films and series are released, researchers will characteristically present a case study at a conference or in a book chapter. Yet, the issue of voice is noticeably absent, although some studies do tiptoe around a couple of connected themes, namely language variation, sociolects, and ethnolects. The use of different fonts and/or colours for diverse languages and variants can work for distinguishing language variation in subtitles, but not for dubbing. There is also the issue of multilingual products containing more languages, again subtitles have the advantage of being able to inform the viewer that the actor is using a secondary language (e.g. viewers see a sub that reads "*in Russian*" for example) but in dubbed products, how will audiences understand that actors are using different languages if they are to be received in the monolingual target concord? (See Chiaro *et al*. 2020). And what of the more ethereal features of voice? Each of us has a unique voice. We all possess a diverse quality of pitch and tone which, while varying according to the meaning we wish to convey (see Brazil 1997), will remain distinctive in terms of its texture despite the significance of supra-segmental connotation. And

herein lies the rub. It is the very texture and grain of an individual's voice that is radically transformed via dubbing – as are the bricks and mortar, the words. But while audiences appear to accept the conversion of the bricks and mortar from one language to another, approval of voice-actors vocal sounds, may well be less tolerable. But to whom? As someone born and raised in an English speaking country, admittedly, the first time I heard John Wayne speaking Italian I winced. But then I was familiar with the actor's true voice. Surely there is a certain amount of snobbery in non-English speakers who flinch at the French or German uttered by the voice actors of well-known English speaking actors. One wonders whether they flinch at the dubs of lesser known actors acting in lesser known languages.

Apart from cognitive scientists and ear nose and throat specialists, voice is also of particular interest to scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Psychoanalytic theory considers voice to be the entrance to the subconscious, to the inner-self. Literary theory focuses on the uniqueness of an author's expressive voice as well as the concept of polyphony in which one single voice may display different voices. As for the field of linguistics, conversational analysts explore the link between voice and the semantic level of communication. The focus on voice by these analysts clearly emerges in Gail Jefferson's (1983) work on the transcription of the spoken word for social research where she pays as much attention to providing ways of signalling non-verbal sounds (especially laughter) to the substance of utterances, namely the words themselves. Last but not least, in an artistic domain, the concept of voice is explored in performativity. Philosopher John Austin (1962) famously highlights how language has the power to bring things about, triggering the recent performative turn in several disciplines beginning with the work of philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler (1988). Lagaay (2011) who sees words as "empty placeholders of the voice" highlights how Austin pays little attention to voice despite the fact that it surely impacts performative utterances. If we consider the example of a minister marrying a couple, the tone, quality and presence of their voice defines the success of the ritual. At one of the wedding sequences in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1994) Rowan Atkinson plays the part of a somewhat confused priest who stutters his way through the ceremony getting most of the verbal ritual

wrong[1]. In this comic scene, the groom constantly corrects the priest's words thereby ensuring the success of the ritual, and once the service ends, the wedding guests display their relief by applauding enthusiastically and shouting "Bravo". The fact that the congregation cheers and applauds the priest, something unheard of at a church wedding, underscores the anomaly of the priest's performance. The priest's vocal demeanour was off kilter. Ministers are expected to accompany their general demeanour with a certain kind of authoritative voice for the ritual to work. Austin's seminal work is lively and readable, and readers can almost hear Austin's sprightly voice, yet the philosopher oddly ignores the purely vocal aspect of the performability of language. Voice does things with words too.

3. Voice and the three turns in screen translation

3.1. The Talkies

Thomas Edison's breakthrough that combined film and recorded sound paved the way for the 'talkies' a phenomenon that was to put many screen actors out of a job. The talkies required actors to learn a new set of skills that some were simply unable to acquire, while others simply had voices that were in some way inadequate for this new form of entertainment, so as a result, the transition from silent film to talkies was far from smooth, *Variety* declared "movie stars should be screened not heard" and many actors put up a resistance to using their voices (Donnelly 2016). Charlie Chaplin himself spoke on film for the first time as late as 1940 in *The Great Dictator*, claiming that silent pictures were superior to talkies because they were "a universal means of expression" which of course is backed up today with the worldwide popularity of Rowan Atkinson's mute Mr Bean. In fact, comedy may well have been the greatest challenge in the shift from silent film to talkies. Writing in 1932 Chaplin argues that words actually limit the pantomimic mode of which he was so fond, something that is certainly true translation-wise. Indeed, Chaplin's rendition of Adolf Hitler (aka Adenoid Hynkel)

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[1] Wedding scene available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKkT8_RGDYg.

in *The Great Dictator* remains pantomimic as the actor's use of German sounding gobbledygook defies translation because it requires none, yet it still managed to convey a strong political message (Cronin 2009: 63-6; Chiaro 2016: 30-31) so much so that the film was banned in Germany, and in every country occupied by Germany in 1940. However, many comic actors of the early talkies such as the Marx Brothers, especially Groucho as well as acts like Laurel and Hardy, made their actual voices an appealing aspect of their movies.

Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy's voices were inextricably linked to their comedic antics. Hardy's catchphrase "Well, here's another nice mess you've gotten me into" is as much to do with its performance as it is about its meaning and audience cue for laughter. Their producer Hal Roach was well aware of the comedic power of the duo's voices, so when he decided to penetrate the European market with their movies, he made multiple language versions of each film also because at the time the possibility of recording a new acoustic track over the original one was still unavailable in the USA. Roach therefore had Laurel and Hardy read their lines off a prompt in the major European languages, while minor roles in each film were taken up by native speakers of the language in question. As I have discussed elsewhere (2021) the effect of the actors' real voices speaking in broken Italian, French etc. with the wrong pronunciation and intonation surprisingly added extra appeal to continental audiences. However, the Fascist regime in Italy did not approve of Anglophone actors speaking in Italian of a sort, so Laurel and Hardy's voices were soon replaced by those of Alberto Sordi and Mario Zambuto who exaggerated the duo's English accents even more – by now of course, the Austrian Jakob Karol had developed a way of superimposing a new voice track over the original, thus giving birth to the technique of dubbing that we know today (Paolinelli and Di Fortunato 2005) and the Italian voices were simply and smoothly placed over the original soundtrack. Significantly, a robust sample of young native speakers of British English who were shown a clip of Laurel and Hardy dubbed into Italian, highly valued the dub (Chiaro 2004: 142-145). Although none of the respondents could understand what the comics were actually saying, they thoroughly enjoyed Laurel and Hardy dubbed into Italian with Sordi's strong English accent. In fact, they were especially amused by Laurel and Hardy's exaggerated English accents showing how voice alone conveys some kind of sense that can trigger emotion in others.

No discussion of voice on screen can avoid the issue surrounding the voices of people of colour, both in terms of source and dubbed performances. As I write, the so-called cancel culture movement is, amongst other things, highlighting several filmic trends of the past which would be unconceivable today. Hattie McDaniel who plays the part of the feisty, cantankerous, asexual Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* is the epitome of a long standing racial stereotype, later reincarnated in cartoon form as Tom and Jerry's maid, Mammy Two Shoes, voiced by Lillian Randolph. Characterizations such as these reveal numerous prejudices of the time that were conveyed both visually and vocally. The mammy was portrayed as a heavy, dark-skinned, commandeering woman who was totally dedicated to the offspring of her employers. Numerous scholars, amongst whom Wallace-Sanders (2008) and Harris-Perry (2011), have taken issue with the veracity behind this caricature and although these discussions are beyond the scope of this paper, they are also unavoidable when debating the question of voice – especially that of the vocal *timbre* given to such characters. The media have played a significant part in strengthening linguistic stereotypes and prejudices that are already widespread between for example speakers of white and black American English, Canadian and European French, Hebrew and Arabic in Israel etc. (Crystal, 2003: 22-23). The voice and timbre of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, as well as her overall use of lexis and syntax, is reminiscent of Aunt Chloe in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Mammy's vocal tones are deep and truncated, almost masculine, while the younger maid in the film, Prissy, (played by "Butterfly" Thelma McQueen), is in direct contrast. Prissy has a comically high-pitched voice that rings of stupidity[2]. Spike Lee notoriously said that watching the film together with black students [t]he[y] "cringed at […] the imagery and […] just wanted to duck under the chair"[3]. But what happens in the Italian dub? On the one hand the Italian dub does away with Mammy's low timbre but on the other it has her speak in a pidginised Italian consisting of verbs uttered in the infinitive and lack of concordances. Mammy's notorious line "What

[2] "Scarlett and Mammy" Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZ7r2OVu1ss.

[3] Bill Lavin, "Spike Lee says 'Gone With The Wind' should be screened but with "historical social context" *NME* July 29 2020. Available at https://www.nme.com/news/film/spike-lee-says-gone-with-the-wind-should-be-screened-but-with-historical-social-context-2717603.

gentlemen says and what they thinks is two different things, and I ain't noticed Mr. Ashley asking for to marry you" becomes "*Quello che giovanotti dire e quello che pensare essere due cose, e a me non parere che lui avere chiesto di sposarti!*"[4] The Italian dub pushes the boundaries of imagined variation further than the original reinforcing a racial stereotype through the diverse ungrammaticality of Mammy's speech. Mammy's use of "ain't" and additional final "s" on other verb forms plus her lack of concordance is taken up a notch in Italian with her use of all verbs in the infinitive. Contrariwise, Lo Faro (1999: 7) points out that the Italian version of black help in the movies of the time would say things like "*Zi Badrona*" and "*Mizz Rozzella*" yet would never miss a subjunctive (sic.) and adopted high level vocabulary. If we consider *L'urlo e la furia,* the Italian dubbed version of *The Sound and the Fury* a film based on the eponymous novel by William Faulkner, the Italian adopted by underprivileged, and above all, illiterate characters, would have been more appropriate in the mouths of the privileged and highly educated.

In the TV series *Hollywood* (Netflix 2020) the story of a group aspiring actors and directors in the post-war era is retold to embrace and subvert racist and sexist grievances, Queen Latifah plays the part of Hattie McDaniel and Laurie Harriet that of Camille Washington who is reminiscent of Dorothy Dandridge, a rather different stereotype from the mammy, namely the light-skinned hypersexualized black woman. A significant scene portrays Camille on a shoot in which she is playing the part of a maid – a typical role for a woman of colour at the time. Camille walks into a room, serves refreshments and says a few words but the director makes her redo the scene comically, having her trip over, roll her eyes and use a "black" voice. In other words, Camille is forced to adhere to the filmic mores of the time.

Not only were the voices of people of colour hyper-stereotyped. Another typical voice of the time was not uncommon for certain white male characters in the Italian version of films set in Ireland. The stereotypically drunken Irishman (e.g. John Ford's *The Quiet Man* and later Ron Howard's *Far and Away*) was

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[4] "Per dindirindina!" Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCqe0-D1X4Q. See also "VIA COL VENTO - doppiaggio & ridoppiaggio".
Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tr2-f9vxBEU.

conventionally connoted by a high pitched, slightly effeminate drawl, a voice also given to actors playing the part of the nincompoop such as Danny Kaye and Jerry Lewis in mainstream comedy. Another example of this trend to hyper-accentuate a character's voice can be found in the clichéd variety of English spoken by Italian-Americans that are common in many US screen products. Systematically in Italian dubs this variety will be marked with a Sicilian accent combined with syntactic structures typical of speakers of Sicilian Italian (e.g. Parini 2017) If Italians and Irishmen are made to sound like idiots, it appears that the industry is working between two extremes. On the one hand we find the total absence of linguistic variation in dubbing, on the other, derision (Chiaro 2008: 17-22).

3.2. The Zenith

From the seventies onwards, in Italy certain voice actors became linked to specific Hollywood artists. This was especially the case of Italian actor Oreste Lionello who notoriously dubbed the voice of Woody Allen films in all his films adopting a pitch and timbre that were so very similar to Allen's, that the two voices were quite indiscernible (see Lionello 1994: 41-50). In a television interview in May 2021, Allen stated that Lionello's dub actually improved his own performance[5], a comment that is reminiscent of the impact of Sordi's dub for the Italian personae of Laurel and Hardy, which, in a sense, through the dub, doubled audiences' fun. Something similar happens in other comedies too. *Look who's talking* is a rom-com that is mostly narrated through the voice of a new born baby, articulated by Bruce Willis. The Italian baby is voiced by a well-known Italian comedian Paolo Villaggio whose voice is, however, totally different from Willis'. The voice is, nonetheless, the voice of Fantozzi, Villaggio's comic persona which would be immediately recognized by Italian viewers who would be familiar with the dozens of comedies in which he was the protagonist. Although the voices of

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[5] The quote taken from Allen's original interview with Fabio Fazio on *Che tempo che fa,* RAI 3, May 9th 2021, was posted as a tweet: "Oreste Lionello, la mia voce nei film italiani, che mi ha doppiato, attore meraviglioso, davvero mi ha fatto sembrare meglio di quanto sono, mi ha fatto diventare un eroe. Mi ha reso divertente, mi ha reso un attore migliore. Gli sono molto grato." - Woody Allen a #CTCF.

Willis and Villaggio are very different, the film was more successful in Italy than in the USA arguably precisely for the association of the baby's voice with the chump Fantozzi. Another example of an ingenious use of voices can be seen in the Italian dub of Hong Kong martial arts comedy movie *Shaolin Soccer.* The dub adopts two unusual strategies that add to the humour thus "doubling" the filmic quality and therefore audience pleasure. Voice actors with different Italian regional accents such as Neapolitan, Sardinian, Tuscan, Sicilian, Lombard, Barese and Calabrese voice the original Mandarin and Cantonese-speaking actors. Casting well-known footballers such as Damiano Tommasi, Giuseppe Pancaro, Marco Delvecchio, Siniša Mihajlović, Angelo Peruzzi and Vincent Candela proved to be a winning solution. Significantly, in these examples we are dealing with comedy where it would seem that anything goes. And the other side of the coin is that it is precisely this comicality that is given to characters like Mammy and Prissy, that makes them the targets of humour, to be laughed *at*, that augments the resentment of contemporary critics of such portrayals.

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to think that the issue of voice can only be resolved within the comic genre. Zanotti explores the world of auteur cinema highlighting the effort that Stanley Kubrick put into the production of the foreign language versions of his films, in which the director was personally responsible for all that was linguistic from choice of translator to voice actors (2019: 91-93). Kubrick chose Verónica Forqué to voice Shelly Duvall in the Spanish version of *The Shining* because her voice was so similar to Duvall's and he insisted that Trintignant should voice Nicholson in the French version because he considered him someone "crazy and talented" (Zanotti 2019: 92). Stanley Kubrick clearly paid as much attention to who voiced the foreign versions of his films as he did to the translation proper.

While Hollywood continued to dominate the big screen worldwide, by the mid to late seventies, non-English speaking Europe witnessed a deluge of TV series and sitcoms from the USA that required translation and dubbing and/or subtitling. Europe was soon spellbound by series like *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, *Love Boat, Eight is Enough,* as well as soaps like *The Bold and the Beautiful, Capitol* and many, many more. People who watched a lot of dubbed TV were soon able to recognize specific voices when they occurred, for example, voicing a new character or a TV

ad. Voice actors became linked to the characters they were dubbing. Lella Costa famously dubbed Reva Shayne (played by Kim Zimmer) star of the daily US soap *Guiding Light* – in Italian *Sentieri* – but, by the mid-nineties, Costa no longer wished to dub the character and was substituted by another voice. Such was the public outcry that the actor was forced to return to voicing her[6]. The public gets used to a certain voice, just as they get used to a certain actor in a specific role and may become annoyed when they are substituted, the same thing happens when one dubbed voice is substituted with another.

Over three decades of a torrent of US products, the European dubbing industry somehow had to deal with language variation, a feature that is closely connected to voiceas there is an evident overlap between voice quality and other, partially phonetic features such as geographical, ethnic and social variation.

Several sitcoms in the seventies and beyond focussed on people of colour (e.g. *The Jeffersons, Diff'rent Strokes* etc.) but characters ceased to be stereotypically connoted, possibly with the exception of Arnold when he uttered the catchphrase "Wha''choo talkin' 'bout, Willis" (*Diff'rent Strokes*) that in Italian (*Il mio amico Arnold*) becomes "*Che cavolo stai dicendo Willis*" in which the actor, Gary Coleman, pouts and lowers his voice to emulate someone older and arguably of a sort of Mammy-talk ilk. That is not to say that there was an absence of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). Films focussing on people of colour such as *The Help, Fences* and many others posed a huge problem in dubbing as AAVE was forced to disappear, in fact all characters have the same standard Italian accent in the dub and in TV series such as *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* where the same thing occurs.

Generally speaking, in dubbing there is no escape from the fact that everyone speaks a flattened single standard variety of the target language. In fictional Italian products that undergo translation, a member of a street gang will speak in the same way as their lawyer, and there is no distinction between a speaker of British English and someone who speaks US English, let alone between a Scot

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[6] Personal communication by Lella Costa who recounted that Silvio Berlusconi (CEO of Mediaset) made her an extremely worthwhile financial offer and so she returned to dubbing Shayne until the end of the series.

and a Mancunian or a German and an Austrian. Possibly one of the most strident examples of a vocal clash between original voice and its dub is the Italian version of *The Nanny.* Yiddish American, spoken by New York-Jewish nanny Fran Fine, played by Fran Descher, is transformed into an Italian from a small town south of Rome, Frosinone. Fran is translated accent and all, but the connotations linked to a small town girl from a town in the Roman countryside is quite different from that of a New York Jewish Princess. This severe choice proved to be successful nonetheless. Cops and robbers, lawyers and criminals, blue and white collar workers all speak in a similar way in Italian "doppiaggese" ('dubbese') – a term originally coined by operators to refer to unlikely calques and formulae that are frequent in Italian dubbed products, but here the term is used to refer to all instances of fabricated Italian for the purposes of screen translation including voice quality (Chiaro 2008).

In the US TV blockbuster of the nineties *ER*, one of the main characters, Dr Elizabeth Corday is British, but to an Italian audience watching the dub, this is not at all evident. Of course making her and Dr Neela Rasgotra, her Anglo-Indian colleague, in some way sound different from their born in the USA colleagues may well be an insurmountable task, yet Luca Kovac, a Croatian medic, also speaks Standard Italian with no trace of a Slav accent. Given that being able to reproduce a British-Italian accent, as opposed to a US-Italian accent may require outstanding acting skills, can an Italo-Slav accent be so hard to do? Of course there is little to be done without acting out variation. There are several actors who speak accented Italian – George Clooney, Colin Firth, Helen Mirren, to name a few, so emulation is hardly impossible. Of course, in dubbing there is always the option of adopting an Italian dialect to differentiate speakers, but having said that, stereotypical connotations attached to Italian dialects would run a serious risk of complicating matters further – as occurred in *The Nanny*.

So is there no way out? Is there no middle ground between flattened dubbese and clichéd stereotypicity? As we shall see in the following section, artificial intelligence offers possibilities that would have been previously unheard of.

3.3. Dubbing and the New Normal

To prove to sceptics that dubbed films can be enjoyable, in September 2006, Mario Paolinelli, the then President of AIDAC the Italian association for dubbing operators (Associazione Italiana Dialoghisti, adattatori cinetelevisivi) organized a film festival in Rome entitled Italian "Short, sweet & dubbed" that featured a collection of Italian short films that had been dubbed into English[7]. Italian experts in the field of dubbing produced two shorts; *Bbobbolone* (directed by Daniele Casella, 2003) and *Tutto Brilla* (directed by Massimo Capelli, 2005) both dubbed into English by a company that specialised in dubbing towards English run by Greg Schlegoff. These shorts were subsequently uploaded onto a website and linked to a purpose-built questionnaire that set out to collect opinions of native speakers of English regarding the dubs. Responses were not only positive, but many respondents were unaware that they were watching translations showing that dubbing into English did stand a chance against subtitling.

Significantly, the second decade of the twenty-twenties has bought dubbing towards English to the AVT forefront. As I have previously discussed at length (2021) streaming platforms such as Netflix and Prime have begun dubbing vast numbers of products from languages other than English for English speakers who would previously have only had access to, say, Italian, Spanish or Turkish etc. products via subtitles. English speaking viewers may initially protest about an English dub, especially on social media, as reception of the German Netflix series *Dark* shows (Chiaro 2021) but not only do they eventually get used to dubbing, but they also accept it with all its advantages. In the not too distant future a flood of articles on how the English dubs have handled cultural aspects of the Italian series *Un medico in famiglia,* humour in the Spanish *La casa de papel* and terms of address in the French Netflix series *Lupin* are foreseeable.

But back to voices. The Netflix English dub of Spanish *Casa de Papel* / *Money Heist* cleverly uses several voice actors from Central America who are speakers of English but with clear Hispanic undertones, yet many Scandinavian noirs will

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[7] AIDAC, Italian "Short, sweet & dubbed". Available at: https://aidac.it/aidac-news/eventi-aidac/italian-short-sweet-dubbed/.

dub say, Icelandic or Danish with US voices. The latter displays ethnocentrism in which for some languages the dub will be accented (e.g. Italian, Spanish and German), while Scandinavian dubs resort to either UK or US English accents. For native speakers of English watching an Italian dub, it may seem somewhat odd to hear Tony Soprano speak Standard Italian rather than a variety of New Jersey English. In fact characters speaking Yorkshire English in *Gentleman Jack,* Brummie in *Peaky Blinders* and Cockney in *Gangs of London* are all flattened into target languages via dubbing. But flattening does not have to be the case. There is also a middle ground between stereotyping an accent or an ethnolect and flattening. BBC Radio 4's adaptation of Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* (directed by Celia de Wolf) successfully substitutes a working-class English accent as a close approximation class-wise to the residents of the Neapolitan neighbourhood in which the story takes place. This is reminiscent of Lawrence Olivier and Joan Plowright's English adaptation of De Filippo's *Filumena Marturano*, directed by Franco Zeffirelli in 1977 in which the actors managed to Neapolitanize accent and gesture without having to resort to English variation. Having the actors talk with a slight Italian accent gave the right tone to the performance.

The future of dubbing may, however, erase all such complications. Artificial Intelligence has created so-called deep fake technology. Deep fake allows the image or a video of a person to be replaced with the image of someone else through the recognition of patterns in their speech and facial and body movements. Audio is superimposed on an image or video to combine with someone else's voice. For example, Face2Face is a program that allows users to operate on images and modify one person's facial muscles to show them mimicking the facial expressions of another person in real time. There are several commercial apps that allow users to swap faces with each other or replace images of themselves in well-known scenes from films. Apart from a string of illicit behaviours that this software can generate – fake news, revenge porn, pornographic images etc. – these deep fakes could be a boon to audio-visual translation. At time of writing, amateur deep fakes or fake dubs are extremely popular on social media such as Tik Tok. Many aspects of voice discussed in this paper will vanish if we simply use the real actor's voice in the target language. Technology allows us to do this. Technology is able to overlay a translation

version of an actor's words over their original utterance while maintaining the original voice quality. Another program can synchronise facial movements of the same target language to that voice. Apart from lip synchronisation, these programs can manipulate facial muscles, neck and throat movements, and imperceptible body movements in a way that is close to screen translation perfection. Of course problems arise as many voice actors see such technology as a threat to their livelihoods. While this may be true, films have never supplanted books, TV has not deposed cinema and so on and so forth. The popularity of vinyl as opposed to the non-materiality of audio-streaming services (e.g. Spotify) gives credence to the possibility that voice actors are likely to be here to stay. Especially if they were to avoid a flattened standard and opt for some kind of vocal similarity with the source voice.

4. Final remarks

Modulating voices in order to accommodate various types of foreignness could soon become reality. As far back as 2005 Gambier describes prototype software such as Reel Voice (sic.) that allowed a dubbed voice to be integrated with that of the original actor. After matching two recordings, a fresh soundtrack of the dubbing actor blended with the original actor will give the impression that it is the original actor speaking in the target language as the software superimposes the intonation contours of the first actor with their translated double. Two decades later technology can deal with pitch and timbre as well as emulating not only facial muscles, but also movements of the throat and chest areas that occur while speaking thus matching real speech to perfection. Meanwhile, voice actors might consider abandoning the flatness of dubbese for a more "performed" variation. The latter would involve more effort than reciting in a plain variety of language X, Y or Z. Such a strategy would not involve the replacement of the source ethnolect or geographical variant with a target dialect, but with discourse in the target language that transmits as much information as possible about the source variety.

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