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The Changing Face of Audiovisual Translation in Italy

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Abstract

Even though audiovisual translation currently involves the use of new modes, such as audiodescription and audiosubtitling, the two most common forms of screen translation still remain dubbing and subtitling. Italy is traditionally a dubbing country. Audiovisual products started to be dubbed in Italy in the 1930s, as a consequence of a Fascist law which forbade the use of any foreign word. Since then, the practice of dubbing has become so deeply rooted in Italian culture that the dubbing industry has developed into an extremely active and profitable business. The practice of audiovisual translation has obviously undergone considerable changes during the years, and it is continuing to evolve. Specifically, such changes are observable both at a diatopic and at a diaphasic and diastratic level, and they reflect the effort on the part of the dubbing professionals to make the language spoken in dubbed films as similar as possible to spontaneous spoken Italian.

A brief history of audiovisual translation in Italy

It is a fact that audiovisual translation currently involves the use of new modes, such as audiodescription and audiosubtitling. For the moment, however, the two most common forms of screen translation still remain dubbing and subtitling. Such modes were originally conceived in Europe as a response to the revolutionary change that the world of the cinema underwent at the end of the 1920s, that is the invention of sound films, or so-called “talkies”. This event caused considerable problems for the international movie market, especially for American films whose distribution usually reached several European countries. The revolution brought by sound films caused the myth of the universal language of cinema to crumble. Consequently, the major production companies were forced to find a solution in order to keep distributing their films in the international market.

Early on, different versions of the same film were shot in the various European languages whose markets were meant to be reached. The films were directed and played by directors and actors of the different countries, while the sceneries and the technical staff were the same. This option turned out to be a total failure, as the costs and the timings increased considerably. The major American companies were compelled to find alternatives in order not to risk losing the profitable European markets. In 1930 the Austrian Jacob Karol invented a procedure called dubbing, which for some countries

turned out to be the ideal solution. Such a process involves removing the original spoken text and substituting it with a new one in the language of the receiving audience. The other solution found in order to face the problem related to the incomprehensibility of the dialogues was subtitling, where the soundtrack is left intact, but a text with a translation of the dialogue appears at the bottom of the screen.

Differently from several other European countries which opted for the technique of subtitling, the practice of dubbing soon became very popular in Italy. To begin with, this choice was the natural consequence of a Fascist law introduced at the end of 1929, which forbade the use of any foreign word on any occasion. The law imposed censorship on any film scene which was spoken in a foreign language. Foreign sound films were originally made silent and shown in Italian cinemas accompanied by some very basic subtitles which summarized the gist of the dialogues. The process of dubbing, however, turned out to be a more suitable solution for the Italian audience. Dubbed films respected the new Fascist law and at the same time made the viewing experience more natural for the audience. Moreover, it is worth mentioning the fact that the level of illiteracy in Italy was rather high at the time and consequently the subtitled versions of foreign films meant the exclusion of a considerable section of the audience. As a result, the major production companies established their own dubbing studios and since then the practice of dubbing has become increasingly important in Italy.

At first, the professional figures involved in the dubbing procedure were not clearly outlined. The films were often dubbed by the actors themselves, who read the lines in Italian, most of the time without a mastery of the language. The dubbed versions very often turned out to be spoken in a “ridiculous” Italian, with wrong pronunciations and incomprehensible words. With time, however, dubbing has become an increasingly sophisticated procedure, and today a dubbed film is the result of a complex production line which involves translators, adaptors, dubbing directors, dubbing actors and sound technicians.

After almost 80 years since its successful adoption, dubbing continues to be the main mode used in Italy to show translated audiovisual works. Even though Italy is currently witnessing an increase in subtitled products, especially since the advent of satellite channels and of DVDs, all screenings at cinemas and all imported audiovisual products broadcast on free terrestrial television channels are dubbed. This means that not only films are dubbed, but also TV

series, soap operas, sit-coms, documentaries, cartoons, and advertisements.

There has been a lively debate of the pros and cons of dubbing over the years. Dubbing has been defined as 'a scandal' (Fink, 1994, p. 32) and as 'an acoustic surrogate' (Antonioni, 1981, p. 115). However, in spite of the well-grounded reasons of the *purists*, who advocate a screen translation mode which preserves the original as much as possible, the practice of dubbing has become so deeply rooted in Italian culture that it is difficult to imagine a radical change in audiovisual translation practice in the near future. Italians are so used to hearing foreign actors speak in their own language that they watch and listen to movies without even thinking of what lies behind the final product. A dubbed product allows the spectators to relax and enjoy what they are watching without worrying about anything else, while a subtitled work engages the audience in two simultaneous activities, that is reading subtitles and following the images on the screen at the same time. The vast majority of the Italian public is happy with this comfortable situation and does not feel the need to change it.

The evolution of audiovisual translation in Italy

Italian viewing habits have not changed over the years. However, audiovisual translation has obviously undergone considerable changes, and it is continuing to evolve. Such changes are related to different aspects, but the most interesting ones are connected to the growing concern about the quality of dubbing, the ultimate aim of which is to make the spectators forget that they are watching a translated product and not an original one. This trend is much more evident in the context of *cinema d'auteur*, films whose directors are internationally regarded as authors of undoubted stature. Unfortunately, recent developments in the Italian audio-visual markets and the rapid spread of endless television channels broadcasting an immense number of products have had unavoidable repercussions on the system and specifically on the quality of translation and dubbing. As Paolinelli (2004, p. 173) notes, in this context 'the only consideration is cost, speed of execution and the ability to deliver a product that does not actually invite criticism and avoids creating problems during production' and a "good" dialogue-writer has to be concerned only to avoid creating hold-ups in a system that works to very tight deadlines".

Despite the differences in the priorities attributed to translation depending on the product to be dubbed, it is possible to outline some

general characteristics related to the changes which have occurred within the context of audiovisual translation over the years. Specifically, such changes are observable both at a diatopic and at a diaphasic and diastratic level.

Diatopic variations

The tendency observable nowadays in Italian dubbing as far as the diatopic dimension is concerned is that of making the language as *neutral* and *unmarked* as possible, so that any potential regional characterization of the variety spoken tends to be avoided. This has not always been the rule. Di Giovanni et al. (1994, pp. 99-104) discuss the case of the Italian dubbing of the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* (directed in 1962 by Robert Mulligan and distributed in Italy under the title *Il buio oltre la siepe*). In this film the character played by Tom Robinson (who has been accused of rape) speaks a variety clearly recognizable as Black English Vernacular, which stands in contrast to the Standard American English spoken by his lawyer, played by Gregory Peck. As the scholars report, in the Italian version of the film the African American character speaks a variety identifiable as the Sicilian regiolect. The translator and the dubbing director probably aimed at transmitting the connotations related to a poor uneducated social group. However, it is a fact that the history and culture of the black and the Sicilian communities are not remotely comparable and have no features in common. Nowadays it is universally acknowledged in the world of Italian audiovisual translation that regional or ethnical variations cannot be transposed with Italian regional dialects. As Galassi (1994, p. 67) claims, “it is impossible to establish an analogy between a regional dialect in the United States and an Italian regional dialect” (own translation).

As a matter of fact, Italian regiolects are presently used in dubbing in two specific cases only. In the first one the regiolect – specifically the Sicilian one – is used to amplify the connotations related to characters of Italian descent. However, a study conducted by the author (Parini, forthcoming) has shown that this device is utilized with two specific groups: with comic characters and with mobsters. With the former, the Sicilian regiolect seems to be used in order to emphasise their speech to the extent of making them caricatures. With the latter, it is employed to further connote the stereotype of the Italian-American criminal. It is a fact that, since the Mafia originated in Sicily, Italian spectators expect Mafiosi to speak with a Sicilian accent. According to the study, however, there are cases when the variety spoken by Italian American characters is not differentiated

from the one spoken by the other characters of the film. In other words, sometimes the Italian dubbing professionals opt for not characterizing the variety diatopically. This happens in most cases where Italian Americans are neither comic characters nor Mafiosi (as in many films by Spike Lee). It is reasonable to deduce that this choice is not casual but is made in order to avoid the risk of loading the characters with connotations in one sense making them comic, or in the other making them sound like mobsters.

The other case where Italian dubbing employs varieties characterized at a diatopic level is found in some TV series or cartoons. Two peculiar examples are the Italian versions of the TV series *The Nanny* and *Roseanne*. While in *The Nanny* the main character is called Fran Fine and is a Jewish-American from the New York borough of Queens, in Italy she has become Francesca Cacace, a catholic woman from Frosinone, Italy, who speaks with an accent typical of that area. Similarly, the character played by Roseanne Barr in *Roseanne* has been turned into an Italian woman from Naples called Annarosa who speaks with a marked Neapolitan accent. The TV series *Tequila and Bonetti* represents another case where the Italian dubbing has resorted to the use of a dialect. This show is peculiar in that the dog named Tequila provides a commentary for the audience. In the Italian version of the series, the character of the dog speaks with a marked and clearly recognizable Neapolitan accent.

Finally, the case of the Italian dubbing of the cartoon *The Simpsons* is another example of an audiovisual product where dialects are used in a peculiar way. In this series some characters display their specific and unmistakable ethnic identity not only through visual representation, but also by speaking with identifiable accents. Interestingly, the Italian dubbing has attributed to these characters other likely specific and unmistakable ethnic identities through the use of Italian regional dialects. The character of the school janitor, for example, who is Scottish in the original version and is also dressed like a Scot, speaks in the Italian version with an unequivocal Sardinian accent. Therefore, it seems that the rule, according to which it is impossible to establish analogies between English varieties and Italian regiolects can be broken in some specific cases.

Taking into consideration the characteristics of the series mentioned above, it is possible to deduce that dialects are used if the purpose is to obey economic principles and make the products more appealing, more comic, or more familiar to the Italian audience. Economic factors undoubtedly play a relevant role in the strategies

utilized in the context of Italian audiovisual translation. As La Polla (1994, p. 51 and p. 58) claims, “[...] any aesthetic and cultural reasoning must be subordinate to the final test related to its industrial use, its adequateness to commercial and profit terms” and “[...] if a film is meant to make people laugh (and make money at the ticket-office), then it is acceptable to make people laugh by any possible means, even if unrelated to the original text” (own translation). The use of dialects or regiolects, therefore, is a device which is used if it serves a specific purpose, but they are generally avoided in *films d’auteur* as a strategy of domestication (see Venuti, 1995).

Diaphasic and diastratic variations

Considerable changes in the translational strategies adopted in the context of audiovisual translation in Italy can also be observed as far as the characterization of the language at a diaphasic and diastratic level is concerned. As Galassi (1994, pp. 64-66) notes, until the 1950’s the language spoken in Italian dubbed films was a standard variety, where all the characters, regardless of their social class or origin, spoke a perfect Italian, with the correct use of verbal tenses such as the subjunctive and the conditional (which are only used properly by educated Italians), and a refined and *recherché* vocabulary, typical of written formal Italian. In 1955, the dubbing of the film *Guys and Dolls* (by Joseph L. Mankiewicz) marked the start of a new attitude. The characters of the film speak a language which differentiates itself from standard American English and has several slangy characteristics. For the first time in the history of Italian dubbing there is evidence of an effort on the part of the translators to convey the connotations implicit in the source text. Galassi (1994, pp. 65-66) points out that the Italian dubbing professionals did not resort to a corresponding Italian slang, rather they invented a variety specifically for that occasion. He also underlines the fact that the relevant point is that they realized that they had to find a way to transpose the connotations linked to the language used in the original.

Since then, the Italian dubbing professionals have approached their translations with growing diligence as far as the diaphasic and diastratic connotations of the language are concerned. Pavesi (2005, p. 35) notices that over the years Italian dubbing has freed itself from the models of classical and literary Italian, overcoming the almost total adherence to a variety which was controlled in its syntax and lexis, and sociolinguistically invariant. As Pavesi shows (Pavesi, 1994, pp. 129-142), nowadays sociolinguistic variations in Italian

dubbing are expressed through some specific morphosyntactical and lexical choices, which are typical of spontaneous spoken Italian and are also used to mark low registers. Moreover, Pavesi and Perego (2006) identify a set of common translation norms that Italian translators tend to observe. Such norms are related to lexical issues and syntactic structures and are used to convey the connotations of the language at a diaphasic and diastratic level. In particular, they observe the use of Italian slang or colloquialisms and marked word order or non-standard grammatical structures (left and right dislocations, cleft sentences, double pronoun structures, prepositional accusative).

Also the translation of obscene language has undergone some changes throughout the years. Despite a constant tendency to attenuate the level of obscene language, which characterized Italian dubbing in the past and is still currently observable (see Pavesi and Malinverno, 2000), it is also possible to observe some variations here. It is a fact that the most common obscene word found in audiovisual works is the intensifier *fucking*. Such a word has traditionally been translated into Italian as *fottuto*. Such a translational choice has surely been influenced by the fact that both words start with the labiodental fricative /f/ and that therefore such a correspondence (partially) fulfills the lips-synch requirements. However, the Italian term *fottuto* is diatopically marked, as it is typical of the Southern areas of Italy, but is not so common in Northern Italy. Moreover, *fottuto* has also been long used in its adverbial form *fottutamente*, a term which is definitely uncommon in Italian. However, the current tendency is to translate the term *fucking* with the expressions *che cazzo* and *cazzo di*, which are no doubt less marked diatopically and probably more natural and common for the majority of Italians. This change in translational behaviour is evidence of the growing sensitivity on the part of the translators towards the use of a language which should ideally reflect spontaneous spoken Italian.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is evident that the situation in the context of audiovisual translation in Italy is both static and dynamic. It is static, in the sense that Italians keep considering dubbing as their favourite mode of screen translation. The reasons which originally forced Italy to choose such a mode – that is, the Fascist law forbidding the use of foreign languages and the high level of illiteracy – no longer apply. However, Italians still prefer to view foreign audiovisual products dubbed rather than subtitled. At the same time the situation is

dynamic, as the practice of translation has undergone considerable changes over the years.

The paper has shown that these changes are observable at different levels and that it is possible to identify a regularity in the behaviour of the various translators. Such consistency reflects the effort to make the language spoken in dubbed films as similar as possible to spontaneous spoken Italian, showing consideration towards the characterization of the language at a diatopic, diaphasic and diastratic level. This growing concern for the quality of dubbed products is definitely evident in the dubbing of films of a certain stature, such as *films d'auteur*. Unfortunately, minor productions are not treated with such care.

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