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To make you see: Linguistic and translational insights in audiovisual literature (Introduction)

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One of the most prolific branches of Translation Studies – the ‘modern’ take on translatology developed also thanks to the endeavours of literary scholars of the likes of James S. Holmes, Gideon Toury and André Lefevere – audiovisual translation (AVT) has grown almost in parallel with film adaptation studies, the area of research which investigates the dynamic and intersemiotic relationship between literary source texts and the films (and later TV shows) which are based on or take inspiration from them¹. Even so, the two disciplines have had little to say to each other and, with few exceptions², AVT has comparatively neglected the many illustrious or less illustrious hypotexts on which much of the phantasmagoria of images and sounds which is at the heart of its reflection has been based³. The truth is that, for an area of studies which holds multisemiotic and multimodal texts as its main objects of investigation, audiovisual translation has long been focused, even fixated, on words, and has made of the linguistic and translational analysis of verbal dialogue the principal aim of much of its research.

¹ Among the many books on the intersemiotic transfer of literary works from page to screen, dealing with both theories and specific cases, we will just mention here the seminal works by Cartmell and Whelehan (1999, 2007, 2010, and 2014), Hutcheon (2013), Leitch (2007, 2017), McFarlane (1996), Stam and Raengo (2014), as well as the recent edited collections by Stewart and Munro (2022) and Chua and Ho (2023).

² For example, Vandaele (2018) makes a convincing point of applying the basic concepts of narratology to stories conveyed across media, subtitling, dubbing and audio description.

³ The relationship between AVT and adaptation studies is explored in a recent volume edited by Ranzato and Valleriani (2025).

AVT has flourished throughout the last few decades and especially since the beginning of the new millennium thanks to the exponential developments in digital technology⁴. Such developments have brought about the inception of new forms of production and consumption of audiovisual products, hence the consequent impact on AVT as a field, with the outbreak of research interest in the key role of digital technology in the translational process of audiovisual material. This branch of scholarly research in AVT, however, is a more recent expansion of a discipline that has traditionally focused, first and foremost, on linguistic and translational issues.

Chaume (2018: 43-44) reports that, after an initial period of necessary contributions on the distinctive traits of AVT compared to other forms of written translation (traits that were defined by Tittford in 1982 as “constraints”, quoted in Chaume [2018: 44]), scholars started to concentrate on the target text (TT) according to the principles of Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS). As Chaume explains, “researchers soon realized that this field constituted fertile ground for the application of DTS methodology with the objective of mapping translation norms (or routines, trends, for other authors) strategies (techniques for others), and even translation methods, mainly foreignization and domestication” (2018: 43-44). The linguistic analysis of the TT, in these terms, always takes into consideration the source text (ST), too, and this comparative method has traditionally been the focus of many AVT studies, which have explored issues on any linguistic level, especially regarding the English language, as it is the main language of telecinematic products imported into other cultures. Being through the analysis of English structures compared to those of the TTs or that on the influence of English on the subtitled and dubbed versions, AVT is undeniably a field of study that has enriched scholarly literature in English linguistics, with a proliferation of contributions related to phonology and prosody (mainly linked to investigations on the rendering of language varieties – see, for example, Dore 2016, 2020; Hayes 2021a, 2021b; Parini 2009, 2022; Ranzato 2015, 2019a, 2019b; Sandrelli – Mecocci 2019; Valleriani 2020, 2021), morpho-syntax and lexico-semantics (by contrasting stylistic issues, such as in Díaz-Pérez 2020; Guillot 2012; Pavesi 2013; Zanotti 2014) and, especially, pragmatic discourses (see, among many others, Bruti – Bonsignori 2015, 2016; Bruti – Vignozzi 2021; Guillot 2016a; Pavesi 2016). These studies, as is customary in the macro-area of DTS, are often conducted through the tools of various approaches,

⁴ As mentioned by Chaume (2014: 41), the first monograph entirely devoted to AVT was published in 1957 by Laks, followed by a journal special issue of *Babel* in 1960, partially dedicated to this field.

at times in combination, such as with Discourse Analysis, Conversation Analysis, and Corpus Linguistics.

The encounter between AVT and Corpus Linguistics, in particular, has been defined by Bruti and Zanotti as a possible intersection that offers “advantages of cross-fertilisation” (2018: 112), as testified by several scholarly studies, such as those collected in the special issue of *Perspectives* edited in 2013 by Baños, Bruti and Zanotti. The scholars add that “large projects such as the *Forlì corpus* (Heiss – Soffritti 2008) and the *Pavia Corpus of Film Dialogue* (Freddi – Pavesi 2009) have made it possible to shed light on the degree of resemblance between original audiovisual dialogue, dubbed telecinematic dialogue and natural conversation” (Bruti – Zanotti 2018: 114). The repository *Dialects in Audiovisuals* (Ranzato et al. 2017), although specifically centred on the functions of language varieties in films and TV series, is also an online resource for AVT-based projects, as it offers instances of dialogue translated from English into Italian dubbing. A large amount of text has thus been made available and, consequently, has been used for research purposes through corpus-based and corpus-driven methodologies both in subtitling and dubbing, but also in media accessibility; in particular, Corpus Linguistics has been combined with Cognitive Linguistics in the analysis of audio-descriptions (Salway 2007) and subtitles for the deaf and the hard-of-hearing (Romero Fresco 2015, see Bruti – Zanotti 2018: 116-117).

Following Chaume (2018), AVT as a consolidated discipline has recently seen three further turns: first of all, a cultural one, with ideological issues including censorship, gender and racial stereotypes, politics, and so on, coming to the forefront, thus expanding the discussion from the mere finding of patterns in descriptive research; a sociological turn, which can be defined as an interest in the role of the translator, but also of audiences, as well as in the process of selection and adaptation of audiovisual material; and third, a cognitive and empirical turn focused on the investigation of the translator’s and the audiences’ mental operations through innovative reception studies (Chaume 2018: 43-44). These three turns made it possible for the discipline to go beyond the identification of specific linguistic items, to try to explain the relevance of such items from either a cultural, sociological or cognitive point of view. The integration of these perspectives into AVT research was not followed by a neglect of linguistic approaches to the text; on the contrary, the different perspectives have combined, as testified by the proliferation of scholarly studies using linguistic and DTS methodologies to draw ideological conclusions. Most of the edited collections and journal special issues related to the field of AVT have indeed included at least one

section, if not the most part of the volumes, on the impact of linguistics on AVT research and practice (see, among others: Freddi– Pavesi 2009; Pavesi – Formentelli – Ghia 2014; Pavesi – Zanotti – Chaume 2021; Pérez-González 2019; Ranzato – Zanotti 2018, 2019).

The role of technology, as previously mentioned, can be considered as a transversal turn, whose developments have been fundamental both in analysing and understanding translation, as well as in being open to innovative possibilities of case-study analyses, since the increment of digital streaming platforms has pushed English-speaking countries to translate many more foreign titles into English and not only through subtitles but also through dubbing (mainly used for animation until recently), thus being open to the necessity of analysing English as a translated language. Technology is also playing a key role in the process of translating itself, thanks to the advent of Artificial Intelligence and the new opportunities of automated translation that it can offer; inevitably, this poses questions on the quality of translated texts, questions that are slowly starting to be addressed by researchers. Linguistic approaches to the analysis of TTs, anyway, are still predominant, and they take as case studies various types of audiovisual texts, from films to TV series, from videogames to documentaries and adverts. These texts, most often, are original, and even a brief survey proves that adapted texts (from books and theatre, and especially classics) are much less frequently selected for scholarly investigations.

By reaffirming the fundamental role of linguistic analysis in AVT research, regardless of the cultural, sociological, cognitive and technological outcomes of the individual papers, the present volume gathers contributions on different linguistic issues observed in the translation of English audiovisual content adapted from classic literary works. The application of linguistic approaches to the analysis of audiovisual (translated) material represents the “inception of AVT theory” (Chaume 2018: 44), and, despite the new developments and “turns” in the discipline as an academic field, it is still fundamental to pursue this path, inasmuch as “linguistic studies offer scholars, professionals and audiences the instrument to experience audiovisual texts with greater awareness” (Bruti – Zanotti 2018: 119, quoting Guillot 2016b)⁵. We believe that this claim is true even in cases where texts are adapted from literary sources, as they can potentially stimulate interesting

⁵ For another recent insight on the evolution of AVT and the centrality of linguistic analysis in the discipline, especially taking into consideration the branch area of media accessibility, see Di Giovanni (2024).

linguistic issues in the multi-layered process of adaptation, both from one language to another and from one medium to another.

This special issue of *Token* seeks to populate that region of AVT studies at the intersection with adaptation studies, as the contributions included in the volume are not only dedicated to the analyses of audiovisual products based on literary sources, but they seek to investigate the dynamic relationship with their respective hypotexts. The authors interpret the data gathered from qualitative, quantitative or mixed methodological approaches, and conclusions relating to different cultural and ideological perspectives are drawn on the basis of these interpretations. The case studies under investigation comprise feature films, TV series, and videogames in various AVT modalities.

More specifically, the article by Agata Hołobut and Monika Woźniak provides an analysis of the Polish translations (subtitles and voice-over) of two popular audiovisual adaptations of Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice*, the 1980 and the 1995 BBC TV serials. By focusing on the famous proposal scene, the scholars first look at how the screenwriters incorporated Austen's original dialogue into their dialogue, then they examine how canonical literary language is rendered in translation for contemporary viewers. The analysis, concentrating on semantic, stylistic and especially pragmatic issues, shows a lack of consistency in the TV authors' choices; an alternation between formal and informal forms of address, for example, suggests that translators attempted but failed to render fully the emotional load of single utterances, in part due to the lack of fixed conventions in Polish for signalling social distance in historical drama. The comparative textual-linguistic analysis is also combined with a visual analysis of the proposal scene, so as to offer a thorough multimodal perspective.

Linguistic politeness is also the focus of Filippo Saettoni's contribution, centred on the analysis of five different telecinematic versions of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*; in particular, the study investigates the translation for the Italian dubbings of English apologies and thanks used in the dialogue of the domestic world of the story. The analysis of these two types of politeness formulae draws on both quantitative (through the use of *SketchEngine*) and qualitative data. Different morphological forms of apologetic and thanking conversational routines are identified in the corpus, and five recurrent translation strategies emerge from the comparative analysis, with direct translation and reformulation as the most frequent ones. The instances of reformulation are particularly interesting, as the change of morphological forms from English to Italian often parallels a certain increase in the level of formality in the target text.

Further targeting the English-Italian pair, Giovanni Raffa examined the translation of on-screen verbal deductions in the TV series *Sherlock*, with a specific look at the first episode of the first season, entitled “A Study in Pink”, explicitly adapted from Arthur Conan Doyle’s novel *A Study in Scarlet*. Such on-screen linguistic items accompany the dialogue and add a ludic quality to the text, which inspired similar strategies in the videogame *Sherlock Holmes: Crimes and Punishments*. The impact of this visual feature obviously poses difficulties in translation, due to verboseness and overlapping with the dialogue, leading to hurdles in the subtitling phase. Omission and reduction are identified as the most common strategies to deal with the on-screen verbal elements, and discussions are provided in those cases where they are maintained, particularly on the lexical level.

Another type of omission is that identified in Olaia Andaluz-Pinedo’s study, which focuses on the film adaptation of the play *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller and its Spanish version. Conducted through the TRACE methodology, and framed within the area of Descriptive Translation Studies, the analysis shows that, coherently with the tendency in the Francoist period in Spain, more than half of the content that might have been deemed problematic was either omitted (entire fragments in more than half of cases) or substituted in the performance-oriented translation of the play, while most of these references were restored in the 20th-century film translation. The investigation concentrated on lexical items and expressions related to the religious, political and sexual semantic fields, but a short section is also dedicated to foul language. The scholar concludes that the exploration of the textual chains generated by plays from the censorship period, their contemporary filmic versions, and their translations offers great potential for more research from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives.

With his contribution, Patrick Zabalbeascoa expands on the discussion of translators’ strategies to deal with controversial topics by looking at adaptations and rewritings of Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Lolita*, to prove that ample textual evidence from this novel can serve to denounce child abuse and sexual exploitation, rather than favouring contrary readings of the novel and some of its adaptations, which do not fit in with current sensitivities. The linguistic and translation analysis focuses on humour, wordplays and double meanings, concluding that in both films surveyed, and in more than one target language, the self-same effects have been variously mis-rendered. The option of translating literally some expressions that bear a double meaning in English – though their equivalents in the target languages do not – shows a general lack of consistency in handling controversial references and, as the author argues, *Lolita* is one of those cases

where even this “neutral” attitude is to be considered as a commitment to a specific reading of the story, namely a traditional one that suggests a lack of a deep textual and literary analysis.

Implicit double meanings, among other categories, are also examined by Davide Passa, whose article is aimed at identifying those linguistic elements that index characters’ homosexuality. The author analyses the Italian and English dubbed versions of the French film *La Cage Aux Folles*, based on the 1973 play of the same title by Jean Poiret, by approaching AVT studies from a queer perspective. Several instances in the film are identified as relevant in terms of rendition in translating gayspeak and discussed through a comparative analysis. The linguistic features that raise problems in the transposition of the characters’ sexuality through language are thus grouped into five different categories, comprising gender inversion, explicitness, implicitness, diminutives and foreignisms. The author concludes that the Italian TT has proved to be more explicit and irreverent than the English TT in re-constructing the characters’ homosexuality, which is to be considered as a fact diverging from the traditional tendency among Italian professionals to omit the rendition of this fictional language variety in translation.

Always within the topic of language variation, Ilaria Parini investigates the use of regional accents in two film adaptations of Stephen King’s *Pet Sematary*, as well as the strategies used to transpose them in both the Italian translation of the novel and in the Italian dubbed versions of the two films. In detail, the analysis focuses on the “phonetically-rendered language” of one character, who is said to speak with a South-Eastern American accent; in the case of the Italian translation of the novel, the data collected and discussed by the scholar show a general tendency for the strategy of omission, eliminating those parts of the text where King explicitly referred to the character’s accent, although in some cases there was an attempt at maintaining them by mentioning the character’s peculiar accent or pronunciation, or even by trying to reproduce their peculiar features. As for the two cinematic adaptations, the dubbing professionals who worked on the two films opted for a total lack of characterisation from a phonological perspective, as part of a consolidated custom in AVT to avoid the adoption of varieties of the target language that are connoted from the geographical point of view so as not to provoke estrangement effects. A brief reception study demonstrated that only a small part of the Italian respondents had noticed the lack of an accent in dubbing, which confirms that this is not perceived as unusual by the audience of the TT, at least in non-comedy films.

Language varieties can be adopted as a tool to coin characters’ identities, and the same is true for linguistic multilingualism, which is the central issue

in the article written by Montse Corrius, Eva Espasa and Laura Santamaria. The three scholars examine this aspect in the miniseries *Unorthodox*, adapted from the autobiography by Deborah Feldman, and, after a comparative analysis of book and TV adaptation, they also provide an analysis of their Spanish translations. This analysis, conducted following a descriptive qualitative methodology, took into consideration the instances of L3 (mainly Yiddish, but there are also instances of German, Russian and Hebrew), how they are integrated with the L1 (English), and what their function is by applying the framework from the Trafilm and MUViTAFi projects. The L3 instances analysed in this study are mainly lexical items, and they are categorised in the following semantic fields: religion, sex, engagement and marriage, people and culture, food, and clothing. Multilingualism is generally kept in translation in Spanish (the L1 in the target texts), both in the book and in the TV series, but the typographical format of L3 words is not always maintained. The role of music is also examined by the authors, as it is considered a relevant audiovisual diegetic element.

Finally, Silvia Bruti and Gianmarco Vignozzi offer insight on the classic opposition in Translation Studies between domesticating and foreignising approaches by analysing the translations of three popular audiovisual adaptations of the Italian novel *Pinocchio*, written by Carlo Collodi (from English to Italian in the case of the Disney animation, from Italian to English in the feature films directed by Roberto Benigni and Matteo Garrone). The aim of the authors is specifically that of identifying culture-bound references in the text and, consequently, determining how much of this “Italianness” is retained in the dubbed versions. Again, within the realm of Descriptive Translation Studies, the method followed in this research is one defined as “coupled pairs analysis” by Toury (1995: 13). The dataset demonstrates that the Disney adaptation deprived the story of its cultural identity by reducing the references to Italy almost to zero, but also that those references are somehow ‘reclaimed’ in the Italian dubbed version. Furthermore, while both feature films are loaded with linguistic and visual references to Italian culture, the English dubbing of Benigni’s film opted for the domesticating choice of erasing language varieties and altering proper names, and yet the English version of Garrone’s product apparently preserves diatopic and diastratic varieties (thanks to the choice of employing Italian actors as dubbers) and also frequent borrowings from Italian oral language.

Collectively, the papers in this journal issue shed new light on the importance of the interconnection between intersemiotic and intra/

interlingual translation in AVT research. After all, both perspectives can be said to take their cue from “the power of the written word” which makes one hear and feel, but, above all, makes one see⁶. Conrad’s claim is often cited, in film adaptation studies, in connection with pioneering director D.W. Griffith’s statement that “the task I’m trying to achieve is above all to make you see” (quoted in Whelehan 1999: 4) as a ‘traditional’ way to create a link between literature and screen adaptations.

The analyses included in this collection seek to show how the process of transposition of texts from one medium to another can influence the translation of the adapted text into any language and AVT modality, from a linguistic, cultural and ideological point of view. This type of research is also relevant in terms of the audiences’ and readers’ reception of variously ‘reread’ and reinterpreted literary texts, to which audiovisual translators add their own perspective.

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⁶ The quotes and paraphrased references, in both text and title of this essay, are of course taken from Joseph Conrad’s Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* (1975: 11–14).

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