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A diachronic analysis of apologies and thanks in five *Little Women* adaptations and their Italian dubbings

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the representation and the Italian dubbing of the two politeness formulae *apologies* and *thanks* in five telecinematic adaptations of Alcott's coming-of-age novel, *Little Women* (i.e., in the 1933, 1949, 1994, and 2019 movies and the 2017 TV series). In particular, the research focuses on how each of these adaptations renders the conversational nature that characterizes the intimate and domestic world of *Little Women*, whose dialogues (both in the original novel and in later adaptations) play a crucial role in the development of the plot as well as in the advancement of the relationships between the main characters. The study consists of a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the formulaic sequences used in the dialogues, followed by a thorough study of the translation strategies used to dub specific expressions of gratitude and regret.

Keywords: dubbing, formulaic sequences, thanks, apologies, translation strategies, *Little Women*.

1. Introduction

The coming-of-age novel *Little Women* was first published in 1868 by American novelist Louisa May Alcott. The story, which is mainly based on actual events in the author's life (Alcott – Cheney 2017), revolves around the lives of four sisters (i.e., Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March) at the time of the American Civil War (1861-1865). During these years of hardships

and deprivation, the four little women grow up and get to know life in their own personal ways by experiencing poverty, loss, friendship, and eventually love.

Despite having been published over 150 years ago, the novel still manages to excite the souls of many different readers, regardless of their age, gender, or social class, for two main reasons. First, Alcott described her protagonists as authentic people with actual strengths and weaknesses (or “burdens” as they are typically referred to in the novel); otherwise stated, the four sisters are “real girls and not some didactic writer’s notion of what girls should be like” (Strickland 2003: 71). In this sense, Meg is a diligent and loving girl who gets easily tempted by nice clothes and worldliness; Beth is shy and sensitive, but also too scared to fly the nest and live her own life; Amy is an aspiring young artist whose ambition makes her too self-centered; and Jo, the main character (and the fictional double of Alcott herself) is an independent and free-spirited girl whose bad temper often gets her into trouble. Thanks to such colorful and relatable descriptions, readers can empathize with and grow fond of the main characters as the story unfolds.

The second reason is connected with the number of products the novel has been adapted into. In this sense, amateur theatre productions, Broadway musicals, TV adaptations, international movies, ballet versions, and graphic novels (Rioux 2018) have kept the original story alive over the years, thus making it a worldwide cultural phenomenon. Each of these adaptations was able to reinvent, in its own way, the story for a new generation of readers and viewers alike. By transforming it in more or less explicit ways and by emphasizing certain aspects over others, these adaptations have sustained “Alcott’s story as a living text that grows and changes with time” (Rioux 2018: 4).

As for the reason why the imaginary world of *Little Women* was chosen for this analysis, it was demonstrated that both the original novel and its vast array of adaptations are characterized by a distinctively conversational nature (Bruti – Vignozzi 2021). In this regard, the dialogues – which are essential for portraying the main protagonists and developing the plot – will serve as a field of research for investigating two conversational routines (i.e., thanks and apologies) through tools of corpus linguistics.

A brief theoretical background on the politeness formulae under examination and on audiovisual translation is provided in Sections 2 and 3, respectively. This is followed by a presentation of the data and the methodology used (Section 4), the analysis (Section 5), and the conclusions (Section 6).

2. Two politeness formulae

When engaging in conversations, people normally employ a set of prefabricated expressions, also known as *formulaic sequences* (Wray 2000). Such sequences are of the utmost importance in everyday conversations due to their immediate availability; in this regard, given that conversations occur in real time and utterances cannot be planned far in advance, speakers can easily retrieve them from their memory and use them not to impair the conversational flow.

Based on their function, formulaic sequences can be divided into two categories (Thornbury – Slade 2006: 66), namely “lexical phrases” and “conversational routines”¹. More specifically, the former do not perform any specific pragmatic function (except for facilitating the fluency of the conversation) and include standard phrases with basic meaning, such as *out and about* or *every now and then*.

On the contrary, the latter “perform a socio-interactional function” (Thornbury – Slade 2006: 66) and include fillers, discourse markers, expletives, and conventionalized social formulae (e.g., thanks and apologies). These phrases, which are also labeled as *polite responses* (Aijmer 2014: 2) or *politeness formulae*, due to their politeness function (Ghezzi 2015), are linguistic objects under investigation here.

2.1 Thanks

As explained by Searle (1969), thanking formulae are ritualized expressions of gratitude, or appreciation, that speakers employ when feeling grateful for a past act (performed by the hearer) which has benefited them. Such conventionalized social formulae are deeply rooted in conversation (Ghezzi 2015) and if, by any chance, speakers fail to thank their hearer at the right moment, they are likely to be considered rude and ungrateful. Such hostility, which may arise from failed communication, is connected to the important interpersonal function that all conventionalized social formulae have. In this regard, “when gratitude is successfully expressed, it enhances the feelings of warmth and solidarity; however, if gratitude is not expressed adequately, it causes negative social consequences and may endanger the relationships among interlocutors” (Cheng 2010: 259).

For the purposes of this study, thanking formulae will be divided into three categories based on their morphosyntactic forms. Under this perspective,

¹ The term *conversational routine* was first coined by Florian Coulmas (1981).

Ghezzi (2015) explained that both the English language and some Romance languages (i.e., French, Romanian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian) share the same forms through which thanks are codified. Thanking formulae can thus be (i) performative verbs (when the act itself is expressed through a semantically relevant performative, as in English *I thank you* and Italian *ti/vi ringrazio*); (ii) performative locutions (when the act is codified by a semantically generic performative verb, whose argument is a noun phrase bearing the main semantic value of the act itself, as in En. *I give my thanks* and It. *rendo grazie*); (iii) reduced forms (when the act is codified by words or expressions, as in En. *thanks* and It. *grazie*, which derive from corresponding performative locutions; such reduced forms may also be modulated by the use of intensifiers, as in En. *many thanks* and in It. *molte grazie*). In this research, the last category will also include expressions such as *thank you* (and all its possible variations obtained using intensification), for they can be regarded as the routinizations of the verb (*I thank you* – similarly to what happens to *thanks*, which derives from the corresponding performative locution (*I give (you) my*) *thanks*).

2.2 Apologies

Apologies (i.e., “expressions that aim at re-establishing social harmony after a real or virtual offense has been performed”, Márquez Reiter 2000: 46) are the second object of analysis.

In the same way as thanks, apologies also serve a significant interpersonal function: people are likely to apologize when they consider themselves responsible for an offense and use a specific repertoire of expressions to maintain harmony between them and their interlocutors.²

For the purpose of this research, following Ghezzi’s (2015) example, apologies are divided into three categories. In this regard, apologetic formulae can be (i) performative verbs (as in En. *I apologize* and in It. *mi scuso*), (ii) performative locutions (as in En. *I entreat your pardon* and in It. *chiedo perdono*), and (iii) reduced forms (as in En. *sorry* and in It. *scusa*).³ Moreover, since the repertoire for apologizing is very wide in Italian, Ghezzi and Molinelli’s work (2019) was used to help clarify the morphosyntactic forms of the reflexive verb *scusarsi* and the transitive verb *scusare*. In this

² Needless to say, the coverage of pragmatic and social functions that speakers may perform when using apologies is much wider than that provided here. For a complete discussion, refer to Aijmer (2014).

³ Verbs such as *apologize*, *forgive*, *excuse*, and *be sorry* were labelled as performative following Cohen and Olshtain’s work (1985: 182) on comparing apologies across languages.

sense, the former verb and its forms (e.g., *mi scuso*, *scusami*, *scusatemi*) are included in the category of performative verbs, as well as the Italian expression of apology *mi dispiace*, i.e., the equivalent of the English *I'm sorry* (Colella 2012); as for the verb *scusare* and all its crystallized forms (e.g., *scusa*, *scusate*, *scusi*), they are to be considered, in this research, as reduced forms of the corresponding performative verb *scusarsi* due to their “high degree of conventionalization” (Ghezzi – Molinelli 2019: 248) in the Italian language.

Table 1 below provides a summary of the morphosyntactic forms presented above, while the following Section considers the different constraints that must be kept in mind when analyzing audiovisual texts that are dubbed into another language.

Table 1. The morphosyntactic forms of thanks and apologies in English and Italian

Conventionalized social formula	Morphosyntactic form	English	Italian
Thanks	Performative verbs	<i>I thank you</i>	<i>Ti/vi ringrazio</i>
	Performative locutions	<i>I give my thanks</i>	<i>Dico grazie</i>
	Reduced forms	<i>Thanks / thank you</i>	<i>Grazie</i>
Apologies	Performative verbs	<i>I apologize / I'm sorry</i>	<i>Mi scuso / scusami / scusatemi / mi dispiace</i>
	Performative locutions	<i>I entreat / beg your pardon</i>	<i>Chiedo scusa / perdono</i>
	Reduced forms	<i>Sorry</i>	<i>Scusa / scusate / scusi</i>

3. About fictional dialogues and audiovisual translation

For many years, audiovisual texts have been deemed unworthy of attention by scholars due to their artificiality and lack of spontaneity (Bednarek 2018). However, in light of the ever-increasing popularity of telecinematic products over the past 20 years, scholars have largely, and successfully, treated audiovisual texts as a reliable source for their linguistic research. This was also made possible by the fact that fictional dialogues are written to be perceived as natural and credible, and to be performed by artists as if they had not been written at all (Gregory – Carroll 1978). As a consequence, despite their evident artificiality, they usually offer scholars many research insights regarding those phenomena typically associated with spontaneous

conversation (e.g., Bonsignori et al. 2011; Forchini 2013; Zanotti 2014; Bruti – Vignozzi 2021), and that scriptwriters try to reproduce as faithfully as possible, at least when they aim to portray verisimilar exchanges among characters.

However, when dealing with fictional dialogues in audiovisual products, one cannot fail to observe the typical constraints of the telecinematic medium, namely the specific length requirements that all audiovisual products must conform to as well as the need both to relate captivating stories and to prevent the public from losing track of the plot (Forchini 2012). Such constraints become even more challenging when audiovisual texts must be translated into another language. To be successful and appreciated by the public, dubbed texts must simulate the same sense of naturalness in the target language that was previously conveyed in the source text (Motta 2015).

Among the factors that “put a limit on translators’ resourcefulness to achieve credible dialogues in their target language” (Baños 2014: 83), one should reference the three types of synchronization which were first categorized by Chaume (2004). In his comprehensive taxonomy, the author mentioned: (i) lip synchrony (i.e., the target text needs to be adapted to the articulatory movements of the characters); (ii) kinetic synchrony (i.e., the translation must be synchronized with the body movements of the actors); (iii) isochrony (i.e., the utterances of on-screen characters must be the same length as those of the actors). These three types of synchronization are important to consider when dealing with audiovisual translations, for “the translator’s need to respect such constraints can be responsible for the translation solution ultimately adopted” (Napoli 2020: 33).

4. Data and methodology

4.1 Aim and research questions

This research aims to investigate the ways in which thanks and apologies are used in the English and Italian dialogues of five telecinematic adaptations of *Little Women*. As already explained in Section 1, this specific literary work was chosen due to the conversational nature of both the original novel and all its following adaptations. Since dialogues perform a significant role in the development of the plot and of the dynamics between characters, much attention will be paid to the selected politeness formulae, in the same way as it happens in everyday life, where thanks and apologies represent formulaic sequences essential for effective communication.

With this in mind, the analysis was carried out by using both quantitative and qualitative methods, trying to pay close attention to the translation strategies employed in the Italian dubbed dialogues to render the two conventionalized social formulae. The questions sought to be answered here are:

- How do thanks and apologies vary quantitatively in the English and Italian dialogues of the five adaptations?
- How do thanking and apologetic formulae vary qualitatively based on their morphosyntactic forms?
- What are the most common strategies used to translate thanks and apologies into Italian?

4.2 Corpus and methodology

The *Little Women* corpus used for this research consists of five telecinematic adaptations of the novel, namely the movies released in 1933, 1949, 1994, and 2019 and the 2017 TV series (made up of 3 episodes). Consequently, a total of 14 scripts were collected: 7 transcripts for the English dialogues (4 for the movies and 1 for each episode of the serial) and another 7 for the Italian dubbed dialogues (with the same division as their English counterparts). More specifically, the English scripts were first downloaded from different websites and then revised one by one while scrutinizing each adaptation to see if any occurrence was missing. As for the Italian transcripts, they were personally produced by Silvia Bruti and Gianmarco Vignozzi (2021), whose analysis of the spoken discourse of *Little Women* has in fact been a source of great inspiration for this research. Table 2 below shows the five adaptations included in the corpus, with their respective word counts and running times.

Table 2. The *Little Women* corpus

Sub-corpus	English sub-corpus (word counts)	Italian sub-corpus (word counts)	Running time (minutes)
1933 movie	11,132	10,966	115
1949 movie	11,640	9,915	121
1994 movie	9,538	9,291	119
2017 TV series	15,730	14,978	174
Episode 1	5,233	5,127	58
Episode 2	5,513	5,342	57
Episode 3	4,984	4,509	59
2019 movie	12,232	11,093	135
TOTAL	60,272	56,243	664

The 14 transcripts were uploaded to the *Sketch Engine* software in “.xls” format, where the parallel corpus of *Little Women* was assembled. Then, the data were investigated by using frequency lists and concordance tools, with the aim of determining how many times, and in which contexts, the linguistic features under study appeared. Moreover, while proofreading the scripts, a list of all expressions of thanks and apologies had also been compiled to ensure that the software query was complete, and that no linguistic expression was left out.

5. Analysis

5.1 Quantitative analysis

As for the quantitative analysis, Table 3 below shows the frequency of thanks and apologies in each adaptation, in both the English and Italian dialogues.

Table 3. Frequency of thanks and apologies in the *Little Women* corpus

	THANKS				APOLOGIES			
	English		Italian		English		Italian	
	Raw freq.	Nor- malized freq.	Raw freq.	Nor- malized freq.	Raw freq.	Nor- malized freq.	Raw freq.	Nor- malized freq.
1933	47	42.2	53	48.3	26	23.3	27	24.6
1949	59	50.7	59	59.5	24	20.6	25	25.2
1994	31	32.5	33	35.5	22	23	19	20.4
2017	27	17.1	35	23.3	37	23.5	36	24.
2019	53	43.3	59	53.2	39	31.8	41	36.9
TOTAL	217	216	239	254	148	147	148	157

When comparing the normalized frequencies⁴ of the English dialogues to their Italian counterparts, one notices that there is little difference in how

⁴ Normalized frequencies were calculated as follows: the raw frequencies of the English and Italian conventionalized social formulae were divided by the number of word counts of each sub-corpus (as shown in Table 2); this result was then multiplied by 10,000 words to normalize the differences in size of the different sub-corpora. Instead, the normalized total frequencies were calculated by multiplying the result of the division by 60,000 words.

many conventionalized social formulae were used: both in the thanks and apologies sections, the Italian politeness formulae only slightly outnumber the English ones.

However, if looking at Table 3 diachronically, a few interesting insights come from the apologies section in English. Here, an increase can be noticed in terms of apologetic formulae from older to more contemporary adaptations, with the 2017 TV series and the 2019 movie having the highest number of occurrences (in terms of both raw and normalized frequency). A possible explanation may be connected to the plot of these latest adaptations, where friction between the four sisters is more frequent (in line with the original novel). Among such conflicts, one may remember Jo accidentally burning Meg's hair with the curling iron, Amy burning Jo's manuscripts (after her elder sisters had refused to take her to the theatre), and the subsequent violent fight between Amy and Jo. Due to the portrayal of such conflict scenes on screen, characters tend to apologize to each other more often and, sometimes, even repeatedly within a few seconds; obviously, this leads to an increase of apologetic formulae in both the original and dubbed dialogues.

On the contrary, the twentieth-century adaptations had not included such scenes, with a view to emphasizing the main theme of all the adaptations in question, that is the unconditional love between the four sisters. As a result, where no offense is portrayed on the screen, the number of apologies decreases. This decision may well have been connected to the period when each product was filmed, for the scriptwriters of older adaptations often portrayed a more united family with happy and healthy relationships. As explained by Bruti and Vignozzi (2021: 41), "the 1933 film, for instance, is a mirror of its time, the Great Depression, with its portrayal of simplicity, economy, and the resilience of the spirit"; conversely, in the 1949 adaptation "frictions among sisters and reference to death are kept to a minimum to spare the spirit of the audience in a wartime period" (Bruti – Vignozzi 2021: 41).

On the other hand, recent adaptations are characterized by more realistic relationships, where characters not only love each other but also quarrel over various matters and try to deal with the difficulties in their relationships despite their different personalities. This is clearly illustrated through Amy and Jo's relationship in the 2019 motion picture (as well as in the 2017 TV series), where the two sisters often find themselves at odds due to their different characters. However, by the end of the film, and after several disagreements, the two finally manage to mend their stormy relationship.

As for the diachronic variation of English thanking formulae, the results are in keeping with Bruti and Vignozzi’s (2021) analysis, where the 1933 and 1949 movies are the ones with the highest number of social niceties, together with the 2019 movie, whose highest number of words in the English script may have influenced the high number of thanking expressions used.

5.2 Qualitative analysis

The qualitative analysis presented here is based on the categorization provided in Sections 2.1 and 2.2, where thanks and apologies were divided on the basis of their morphosyntactic forms. Let us start by looking at thanking formulae.

Table 4. Thanks and their morphosyntactic forms in the *Little Women* corpus

	1933		1949		1994		2017		2019		Total	
	ENG	ITA	ENG	ITA	ENG	ITA	ENG	ITA	ENG	ITA	ENG	ITA
Performative verbs	–	3	–	–	–	1	1	4	–	5	1	13
Performative locutions	5	5	4	4	–	–	1	1	2	2	12	12
Reduced forms	37	40	51	52	22	23	20	25	42	43	172	183
Other	5	5	4	3	9	9	5	5	9	9	32	31
											217	239

As shown above, in both the English and Italian dialogues, reduced forms are the category with the highest number of occurrences. This is likely due to two factors. First, this category includes the thanking expressions (i.e., the English *thank you* and the Italian *grazie*) that are most widely used in everyday conversations (and represent the main source of inspiration when writing a script) of both languages (Demir – Takkaç 2016).

Second, these two expressions, with or without modulation by intensifiers, can be employed in both formal and informal contexts, thus leading to greater use of such formulae in a wider number of situations – if compared to the other two categories that can only be used in more formal contexts. Examples (1) and (2) show how *thank you* and *grazie* may appear in both formal and informal exchanges. In this sense, in (1) a stranger thanks

Mrs. March for an overcoat she had given him, in the same way in which Amy rejects her mother's offer to go visit the Hummels in (2).

(1) **English version**

Marmee: You've done a great deal for your country, sir.

Man: Oh, not a might more than I ought to, Ma'am. I'd go myself if I was any use. **Thank you** for the overcoat.

Dubbing

Marmi: Avete dato molto alla nostra patria, signore.

Uomo: Oh, niente di più di quel che le dovevo, signora. Ci andrei anch'io se servissi a qualcosa. **Grazie** per il cappotto.

(LW 1933)

(2) **English version**

Marmee: Keep your cloak and bonnet on. You can come with me to the Hummels. Amy, would you like to come, too?

Amy: No, **thank you**, Marmee. I'll stay home and tidy my art box.

Dubbing

Marmi: Tieni pure addosso mantella e copricapo. Andiamo a fare visita agli Hummel. Amy, tu che fai? Vieni con noi?

Amy: No, **grazie**, Marmi. Rimarrò a casa a riordinare i miei pennelli.

(LW 2017 E1)

Another interesting result, one reflected in Table 4 above, is the fact that in the English sub-corpus, only 1 instance of the performative verb was found (in the 2017 TV series), unlike the Italian sub-corpus where 13 occurrences were counted. This may be attributed to the choice of the Italian translators to include some outdated thanking expressions, which would probably sound old-fashioned to more contemporary listeners, stimulating in them a feeling of past times. The fact that the use of performative verbs to express one's gratitude belongs to past habits is attested by Ghezzi (2015); here, while analyzing the use of thanking formulae in Italian along a diachronic line, she found that the performative verb *ringraziare* (with its inflected forms) was mostly employed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, only to decrease in the twentieth century, in favor of the increasingly popular *grazie*.

This atmosphere of older times is also conveyed through the use of more formal expressions in the form of performative locutions, which are equally used in the English and Italian dialogues. This is exemplified in (3),

where the grumpy old Mr. Laurence formally expresses his gratitude by saying:

(3) **English version**

Mr. Laurence: Oh, no, no, young man, you are staying indoor today. I will see Miss March home. **I want to pay my respects** to your mother ... I'm afraid I've neglected my neighborly duties too long.

Dubbing

Mr. Laurence: No, no, non devi uscire oggi giovanotto. Accompagno io la signorina. **Voglio ossequiare** vostra madre ... temo di aver trascurato i miei doveri di vicino.

(LW 1949)

As regards apologies, the data offer a very different picture. As shown in Table 5 below, the morphosyntactic form with the highest number of occurrences is the one including performative verbs in both the English and the Italian sub-corpora, with 98 and 82 hits, respectively. However, this is of little surprise, considering that the category includes “the most common apology sub-formula in English” (Demir – Takkaç 2016: 76), namely the bare *I'm sorry*, with its 45 occurrences, followed by all its intensified variants (e.g., *I'm so sorry*, *I'm truly, truly sorry*). The same applies to the Italian dialogues, where the most used apologetic formula is *mi dispiace* (i.e., the Italian translation for *I'm sorry*), with 36 occurrences, also followed by some of its intensified variants (e.g., *mi dispiace tanto/molto*).

One possible explanation for the high number of apologetic performative verbs, as opposed to thanking expressions, may be the fact that such verbs (unlike the other categories) emphasize the acknowledgment of responsibility of the offender when apologizing to the offended party. In other words, to be perceived as such, apologies need to display a certain degree of regret, and performative verbs are the forms that best emphasize the taking of responsibility by the speaker; in this sense, performative verbs tend to focus “on the speaker with a degree of agency and personal commitment” (Ghezzi – Molinelli 2019: 252) and not on the hearer.

On the contrary, when considering thanking expressions, reduced forms are more frequent, for they do not imply a direct commitment by the speaker. Instead, they emphasize the fact that “one has benefited from an action by another person” (Aijmer 2014: 52) and, as a consequence, they are meant as beneficial acts for the interlocutors, whose service or favor must be explicitly (and adequately) appreciated.

Table 5. Apologies and their morphosyntactic forms in the *Little Women* corpus

	1933		1949		1994		2017		2019		Total	
	ENG	ITA	ENG	ITA	ENG	ITA	ENG	ITA	ENG	ITA	ENG	ITA
Performative verbs	13	14	13	10	18	12	25	19	29	27	98	82
Performative locutions	7	4	2	4	–	2	3	6	1	2	13	18
Reduced forms	2	2	2	3	2	4	7	7	3	4	16	20
Other	4	7	7	8	2	1	2	4	6	8	21	28
											148	148

Finally, it is again worth noting that performative locutions are also used with apologetic expressions to convey a certain degree of formality in the dialogues. An example is the use of the performative locution *I beg your pardon* (in It. *io vi chiedo scusa*); again, this formula is used mostly in the 1933 and 1949 films – where exchanges between characters are more deferential and formal – as opposed to more contemporary dialogues where performative verbs or standard reduced forms have been used more.

5.3 Translation strategies

The corpus examined in this research made it possible to reveal five recurrent strategies when translating thanking and apologetic expressions from English into Italian. Part of the scheme of translation strategies shown below follows Zanotti's (2014) categorization, which highlights those strategies used to translate general extenders; the remainder was derived independently as a result of the present analysis. The strategies found are *direct translation*, *addition*, *omission*, *reformulation*, and *modulation*; the last one can be either *intensifying* or *weakening*.

To clarify the categorization adopted in this research, some examples for each translation strategy are proposed.

When the expression of gratitude, or regret, is translated by using an equivalent Italian expression, it means that the translators opted for a direct translation and, as a consequence, the morphosyntactic form of the conversational routine remained the same in both languages. In (4) below, Jo thanks Laurie, for the breakfast he had gifted to the girls on Christmas day, using a performative verb in both dialogues.

(4) **English version**

Jo: How do you do? **I wanted to thank you.** We did have such a good time over your nice Christmas present. What's the matter? Are you sick?

Dubbing

Jo: Come state? **Volevo ringraziarvi.** Ci siamo molto divertite con il vostro magnifico regalo di Natale. Ma che avete? State male?

(LW 1933)

Then, in some cases, translators decided to add a conversational routine in the Italian dialogue, when no apologetic or thanking expressions were present in the original script. This may happen when several characters are together in a choral scene, where dialogues may not be clear and translators can then freely choose what to translate, without compromising the general meaning of the scene. In (5), for example, the four sisters rejoice at learning that Laurie has become the newest member of their literary club. It is amidst the applause and cackles that the boy takes pleasure in their enthusiasm; but, while in the English version his words are more neutral, in the Italian version his gratitude is more explicit.

(5) **English version**

Laurie: Yes, well. Of course. Yes! Yes!

Dubbing

Laurie: **Grazie, grazie!** Non dovete ... **grazie! Grazie! Grazie!**

(LW 2019)

Sometimes, conversational routines can also be added when characters are not talking in the original dialogue, as in (6), where Jo is running happily on her way to Mrs. Kirke's boarding house after she has sold one of her first short stories. In this scene, she is in the streets dodging people and, while she does not say anything in the English version, she apologizes in the Italian one. This was possible because of the way the scene was shot: there are no close-ups of Jo's face, so the audience cannot see whether she is talking or not. In other words, in this specific scene, translators were not constrained by lip synchrony (Chaume 2004). This particular dubbing choice may have been dictated by the desire of the translators to make the scene sound more natural, for people normally apologize when they bump into someone else on the street.

(6) **English version**

Jo: [-]

DubbingJo: **Scusate! Scusate.**

(LW 2019)

Moreover, it may also happen that conversational routines are omitted in the target language dialogues, as in (7) and (8). While in (7) the two conversational routines are condensed into a single apology, in (8) the thanking expression (here used as a strategy of mock politeness) is rendered differently in Italian.

(7) **English version**Jo: **I'm sorry! I'm sorry!** You shouldn't have had me do it. I spoil everything.**Dubbing**Jo: **Mi dispiace!** Non avresti dovuto farlo fare a me. Rovino sempre tutto.

(LW 1994)

(8) **English version**

Laurie: I thought you'd be pleased.

Jo: At the idea of anybody coming to take Meg away? No, **thank you.****Dubbing**

Laurie: Non sei contenta?

Jo: All'idea che qualcuno potrebbe portarci via Meg? No, **affatto.**

(LW 2019)

The fourth translation strategy (i.e., *reformulation*) consists in paraphrasing the conversational routine either by using a similar expression or by modifying its morphosyntactic form. In (9), for example, Meg and Mr. Brooke are having a friendly conversation while at a picnic, and the English reduced form is translated with an Italian performative verb.

On the contrary, in (10), Mr. Vaughn is helping to decorate the living room in celebration of Beth's recovery, when he apologizes for damaging a shabby chair; here, he uses a performative verb, which is changed into an Italian performative locution. Such dubbing choices tend to increase the level of formality of the Italian dialogues, when compared to their English counterparts, thus increasing the distance between the interlocutors.

(9) **English version**

Mr. Brooke: **Thank you.** Now, Miss Meg, let's race back to those hampers.

Dubbing

Mr. Brooke: **Vi ringrazio.** Signorina Meg, un sontuoso picnic ci attende.

(LW 2017 E1)

(10) **English version**

Mr. Vaughn: Oh, **I'm sorry.**

Dubbing

Mr. Vaughn: Oh, **mi dispiace.**

(LW 1994)

Finally, conversational routines can also be modulated for intensity, by adding or omitting one or more intensifiers in the Italian dialogues, as happens in the following examples. While an intensifying modulator is used in (11), a weakening one is employed in (12).

(11) **English version**

Marmee: **I thank you,** John, for the loyalty you've shown us and the service you are about to give to our country.

Dubbing

Marmi: Oh, **ti ringrazio di cuore,** John, per la lealtà che ci hai dimostrato e per il servizio che sei in procinto di rendere al nostro paese.

(2017 E2)

(12) **English version**

Marmee: **Thank you so much** for being here.

Dubbing

Marmi: Oh, **grazie** di essere venuto, Laurie.

(LW 2019)

5.3.1 Translation strategies and thanking expressions

As shown in Table 6 below, the strategy which is used most by translators when dealing with thanking expressions is direct translation, with 163 occurrences (67.6%). This means that these translators tended to respect the morphosyntactic forms of the expressions of the original dialogues and used the same forms in the Italian ones. In this way, both the meaning and the level of deference of the

English conversational routines are conveyed in the same way in the Italian dialogues; by doing so, both the social and affective distance (Molinelli 2015) between the interlocutors remain unchanged in the two languages.

Then, tied with 32 occurrences (13.2%), one finds the reformulation and addition strategies. What is worth underlining about the reformulation strategy is that, in most cases, the translators changed the English reduced form *thank you* into the Italian performative verb *ti/vi ringrazio* (whose back translation would be the performative verb *I thank you*). As already mentioned in Section 5.3, this particular dubbing choice could be explained by the translators' wish to increase the level of formality of the exchange; in this sense, the Italian audience is likely to perceive the performative verb as a more formal and deferential form (Demir – Takkaç 2016) and, of course, as more outdated, as opposed to the more neutral and direct *grazie*.

As far as addition/omission strategies are concerned, one can notice that translators tend to add thanking expressions in the Italian dialogues, rather than eliminate them. This happens especially in crowded scenes, where many characters are present all at once and the original words of the English dialogues cannot be understood well due to all the chattering in the room.

Ultimately, modulations and omissions account respectively for only 4.5% and 1.2% of all translation strategies, thus being those with the lowest number of occurrences.

Table 6. Translation strategies for thanks

	Direct Translation	Reformulation	Modulation		Addition	Omission
			IM	WM		
1933	39	7	1	–	11	1
1949	52	3	2	–	1	1
1994	25	4	1	–	4	–
2017	18	9	3	1	8	–
2019	39	9	1	2	8	1
TOTAL (241)	163 (67.6%)	32 (13.2%)	8 (3.3%)	3 (1.2%)	32 (13.2%)	3 (1.2%)

5.3.2 Translation strategies and apologetic expressions

Table 7 below shows the frequency of the five strategies when dubbing apologies. In terms of the strategies most used in the corpus, the results are similar to those in Section 5.3.1, for direct translation and reformulation are the two with the highest rate of use (i.e., 53.1% and 29.7%). This means that,

when translating conversational routines (whether they were expressions of gratitude or regret), the translators preferred to use an equivalent Italian expression, without changing morphosyntactic forms, so that even the pragmatic meaning of the conversational routine would be the same.

Table 7. Translation strategies for apologies

	Direct Translation	Reformula- tion	Modulation		Addition	Omission
			IM	WM		
1933	17	9	1	1	2	2
1949	11	9	–	2	2	2
1994	10	9	–	–	–	3
2017	21	11	2	1	–	1
2019	25	9	1	4	3	–
TOTAL (158)	84 (53.1%)	47 (29.7%)	4 (2.5%)	8 (5%)	7 (4.4%)	8 (5%)

As regards reformulations, it is readily noticed that the translators either paraphrased the conversational routine or changed its morphosyntactic form, usually from a performative verb into a reduced form (e.g., the En. *I’m sorry* is typically translated into the It. *scusate/scusa*), as in (13) and (14). Both examples are characterized by the En. *I’m sorry*, but what differs is its Italian translation; in fact, while in (13) Jo employs a deferent expression (using the polite V form) when addressing Laurie, in (14) she makes use of the more neutral *scusa* (through the intimate and informal T form).⁵ This particular dubbing choice is due to differences in terms of affective distance (i.e., that based on frequency of contacts) between the two interlocutors in the exchanges. In this sense, in (13) the affective distance between Jo and Laurie is great since the two of them are still strangers to each other at this point of

⁵ When addressing their interlocutors, speakers may resort to second person lexical pronouns, whose choice depends on the language used; in this sense, while English speakers can only use the second person pronoun “you” (Dufon 2010), German, French, Italian, and Russian speakers can either resort to the deferential V form or the informal and unmarked T form. More specifically, the Italian system of pronouns (from the fifteenth century on) can be schematized as a “three-term situation where two deferential forms are attested, as *Voi* coexists with the third person feminine singular pronoun *Lei*” (Molinelli 2015: 284). However, this is not the case in contemporary Italian, where the deferential *Voi* has been progressively abandoned in favor of *Lei* – except for some Southern regional varieties of the language where the V form may still be used (Molinelli 2015).

the film. On the contrary, in (14) the affective distance between Jo and Meg is small since they are sisters; as a consequence, the intimacy characterizing their relationship is reflected by the use of the unmarked Italian formula.

(13) **English version**

Jo: **I'm sorry.** Meg makes me take the gentleman's part at home. It's a shame you don't know the lady's part! Why are you looking at the back of my dress?

Dubbing

Jo: **Scusate**, ma Meg mi fa sempre fare la parte dell'uomo a casa. Peccato che non conosciate la parte della donna. State guardando il didietro del mio vestito, imbroglione?

(LW 1994)

(14) **English version**

Jo: **I'm sorry!** You shouldn't have asked me to do it! I ruin everything.

Dubbing

Jo: **Scusa**, ma ... non dovevi chiederlo a me!

(LW 2019)

Ultimately, no particular trends emerge from the last three translation strategies shown in Table 7 above, primarily because their occurrences and rates of use are very low, especially when compared to direct translations or reformulations. The only aspect that may be seen to emerge is that, when dealing with apologies, translators tended to use more weakening modulations in thanking expressions (which were usually intensified rather than being downgraded). However, that may be a coincidence; the very low number of occurrences within the corpus prevents any real generalization.

6. Conclusions

Besides showing that the four movies and the TV series compose a good and reliable corpus for linguistic analysis due to the conversational nature characterizing the original plot, this analysis has also revealed several interesting patterns.

As for the first research question, it emerged that there are no real differences if looking at thanks and apologies synchronically; however, some

differences appear if we consider them from a diachronic perspective. In this sense, thanking expressions are more frequent in older adaptations and in the 2019 movie; this is likely due to the period when the first motion pictures were produced, when polite expressions and social niceties were typical of everyday social interactions. As for apologies, it was found that they tend to increase from older to more contemporary adaptations, perhaps because quarrels and disputes between characters (with all their related expressions of regret) were only inserted in later productions, where directors wanted to portray more relatable (and thus less artificial) relationships.

As regards the second research question, the data were divided into three morphosyntactic forms and, interestingly, different structures emerged. In this sense, thanks were mostly expressed in reduced forms, while apologies were mainly conveyed via performative verbs. In light of this, it may be surmised that speakers tend to use reduced forms when expressing their gratitude, not to focus on themselves but to show appreciation for the listener, who is the one offering a hypothetical service. On the contrary, apologies, which must show to the interlocutor the speaker's true feeling of repentance, are relayed through performative verbs, which tend to emphasize the level of engagement of the offender and thus their acknowledgment of responsibility.

Furthermore, it must be underlined that the quantitative and qualitative results of the conversational routines mentioned mirror the desire of scriptwriters, and translators alike, first to reflect the norms and conventions of a bygone society and, second, to mirror the way ordinary people spoke in the real-life exchanges of the 1860s, as demonstrated by Ghezzi (2015), Demir and Takkaç (2016), and Ghezzi and Molinelli (2019).

Regarding the final question, five recurrent translation strategies were observed. More specifically, the data revealed that the translators mainly used direct translations and reformulations when rendering both thanking and apologizing expressions in the Italian dialogues. This confirms the importance of the studied formulae in spoken exchanges, for they have "a vital role in discourses such as restoring equilibrium among interlocutors and negotiating the offender or indebted" (Demir – Takkaç 2016: 75). Due to the crucial role of such formulae in conversations, the Italian translators preferred to find equivalent expressions or paraphrase them, rather than to omit them completely from the final dialogues. It seems, and this is especially true of thanking expressions, that scriptwriters tended to insert them into character lines, especially in choral scenes where the original dialogue was not entirely understandable.

One last interesting finding regards the reformulation strategy; in several cases, translators tended to increase the level of formality of the conversational routines under consideration; this was carried out by changing the morphosyntactic form of some English expressions into a different form in Italian to make them sound more formal and old-fashioned to contemporary hearers.

Although these conclusions undoubtedly reflect the larger picture of conversational formulae of English and Italian, and perhaps some number of related languages, they are, of course, supported directly only by the data adduced here. Much research in this vein remains to be done, additional formulae analyzed and extended corpora examined.

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Filmography

- Little Women*
 1933 Directed by George Cukor. USA.
- Little Women*
 1949 Directed by Mervyn LeRoy. USA.

Little Women

1994 Directed by Gillian Armstrong. USA.

Little Women

2017 Directed by Vanessa Caswill. USA, UK.

Little Women

2019 Directed by Greta Gerwig. USA.

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