

Spoken discourse and conversational interaction in audiovisual translation

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Spontaneous vs. planned conversation

Although linguistics has, until recently, focused on the study and description of written language, the turn of the century has witnessed a shift to the study of spoken language as a domain of research in its own right. Significantly, for the purposes of this chapter, ‘research into the features of faked casual conversation in audiovisual conversation has . . . begun to surface’ as a particularly productive research theme within the field of audiovisual translation (Valdeón 2011: 224). Back in the 70s, Gregory and Carroll were the first to recognize that, while dialogues in audiovisual texts are scripted in nature, they are ‘written to be spoken as if not written’ (Gregory and Carroll 1978: 42). In doing so, they paved the way for the debate on the authenticity of film language when they argued that this is a genre of its own, where naturalness is the result of detailed planning. Today, much of the current research on audiovisual translation (AVT) touches upon the comparability between filmic dialogue and spontaneous dialogue, and consequently also translated dialogue (in particular, dubbing).

Indeed, the growing interest in the colloquial features of original and dubbed filmic dialogue stems from concerns over the quality of audiovisual products, and, consequently, their translation, including their potential contribution to the acquisition of a second language on the part of the viewers (see, among many, Pavesi 2012; Bruti 2015). The pervasiveness of orality in multimodal texts, including films, has certainly favoured the interest in the nature of filmic dialogue that, while far from a perfect replica of spontaneous conversation, represents a convenient register to use as a source of input in a second language for, as Moreno Jaén and Pérez Basanta (2009: 288) rightfully note, ‘teachers cannot teach conversation, which is by nature multimodal, with monomodal materials’.

Further to this applied research agenda, an ever-growing range of recent interdisciplinary studies has revealed that scriptwriters—and subsequently audiovisual translators—tend to achieve a certain degree of conversational naturalness by replicating specific features of spontaneous speech that are widely accepted and identified as such by their audience. The selection of such features is crucial, as credibility is singled out by professionals and scholars alike as one of the most important requirements for audiovisual products to succeed

commercially. Chaume (2012) coined the expression ‘prefabricated orality’ (Baños and Chaume 2009) to designate this ‘combination of features deriving from both oral and written texts’ (Chaume 2012: 81). This is because while filmic speech requires a certain degree of spontaneity, it is bound by medial constraints, genre conventions, stylistic rules (e.g. standardization, censorship, patronage) dictated by television authorities and broadcasting companies, as well as the strong link that exists between images and words. For these reasons, Chaume (2012: 82) suggests using an integrated approach to analyze original and translated filmic speech that takes into account the ‘multiple semiotic codes operating simultaneously’. From a similar standpoint, Pavesi (2012) acknowledges that scripted conversation aims to replicate real, or plausible, face-to-face communication, but it does so under specific situational and interactional constraints that differ significantly from those shaping spontaneous spoken language. In Pavesi’s own words, screen dialogue is the result of a ‘multilayered structure in which several addressers—the film maker, the script-writer, the actors, etc.—interact among themselves but also communicate with the silent audience watching the screen and listening to the dialogues’ (2012: 158). The most striking difference with spontaneous conversation is that, although the audience is the final addressee of all exchanges, it is not a party to the interactional context and cannot participate fully in the latter.

Other scholarly strands have gauged the comparability of fictional dialogue with spontaneous conversation from various perspectives, sometimes with contrasting results. Several studies have pointed out how and to what extent features of spontaneous conversation have been used in original and translated filmic dialogue, starting from the seminal studies by Gottlieb (1998), Hatim and Mason (1997), Blini and Matte Bon (1996), Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007) on subtitling; and Chaume (2004), Baños and Chaume (2009), and Freddi and Pavesi (2009) on dubbing. More specialized studies like those by Quaglio (2009a; 2009b) and Forchini (2012), both of which are based on Biber’s (1988) multidimensional analysis, highlight a number of similarities between the interpersonal dimension in both types of interaction (Biber 1988). However, the analysis of more specific features, such as vague language (Quaglio 2009b), shows that changes do not only have to do with frequency of use; they are also dictated by the need for audiovisual texts to be clear and able to attract a sizeable audience. Other corpus-based studies comparing screen dialogue (drawing on a collection of film transcripts) and real-life conversation (British National Corpus) by Rodríguez Martín and Moreno Jaén (2009) and Rodríguez Martín (2010) have similarly concluded that filmic dialogue employs a wide range of conversational strategies and devices, especially those that are closely connected with the dialogic nature of interaction (e.g. personal pronouns, turn-taking management devices). On the whole, it can be safely argued that narrative requirements and industrial constraints have a direct bearing on the choice of the mechanisms that normally lend discourse a natural flavour. Translated conversation tends to deploy fewer conversational features (e.g. discourse markers, interjections, hesitations, dysfluencies, false starts, etc.) and neater turn-taking mechanisms. In this chapter the focus is placed on structural and expressive aspects of conversation.

Conversational features in subtitling

Studies on subtitling unanimously point out that some conversational features are eliminated from subtitles because this modality of audiovisual translation involves a transfer from oral to written discourse—which, in turn, entails the need for a significant amount of text reduction.

The turn-taking system is thus often altered to follow more closely the rules of written language; as a result, subtitled conversation features more homogeneous turns and a neater sequencing (e.g. with little overlapping). Likewise, many indexes of the unplanned nature of discourse that are present in original dialogues—in an attempt to reproduce naturalness—are also drastically reduced.

The following two subsections focus on the structural and organizational aspects of conversation, and examine how expressive and orality markers are rendered in subtitling.

The structural organization of conversation in subtitling

The structural elements of conversation, mainly turn-taking rules, are sometimes manipulated in subtitles to follow the rules of written rather than spoken language. Audiovisual narratives favour smooth transitions between turns at talk, and this is further emphasized in subtitling because of the spatio-temporal constraints that subtitlers operate under. The emphasis on narrative linearity has also been found to result in streamlined, more compact narratives—as subtitlers often condense or even suppress the nonconformist voice of secondary characters (Remael 2003, Pérez-González 2007, Zabalbeascoa 2012). Translating lengthy exchanges through short subtitles, however, can be detrimental in terms of audience perception. As Díaz Cintas notes, overtly condensed dialogue can ‘raise suspicion, as would laconic dialogues channelled into expansive subtitles’ (2012: 277).

Drawing on dialogic theories of communication, Remael (2003) emphasizes that film interaction is always characterized by a dynamic of ‘dominance’. From a quantitative point of view, powerful characters deliver the highest number of turns or words; from a semantic perspective, dominant characters choose and suggest topic changes throughout the conversational exchange; interactionally, dialogue is often asymmetric, with powerful characters managing turn-taking; and finally, and most importantly, strategically speaking, dominant characters are allotted the most important moves in the exchange—i.e. those that push the plot forward and are responsible for the most crucial narrative nuclei. Remael’s study reveals that the majority of ‘dominance’ patterns found in original filmic dialogue are either replicated or even enhanced in their subtitled counterparts. Cases of inversion of dominance are relatively few and far between but they happen and, when they do, they have an impact on the narrative dynamics of the film. For instance, quantitative ‘dominance’ on the part of one character may be redressed in the subtitled version by levelling out the unbalanced turns at talk in the original filmic dialogue. A more balanced outcome can be reached by allotting an equal number of lines and words to characters, as illustrated by the following examples.

In Example 1 (*Match Point*, Allen 2005), the changes entailed by the subtitling process affect mainly the interactional and quantitative dimension of the original dialogue between the two characters’ distinctive speech styles: brilliant, upper-class Tom, and his scheming, lower-class tennis instructor Chris. Tom is rather verbose and, from the moment he meets Chris, he employs a friendly, colloquial style to reduce the social distance that exists between them. By contrast, Chris, who aspires to be part of Tom’s glamorous world, is exceptionally gentle and more formal, although concise (artfully so, as he is much more articulated when talking to his peers). As shown in the example, Tom is the one who chooses topics, manages conversation and speaks the most, so the decision of reducing and altering his turns creates a more symmetrical exchange.

Example 1 (my transcription; back-translation in italics)

<i>Original dialogue</i>	<i>Italian subtitles</i>
<p>TOM Yeah, well, the olds say thank you very much for the lovely flowers, they said it was very thoughtful, and totally unnecessary, but, off the record, well done, A+, 'cause they love that sort of thing.</p>	<p>TOM Beh, i vecchi dicono 'Grazie infinite per i bellissimi fiori'. <i>The old folks say</i> <i>'Thank you so much for the wonderful flowers'.</i> 'Un gesto premuroso e totalmente non necessario'. <i>A thoughtful gesture</i> <i>and totally unnecessary.</i> Ma . . . un vero colpo da maestro! Adorano questo genere di cose! <i>But . . . a real masterstroke!</i> <i>They love this sort of things!</i></p>
<p>CHRIS Oh, they're lovely people. And your sister's very bright.</p>	<p>CHRIS Oh, sono molto simpatici e tua sorella è molto intelligente! <i>Oh, they are very nice</i> <i>and your sister is very bright.</i></p>

In particular, what gets lost in Example 1 is the attribution of the statement 'it was a thoughtful but unnecessary gesture'—which can be ascribed in the subtitled version to Tom instead of his parents. Conversely, some elements that are distinctive about Tom's attitude—such as 'off the record' and 'well done', with only the latter being condensed into 'A+' in the expression 'un colpo da maestro' (*a masterstroke*)—are eliminated.

In other cases, as illustrated in Example 2 from the *The King's Speech* (2010), changes affect more evidently the strategic dimension of interaction. Modifications in this extract pertain to the character of Elizabeth, the future King's wife, who meets Lionel Logue, an unconventional speech therapist, and attempts to persuade him to treat her husband's heavy stuttering.

Example 2 (my transcription; back-translation in italics)

<i>Original dialogue</i>	<i>Italian subtitles</i>
<p>ELIZABETH No, look, erm . . . My husband has seen everyone to no avail. Awfully for him, he's given up hope.</p>	<p>ELIZABETH No, sentite. Ehm . . . Mio marito si è rivolto a tutti, senza successo. <i>No, listen. Erm . . . my husband has turned to everybody, without success.</i> – Temo stia perdendo ogni speranza. <i>I'm afraid he is losing every hope.</i></p>
<p>LIONEL He hasn't seen me.</p>	<p>LIONEL – Non si è rivolto a me. <i>He hasn't turned to me.</i></p>

(continued)

(continued)

Original dialogue

Italian subtitles

ELIZABETH

You're awfully sure of yourself.

ELIZABETH

Molto sicuro di voi stesso.

Very self-confident.

LIONEL

Well, I'm sure of anyone who wants to be cured.

LIONEL

Sono molto sicuro
di chiunque voglia essere curato.

I very much trust

anyone who wants to be treated.

ELIZABETH

Of course he wants to be cured. My husband is, erm
. . . he's required to speak publicly.

ELIZABETH

Certo che vuole essere curato.

Of course he wants to be treated.

A mio marito si . . . si richiede
di parlare in pubblico.

*My husband is . . . is requested
to speak in public.*

LIONEL

Perhaps he should change jobs.

LIONEL

Forse dovrebbe cambiare lavoro.

Maybe he should change his job.

ELIZABETH

He can't.

ELIZABETH

Non può.

He can't.

LIONEL

Indentured servitude?

LIONEL

Un contratto di apprendista?

Is he an apprentice?

ELIZABETH

Something of that nature. Yes.

ELIZABETH

Una cosa del genere, sì.

Sort of, yes.

LIONEL

Well, have your hubby pop by . . . ah . . . Tuesday
would be good . . . he can give his personal
details, I'll make a frank appraisal and we'll take
up from there.

LIONEL

Bene, il maritino
dovrà fare un salto qui.

*Well, the dear husband
will have to pop here.*

Martedì andrebbe bene.

Tuesday would be fine.

Mi darà i suoi dettagli personali,

He will give me his personal details,

io farò una valutazione schietta
e poi partiremo da lì.

*I will make a frank assessment
and then we will start from there.*

ELIZABETH

Doctor . . . forgive me, I do *not* have a "hubby". We
don't "pop". And nor do we ever talk about our
private lives. No, you must come to us.

ELIZABETH

Dottore, perdonatemi . . .

Doctor, forgive me . . .

Io non ho un maritino,
non facciamo un salto

*I haven't got a dear husband,
we don't pop here*

e non vogliamo mai parlare

della nostra vita privata.
*and we never want to discuss
 our private life.*
 No, voi dovete venire da noi.
No, you must come to us.

The first instance, ‘awfully for him’, is rendered with the Italian equivalent of ‘I’m afraid he’s losing every hope’, which shifts the speech focus from Prince Albert’s plight to his wife’s viewpoint. This shift contributes to presenting her as even more powerful—indeed, in this excerpt she is trying to arrange medical treatment for her husband without his consent. Similar remarks apply to her last turn in the extract featured in the example, where she uses a formal and emphatic marked construction ‘nor do we . . .’ that is lost in the subtitles. This is significant in comparison with Lionel’s previous turn, which undergoes neutralization in the Italian subtitles. In the original dialogue, Logue employs extremely colloquial forms, such as ‘hubby’ and ‘pop by’, both of which are criticized by Elizabeth as inappropriate. *Maritino*, the Italian term used to subtitle ‘hubby’, is an endearment obtained through the deployment of the diminutive suffix *-ino*. Although it is typically employed in affective or light-hearted settings and retains the humorous tone of the original, it is not associated with a lower and inappropriate register in Italian—which is also the case with the choice of *fare un salto* to subtitle the English expression ‘pop by’.

On the whole, even though these changes do not abound, they occasionally have a severe impact on interpersonal dynamics and ‘prove detrimental to the dynamics of dramatic characterization envisaged by the creator of the original audiovisual text’ (Pérez-González 2014: 16).

Expressive and orality markers in subtitling

Manipulative behaviour in subtitling can also result in the cleaning up of expressive markers of various types. Some of them impinge more directly on the interpersonal dimension, as they contribute to the illocutionary force of an utterance and represent a sort of socio-pragmatic reflection of the forces at play. Among them are most notably vocatives, interjections, tag questions, expressive and phatic speech acts, politeness devices such as mitigation, understatement and the like (see, among many, Hatim and Mason’s (1997) chapter on Pragmatics).

Some other elements that may be downgraded or removed in subtitling are instead manifestations of the unplanned nature of spontaneous spoken discourse, through which film creators seek to make their scripted dialogues more ‘natural’. They include elements that underline the online dimension of speech, such as hesitations, fillers, repetitions and redundancies (Blini and Matte Bon 1996, Kovačič 1996, Taylor 2002, Bussi Parmiggiani 2002), and also some discourse markers that help speakers organize their talk. If they are omitted, the structure of the story is not seriously compromised, as denotative meaning is always preserved, but the narrative development of the film can be altered to a greater or lesser extent (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 165–166). When repetitions or hesitations are expunged from a shy or insecure character’s speech, for instance, the original interpersonal dynamics may be significantly altered, and viewers of the subtitled version may no longer perceive those characters in the same way.

This is exemplified in Example 3, which features an extract from *Green Street* (Alexander 2005), a film about football hooliganism. Matt's first turn rejects an invitation in a dubious and tentative manner, as signalled by the opening discourse marker 'well' and the approximator 'sort of'; however, his rejection is presented as strongly assertive in the subtitles. In Pete's turn, instead, other elements are toned down. This is the case with the swearing 'fuck you'—which is not meant to cause offence, but used as an in-group marker—and the familiarizer 'mate'—replaced here by the addressee's first name Matt, which happens to be phonetically similar to the replaced element. In most cases, providentially, the 'inter-semiotic redundancy' of subtitling (Gottlieb 1998: 247) allows the audience to correctly decode the message by accessing images (in particular gazes and gestures) and paralinguistic features (e.g. loudness, pitch, contour), both of which reveal much about the characters' relationships.

Example 3 (my transcription; back-translation in italics)

<i>Original dialogue</i>	<i>Italian subtitles</i>
MATT Well, I sort of have plans with Shannon this afternoon, so . . .	MATT Ho preso un impegno con Shannon, per oggi pomeriggio. <i>I have made a commitment to Shannon for this afternoon.</i>
PETE All right, fuck you, then. We'll have a beer later, yeah?	PETE Come non detto. Ci prendiamo una birra più tardi. <i>Forget what I just said. We have a beer later on.</i>
MATT Yeah, yeah, see you at the pub!	MATT and PETE – Sì, ci vediamo al pub.
PETE All right, mate! (leaves)	– A dopo, Matt. – <i>Yes, see you at the pub.</i> – <i>See you later, Matt.</i>

Similar remarks hold for the extract from *Sliding Doors* (Howitt 1998) presented in Example 4. The exchange involves Gerry, an unaccomplished novelist, and Russell, one of his closest friends. Gerry often confides his love troubles to Russell, but in this scene he wants to share with him the news that he has completed his novel. He strengthens his utterance through repetition and the use of 'bloody' as an intensifying adverb, but in the Italian subtitled version both elements are reformulated as *Sono un mago* ('I'm a wizard'). Russell reacts with positive appreciation, which is more condensed in Italian, while appearing to be puzzled because he probably expected Gerry to talk about his love troubles. After Gerry's second turn, Russell acknowledges that he has understood but expresses his surprise with an exclamation and a discourse marker ('oh' and 'well'), and his affection through the familiarizer 'mate'. All these elements are expunged from the subtitle, which thus becomes a strong but more impersonal statement.

Example 4 (my transcription; back-translation in italics)

<i>Original dialogue</i>	<i>Italian subtitles</i>
GERRY I've done it, Russell. I've bloody done it!	GERRY Ce l'ho fatta, Russell. Sono un mago. <i>I made it, Russell. I'm a wizard.</i>
RUSSELL Excellent. Congratulations. Done what?	RUSSELL Congratulazioni! A fare cosa?! <i>Congratulations! To do what?!</i>
GERRY I've finished it.	GERRY Sono arrivato alla fine. <i>I arrived at the end.</i>
RUSSELL Oh, the book. Oh, well, great, mate, that's great.	RUSSELL Del libro? È grandioso. <i>Of the book? It's fantastic.</i>

Formulaic language in subtitling

One further element that deserves attention is the use of formulaic language. In spontaneous speech, prefabricated items are quite well spread, especially in the form of set phrases and collocations, because they are memorized and retrieved as chunks. As Conklin and Schmitt report on the basis of several experimental studies, 'normal discourse, both written and spoken, contains large (but not yet fully determined) percentages of formulaic language. . . . Overall . . . formulaic language makes up between *one third* and *one half* of discourse' (Conklin and Schmitt 2012: 46, *my emphasis*).

Within the class of formulaic expressions, conversational routines—i.e. a series of speech acts such as greetings, congratulations, thanks, apologies—are important strategies for the negotiation and control of social identity and relationships between participants in an exchange. Sometimes they are mainly used to smoothen interaction, but contribute little factual information. This depends on the trade-off between a whole series of parameters: the unwritten rules of behaviour of a lingua-cultural community, the intimacy among speakers, the formality of the situation of utterance, the purposes of communication and so on. In everyday conversation, when speakers are very close or the situation of utterance is relaxed, these elements may often be dispensed with. If, instead, speakers are more distant, phatic talk is needed as a social lubricant (Bonsignori *et al.* 2011; Bonsignori *et al.* 2012; Bonsignori and Bruti 2014a). However, in fictional filmic dialogue—a genre where speech is scripted and rehearsed in advance—social chit-chat is seldom just social chit-chat; given the spatio-temporal constraints at play, anything that is uttered by characters must respond to specific narrative aims.

As Guillot has aptly shown (2012, 2016), the use and frequency of routines need therefore to be relativized and subordinated to their diegetic function. Furthermore, the nature of audiovisual texts also strongly conditions translation. Thus if routines are used in the original dialogues to accompany corresponding images on screen, they have to be reproduced in subtitles (and in dubbing, albeit for different reasons, as elaborated in the next section). Translation is only 'a matter of modulating words, but adherence to the image must in any case be pursued' (Bonsignori and Bruti 2014a: 77). Good wishes, for instance, have been shown to be quite widely used in TV series, as they accompany family celebrations such as birthday or Thanksgiving parties (Bonsignori and Bruti 2014a). Consequently, although they are concentrated in a few episodes, they are very 'image-related' and hence always prioritized in the subtitles.

An isolated but very significant feature that has been observed in TV series, in line with Guillot's findings (2012, 2016), is that some characters occasionally perform social rites with unusual phrasing. In an episode of American TV series *Brothers and Sisters* (see Example 5), Holly Harper utters a wish before taking leave. The children of her former lover tried to deceive her upon finding that their father left her a legacy of 10 million dollars. So the place typically occupied by conventional expressions such as 'goodbye' or 'see you' is here replaced by a biting and ironic wish, which sanctions sarcastically the end of the encounter.

Example 5 (my transcription; back-translation in italics)

<i>Original dialogue</i>	<i>Italian subtitles</i>
HOLLY HARPER Enjoy your bankruptcy.	HOLLY HARPER Godetevi la bancarotta <i>Enjoy the bankruptcy.</i>

In addition, some situation-bound and rapid routines may turn into strategic instruments to deliver information for the audience's benefit. For example, the closing of an interactional encounter may contain a reference to the moment in which two characters made each other's acquaintance, and that had not previously been shown to the audience. This represents 'a very economical way of condensing essential diegetic information' (Bonsignori and Bruti 2014a: 87) and can be easily translated in the subtitles, as illustrated in Examples 6 and 7 from *Brothers and Sisters*.

Example 6 (my transcription; back-translation in italics)

<i>Original dialogue</i>	<i>Italian subtitles</i>
WARREN Pleasure to meet you.	WARREN Piacere. <i>Pleasure.</i>
KITTY Nice to meet you.	KITTY Il piacere è mio. <i>The pleasure is mine.</i>

Example 7 (my transcription; back-translation in italics)

<i>Original dialogue</i>	<i>Italian subtitles</i>
PROF. HARRIS It was very nice meeting you. ((handshake))	PROF. HARRIS È stato un piacere. <i>It has been a pleasure.</i>
RORY Same here. ((handshake)) Pleasure to meet you.	RORY Anche per me. <i>For me too.</i>

By way of summary, it must be observed that the dissatisfaction with some of the limitations and features of professional subtitling on the one hand, and the exponential growth of popularity of audiovisual products on the other, have favoured the spread of community translation practices such as fansubbing. Over the last decades, the phenomenon has rocketed, because it has pursued the aim of achieving a translation that makes up for the ‘cultural insensitivity’ (Pérez-González 2014: 17) often displayed by official commercial translations. Fansubbers tend in fact to adhere to the source text closely (preserving many of the features that are focused upon in these paragraphs) not as a mere imitation strategy, but in order to render adequately both style and register (Massidda 2015). In so doing, they prioritize narrative and affective functions (Bruti and Zanotti 2012, 2013) through a series of different formal conventions, thus meeting the audience’s tastes and expectations.

Conversational features in dubbing

In dubbing many expressive and orality markers are also deleted, although for different reasons from the ones at play in subtitling. These are not only related to lip synchrony constraints, as plenty of studies in the last decades have thoroughly demonstrated (Pérez-González 2014: 22), but to translation universals (Mauranen and Kujamäki 2004) and to typical features of dubbed speech that have somehow crystallized through repetition (Pavesi 2005: 48).

The structure of conversation and the distribution of turns at talk in dubbed interaction is bound by less strict constraints than subtitled speech, given that quantitative synchronism requires the length of turns in the original and dubbed dialogues to match (Herbst 1994). As Valdeón argues in relation to other related aspects of orality (e.g. interruptions and unfinished utterances, as elaborated below), the structure of dubbed conversation remains very similar to the original because ‘the constraints imposed by the multimodal text might prevent any changes in the target texts, for instance isochrony’ (Valdeón 2011: 227). The following two subsections will therefore focus on expressive and orality markers and formulaic language, respectively.

Expressive and orality markers in dubbing

It has been noted that the dialogues of contemporary Anglophone audiovisual texts are carefully crafted to depict realistic contemporary life (Taylor 1999). Dysfluencies are thus used more commonly than in older films and TV programmes, which sought to construct informality through other means, notably the use of a lower register and the deployment of a range of discourse markers (Quaglio 2009a, Valdeón 2009, Valdeón 2011).

As hinted at above, interruptions and unfinished utterances are the most frequently preserved forms of dysfluency for reasons of isochrony. Conversely, repeats—i.e. recurrent segments, not necessarily entire words—are rendered in different ways, although not all of them achieve the same pragmatic effect as the original dialogue. Valdeón (2011), for example, has explored the implications of retaining and eliminating repeats. In some cases, repetitions are voluntary and confer more illocutionary strength on speech; in other cases, repeats are involuntary and betray a wide range of emotions, including uncertainty, surprise and nervousness. Consequently, it is the overall characterization of the protagonists, and not only the local stretch of discourse containing the dysfluency in question, that is altered. These choices, however, are the result of a trade-off between the tendency

to imitate speech in its spontaneous nuances and the need for audiovisual fiction to be comprehensible and entertaining—while complying with rules imposed by the market and production companies (Romero-Fresco 2009). Of note is the fact that some elements are more difficult to alter because they are utterance-initial or final, and hence more clearly foregrounded through the linguistic code and other semiotic modes. Instead, those that occur within a turn can be more easily manipulated, either by deletion or replacement (Valdeón 2011: 231).

The majority of studies on this aspect of dubbing have until now dealt mainly with hesitation markers (Romero-Fresco 2009), interjections (Cuenca 2006, Bruti and Pavesi 2008) and discourse markers (Romero-Fresco 2006, Cuenca 2008, Forchini 2010, Baños 2014, Freddi and Malagori 2014).

Hesitators and gap-filling elements have different preferred realizations across languages. In Spanish, for example, hesitation can be expressed thanks to lengthened vowels, repeated syllables, or also unintelligible sounds (Valdeón 2009). Also in dubbed Spanish, the most common way to signal uncertainty is deletion (*ibid.*: 138), followed by strategies involving the use of pauses or lexical items—e.g. discourse markers or repeated items. In Italian too, hesitation is communicated with filled pauses like *mmm* and *ehm*, but a wide array of other expressions are available to perform this function, including elongated vowels and gap-filling words like *ma*, *allora*, *non so*, *forse*, *praticamente*, or *cioè*.

In *Notting Hill* (Michell 1999), a film analyzed in Valdeón (2009), the hesitation marker *er* and its nasalized version *erm* occur 105 and 87 times, respectively (see Bonsignori 2009 for more information on the various options available to transcribe these items and the way in which they are used in English). A look at the dubbed dialogue suggests that these hesitations—which signal the awkwardness of some situations and, in particular, the clumsiness of the male protagonist in this film—are not always retained in the target language. The fragment of dialogue featured in Example 8 shows that, when they are,

Example 8 (my transcription; back-translation in italics)

<i>Original dialogue</i>	<i>Italian dubbing</i>
ANNA to WILLIAM I will take this one.	ANNA to WILLIAM Prendo questo qua. <i>I take this one.</i>
WILLIAM Oh, right, right. So, er, well, on second thoughts, uhm, maybe it's not that bad after all. Actually, it's a sort of classic, really. None of those childish kebab stories you find in so many books these days. And um, I tell you what, I'll throw in one of those for free. Useful for, er, lighting fires, wrapping fish, that sort of thing ...	WILLIAM Oh, certo certo! In fondo, eh, bè, ripensandoci, dopo tutto, non è così male. A dire il vero, è un po' classico. Niente storie sul kebab. Infantilismi che trovi sui libri di oggi. E ehm, facciamo così, le do uno di questi gratis. È utile per . . . accendere il camino, incartare il pesce, quelle cose lì ... <i>Oh, right, right! In sum, er, well, thinking back again, after all, it's not so bad. To tell the truth, it's a classic. No stories about kebab. Childish things you find in contemporary books. And uhm, let's do this, I give you one of these for free. It's useful to . . . light the fire, wrap fish, that sort of thing . . .</i>

Italian uses a wider repertoire of items, in some cases to enhance the naturalness of the dubbed interaction.

In this extract Anna, a famous American actress, visits William Thacker's bookshop in Notting Hill. William, excited and embarrassed at the same time, comments on the book she has picked up. Many hesitation markers, such as *er*, *um* and *uhm*, feature in the dialogue (*uh* and *um* are used 19 and 16 times, respectively, in the whole film). Apart from these, there are other elements that also signal difficulty in planning one's speech and are associated with spontaneity and naturalness. These include pauses, repetitions (e.g. 'Right, right!'); forward-pointing phrases like 'I tell you what'; or fillers such as 'well' and 'actually'. In the dubbed version, only two out of the four original hesitation markers are used: *eh* and *ehm*. Instead, other resources have been relied upon to convey the same effect. Filling phrases signalling uncertainty (*in fondo*, *bè*, *a dire il vero*), for example, are consistent with dubbing practices in Spanish (Valdeón 2009: 138–139).

Interjections in dubbed language (Bruti and Pavesi 2008, Valdeón 2009) are generally less frequent and less assorted than in non-fictional spontaneous conversation. Sometimes they are turned into other exclamatory items (Valdeón 2009: 124) because they sound more natural in the target language. A study on interjections in dubbed Italian (Bruti and Pavesi 2008) shows that the pattern differs considerably from that of interjections in spontaneous speech, partly because many occurrences are modelled on the source text, thus producing awkward expressions in some cases. The interjections that find a similar counterpart in English 'tend to be over-represented in dubbing, whereas interjections which are specific and restricted to Italian tend to be under-represented' (*ibid.*: 220)—a fact that confirms the Unique Item Hypothesis put forward by Tirkkonen-Condit (2004), which states that the absence of certain linguistic stimuli in the original text strongly conditions the translating process, even when the target language is rich in those elements.

Discourse markers have been quite extensively analyzed in fictional dialogue and dubbing. Even though translation choices are informed by a number of interrelated factors, such as the position of the discourse marker and its place within the overall multimodal ensemble of the audiovisual text, specialists agree that what often gets lost in translation is interpersonal meaning. Choices also seem to depend on the genre of the film, as the same dialogue adapter tends to choose different alternatives for the same discourse markers in different film genres (Romero-Fresco 2009, Freddi and Malagori 2014: 205).

In *Love Actually* (Curtis 2003), for example, discourse markers are extensively employed, as the plot of the film is based on a series of interweaving conversations revolving around lovers, friends and acquaintances. Phrasal markers such as 'you know' and 'I mean' are both utilized on 16 and 10 occasions, respectively. As Deborah Schiffrin points out (1987: 267), 'you know' is a marker of 'metaknowledge of what speaker and hearer share, and . . . about what is generally known', whereas 'I mean', although interactional, is more clearly speaker-centred and betrays the intention of expanding one's speech or explaining one's intentions (*ibid.*: 296). In the Italian dubbed version, 'you know' is omitted 8 times, translated 6 times as *sai* ('you know'), and once as *sa* ('you know', polite form) and *sai . . . allora*. 'I mean' is omitted altogether 3 times or translated as *insomma* (3 times), *voglio dire* (2 times), *cioè* (once), and once as *un momento* ('one moment'). Essentially, when 'you know' is translated, it is always rendered literally. By contrast, 'I mean' is translated using different pragmatic equivalents attending to the context in which the utterance is delivered—as illustrated in the extract featured in Example 9.

Example 9 (my transcription; back-translation in italics)

<i>Original dialogue</i>	<i>Italian dubbing</i>
SARAH It's my brother. He's not well. He calls a lot.	SARAH Era mio fratello. Non sta bene. Mi chiama spesso. <i>It was my brother. He's not well. He often calls me.</i>
KARL I'm sorry.	KARL Mi dispiace. <i>I'm sorry.</i>
SARAH No, it's fine. It's fine. I mean, it's not really fine, it is what it is and there being no parents now and us being over here, it's my job to keep an eye over him. I mean not my job, obviously, I'm glad to do it . . .	SARAH No, va bene. Va bene. Cioè, in realtà non va bene. Le cose stanno come stanno e poi visto che non abbiamo più i genitori e adesso ha solo me, è mio dovere tenerlo d'occhio. Insomma, non sarebbe un mio dovere. Ovviamente sono contenta di farlo . . . molto. <i>No, it's ok. It's ok. That is, it's not ok. Things are the way they are and given that we no longer have parents and now he has only me, it's my duty to keep an eye on him. In short, it wouldn't be my duty. Of course I'm happy to do it. . . very happy.</i>

In the extract above the meta-discursive function of 'I mean' is quite evident. It allows conversation to flow and bestows dubbed language with an air of naturalness and spontaneity (Romero-Fresco 2009: 45). However, discrepancies in the dubbing of discourse markers are relatively frequent; ultimately, viewers watching dubbed content agree to suspend disbelief, and hence make occasional compromises to enjoy their 'diegetic experience' (Romero-Fresco 2009: 57).

Formulaic language in dubbing

Along with Guillot (2016), several studies on social rituals in films and TV series and their Italian dubbed versions (Bonsignori *et al.* 2011, 2012; Bonsignori and Bruti 2014b, 2015) have revealed that conversational routines are strategically employed in audiovisual dialogue and tend to be translated in most cases. Specifically, corpus-based analyses have confirmed that routines play an important role in the pragmatic construction of orality both in original and dubbed dialogue, although they have also acknowledged that discrepancies in linguistic mapping across languages do occur. These often result in socio-pragmatic shifts, neutralization or omissions. In the case of greetings, for example, shifts entail changes from one time expression to another, or from phatic expressions to vocatives. Familiarizers—which are more numerous in English (e.g. 'mate', 'dude', 'pal' and the like) than in Italian—are often omitted, and stylistic variations between different levels of formality often occur.

Based on the findings of a small corpus-based study of original Italian films (Bonsignori *et al.* 2011; Bonsignori *et al.* 2012), the representation of greetings and leave-takings would appear to be handled in similar ways in original and dubbed films, both in English

and Italian—thus confirming the role that these items play as key markers of orality in both. Comparison of dubbed and original cinematic Italian shows that *ciao* is the most frequent greeting in both registers. Differences are found when looking at the second most frequent greeting in these two varieties (i.e. *salve* in dubbed Italian and *buongiorno* in its original filmic counterpart). For leave-takings, *ciao* appears to be also the most frequently employed formula in both modes, but *ci vediamo*, which is quite frequent in dubbing, never occurs in Italian filmic speech. The same results apply also in dubbed television series, ‘possibly because [*salve* and *ci vediamo*] obliterate class, gender, age, and formality differences, acting as a kind of *passe-partout* form’ (Bonsignori and Bruti 2015: 109). These results tie in with Pavesi’s idea that the language of dubbing follows ‘the third norm’ (1996: 128), i.e. dubbese adheres neither to the source nor to the target language, but to a third language that strengthens formulaic language and translational clichés.

Summary

This chapter has discussed the main features of spoken discourse and conversational interaction in audiovisual dialogue and translation. The organizational structure of conversation proves to be more complex to mediate in subtitling where, due to space constraints, it is frequently altered—with inevitable and serious consequences in terms of the way in which interpersonal dynamics and characterization in the subtitled version may differ from the original film.

The number of expressive and orality markers is reduced in both subtitling and dubbing, although in distinct ways and for different reasons. In subtitling, their meaning can sometimes be retrieved thanks to the other semiotic channels, whereas in dubbing they are preserved when used in turn initial and turn final position, even though this does not necessarily result in natural-sounding translations.

Formulaic speech acts like greeting, parting, and wishing-well routines are used strategically in audiovisual diegesis as keys to orality. They are always translated, although they may sometimes result in differences between the representation of power relationships and relative closeness between interactants in the original and translated dialogues.

Further reading

- Baños, R. (2014) ‘Orality Markers in Spanish Native and Dubbed Sitcoms: Pretended Spontaneity and Prefabricated Orality’, *Meta* 59(2): 406–435 | *This article discusses the idiosyncratic features of audiovisual dialogue in translated and non-translated texts, drawing on corpus-based results—a relatively under-represented methodology in AVT.*
- Guillot, M. N. (2016) ‘Communicative Rituals and Audiovisual Translation. Representation of Otherness in Film Subtitles’, *Meta* 61(3): 606–628 | *Representation of spontaneity is a concept used here to explore how conversational routines are constructed in fictional dialogue vis-à-vis translated conversational interaction.*
- Remael, A. (2003) ‘Mainstream Narrative Film Dialogue and Subtitling’, in Y. Gambier (ed.) ‘Screen Translation’, special issue of *The Translator* 9(2): 225–247 | *This paper delivers an original study of the impact that the structural organization of fictional conversation (and its translation) has on the narrative dynamics of filmic texts.*
- Valdeón, R. A. (2011) ‘Dysfluencies in Simulated English Dialogue and Their Neutralization in Dubbed Spanish’, *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 19(3): 221–232 | *Three different types of dysfluencies (interruptions, unfinished sentences and repeats) are examined to gauge their contribution to the representation of orality in English TV series and their Spanish dubbed versions.*

Related topics

- 3 Subtitling on the cusp of its futures
- 4 Investigating dubbing: learning from the past, looking to the future
- 16 Pragmatics and audiovisual translation
- 18 Sociolinguistics and linguistic variation in audiovisual translation
- 20 Corpus-based audiovisual translation studies: ample room for development

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