

# Dubbing: adapting cultures in the global communication era

## Introduction

As the modification of a given work, object or structure in order to make it applicable or comprehensible in situations different from the ones that have originated it, adaptation would be best described by its correlation with dubbing and audiovisual translation. After all, we now live in the global communication era, and cinema and TV industries are relevant vehicles of the globalization process.

Everyday for at least three decades now – ever since television broadcasting became commercialized on private networks – we Europeans have been exposed to situations, codes, and meanings different from those that reflect the cultures we belong to. Through such an exposure, we have acquired a great deal of information on other cultures in the comfort of our local realities, while maintaining our local means of expression, and our own culture. We have been able to do this thanks to our long history of dubbing, with its extensive usage of translation procedures such as transposition, and adaptation.

Briefly, the latter is what Vinay and Darbelnet (1958) defined as “le limite extrême de la traduction”, and a “situational equivalence”. In fact, as language reflects the social reality in any given culture, some situations referred to by the source culture and source language do not find an equivalent in the target language. In such cases, adapters will create a new situation: one that the target audience perceives as familiar, and can thus be considered as being equivalent. In addition to the quest for the right words, the sociolinguistic and cultural situations to be translated and adapted are also highly constrained by the images on the screen, with their kinetic – and also proxemic<sup>1</sup> – aspects.

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<sup>1</sup> For further clarification on the topic, cfr. Herbst 1994 and Pavesi 2009.

Even though the verbal code is the only aspect a translator can modify in order to make the audiovisual work accessible to different linguistic communities, all the nonverbal codes can make an impact on the dialogues and on the plot. Hence, the translator is left with the great responsibility of dividing the work into its constituents, retracing all patterns for both the verbal and nonverbal codes, in order to draw them back together into a comprehensible whole (Paolinelli – Di Fortunato 2005: 6) – which is equivalent in its expression, and satisfactory in its communication.

Therefore, it is clear that adapting translation for dubbing concerns not only linguistic factors, nor the adaptation of codes alone; rather, it is mainly the adaptation of cultures.

## **1. Dubbing and the history of contemporary Europe**

The correlation between the adaptation of translation for dubbing and the adaptation of cultures would be even more evident if we analyze its history, and the way it intersected the continuum of events that happened in countries such as Italy, France, Germany and Spain in the twentieth century.

In fact, dubbing was invented in the 1930's in order to overcome the crisis that many European markets were facing as a consequence of the *Talkie Revolution*: the commercialization of sound films featuring synchronized dialogues. By the time those talking pictures, or *talkies*, were being pushed to expand in global markets, Europe was experiencing the rise of far right, Fascism and totalitarian regimes favored by the worldwide recession consequent to the Wall Street Crash.

Obviously, nationalist and totalitarian governments were alarmed by the dialogues contained in the movies, for they could potentially introduce ideas and ideologies contrary to those of the countries' leaders. These dialogues could put Otherness within everyone's reach, including the less literates', and this was clearly considered dangerous.

This, of course, posed a problem for the American film industry, as many European countries issued prohibitive laws against anything

foreign. Under the Vichy regime, Francoist Spain, Hitler's Germany, and Fascism, dubbing was the only possible way of bypassing these laws. And while it is a well-known fact that dubbing was a censorious filter in those years<sup>2</sup>, it is also true that it started having an impact on both the audience and the general public, and it has rapidly become a useful tool for the spread of culture.

This is even truer in Italy, where dubbing has held a great importance in spreading the standard Italian language, and has had a strong impact on the population's perception of a common idiom that is not merely literary or academic<sup>3</sup>.

At this point, it will be of some value to mention Sergio Raffaelli (1996), who has appropriately distinguished an *external* and an *internal history* of dubbing. The external history consists of the whole which includes laws and customs, along with the social and cultural vicissitudes that influenced the choice of the language to be used for dubbing. It goes without saying that this history has gone through many phases and turning points, and it is still evolving. As culture and society change, the translational linguistic choices change too, and they obviously influence the audience's choices. Besides, due to all of these elements, dubbing contributed to shape a linguistic standard in the thirties, a language that transcended regional boundaries. Dubbing also brought to the forming of neologisms.

The internal history of dubbing, on the other hand, consists of the variations that dubbing has undergone through the decades. Basically, the internal history includes the variations that arise from the external history.

Bearing this difference in mind, a further consideration of some fundamental points would be in order if one wants to fully understand the great role dubbing has played in the spread of cultures.

The history of dubbing in Italy has witnessed two phases: a first one that took place during the Fascism regime and lasted up until the

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on early dubbings, cfr. Bergamo 1998 and Quaragnolo 1994

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Castellano 2000; Rossi 2005.

postwar period. It is possible to identify a strong conservatism of the linguistic patterns in dubbing during that phase, although this had some positive outcomes concerning the formation of neologisms and the diffusion of the Italian language. In fact, the illiteracy rate in Italy in the thirties was 25% out of a forty million people (Di Cola 2000: 29), and most speakers still used to use their local dialects even in formal contexts, for they could not speak any other language. However, with the advent of dubbing, people began to use the Italian standard more and more in every possible social context.

The second phase began in the 1970s. The coming of private TV networking marked a turning point: on the one hand, TV started to be a means of mass communication, and subsequently, a carrier for those subtle mechanisms that generate cultural hegemony, which increases with the expansion of globalization. On the other hand, production companies have imposed all dubbing cooperatives work shifts to save as much time as possible, to the detriment of the quality of dubbing. In fact, it is possible to observe a series of linguistic *clichés* that go under the name of *dubbese*<sup>4</sup>, which contribute to immediately being able to identify the movie as being American. These linguistic *clichés* that are consequent to the short deadlines are clearly a growing problem, especially nowadays, in the global communication era.

## 2. Dubbing and globalization

In light of this information, dubbing can definitely be considered as an effective tool for linguistic transmission. And as language is, in Sapirian terms, “a social guide to reality”<sup>5</sup>, language transmission is undoubtedly cultural transmission and this alone can enable the socio-anthropological function of dubbing. In fact, two different cultural contexts can be distinguished through dubbing, as the usage of a target language ensures the signs of a source culture are perceived as useful information, rather than portions of the target culture.

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<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Antonini 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Sapir 1956.

The American film majors immediately realized this great potential of culture circulation, and took action. In fact, American producers started using dubbing to export their movies as much as possible, but they have been actively impeding its usage in imports.

Therefore, the incredible success of Hollywood movies through the years is not entirely due to highly productive investments in quality and aesthetics, but also precise marketing strategies that aim to systematically dub all American films that are exported to foreign markets, and subtly impede the circulation of foreign films into the American market. Gregory Snegoff, an American voice actor, says in his *Doppiare negli Stati Uniti* (1996: 78) that the only reason why dubbed movies do not have great diffusion in the United States is because there are not enough distributors and producers willing to invest in dubbings.

Despite the growing demand, foreign movies are only projected in their subtitled versions at universities or film festivals, and they do not position themselves well in local markets outside the New York and Los Angeles areas – where people are more used and more incline to the sound of foreign languages. He also adds that contrary to Europe's own, the American market is show business-based, and neither the American population nor the American producers are sensitive to the artistic side of productions, and the artistic quality of dubbings.

Therefore, Snegoff, in line with many Italian translators, adapters, and actors, believe that European films aiming to position themselves in the American market should be dubbed in Europe. The question is not only economic or artistic, but it takes on the ideological discussion about globalization in its much debated terms: the hope for reciprocity vs. the consequences of its real inequity.

Careful investigation suggests that modern industries in the cultural fields tend to reflect the spheres of the globalization process, of which cinema and TV industries are relevant carriers. Those spheres embrace cultural change, and they have been summarized by Ian Clark (1997: 1) as

[...] The uniformity of political ideas and practices; the geographical extent of social interaction and reflexivity; the degree of integration of economic activities; the diffusion of technology (information, communication, transport) which overcome the significance of time and space; and the extent of the dissemination of cultural symbols and signification.

All of these factors are clearly embedded in audiovisual works, and are used by modern cultural and communications industries – especially in the United States – that tend to create homologation of lifestyles and cultures, with the aim of expanding the market for more profit. The worldwide dissemination of cultural symbols and significations pertaining to the United States has taken its toll on non-Western societies, but it can have undesirable outcomes on Western societies as well. Films – and audiovisuals in general – are carriers of images, words, ideas and ideologies. All of these signs can be diffused through mass communication technologies any time, any where. Nonetheless, that diffusion is not equal on a global scale: when some cultures are inevitably more powerful than others, in terms of politics and economy, the risk is that the lack of reciprocity in the diffusion of cultural signs accounts for the hegemony of a specific culture on others, which may bring to a subtle form of acculturation, and which makes communication a little less global than one expects it to be in the so-called global communication era. After all, as the British sociologist Anthony Giddens affirms, «globalization is political, cultural, and technological, as well as economic, and it is diffused especially through communication mass media» (Giddens 2000: 23).

However, when the diffusion channels are imbalanced we find a situation where all films and TV series produced by the American major film studios are aimed to be distributed to the masses. In addition to this, one of the distinguishing traits of the United States is the fact that it is multiethnic, which results in the production of films that are able to satisfy the tastes of a large number of people whose cultural backgrounds are extremely different.

On the contrary, non-American films often carry more local connotations, therefore, they would be much less comprehensible, or have a lesser impact on a large audience; not to mention, film producers in the rest of the world do not have the same access to widespread distribution as the American majors do.

Consequently, all of those successful American productions create and shape a cultural context through which the vast majority of people all over the world identify themselves. Spectators recognize themselves in those films, in the actors, in the music the characters listen to, in the books they read, in the clothes they wear, and in the food they eat. We must face the fact that American majors have transformed commerce into a portion of culture that is common to everyone, from the Western World to the so-called 'Third World'. Clearly, this means that the role that films play in globalization is biased and the outcome is not always positive. As Giddens suggests, for many people who live outside Europe and Northern America, globalization has the unpleasant aspect of 'westernization', or rather, 'Americanization'.

In fact, especially regarding audiovisual works, we have a situation that is very close to what Tomlinson (1999) defines as "deterritorialization", which is a weakening of the ties between time and space, and a process of globalizing culture. We do need to bear in mind, however, that this weakening is not so positive: with distances no longer meaning anything, localities, separated by distances, also lose their meanings (Bauman 1998: 18).

Through deterritorialization, the impact of audiovisual (especially televisual) media alters our repertoires of discursive resources; it changes our linguistic and cultural practices, and that in terms of globalization, translates into a change of identity<sup>6</sup>.

After all, as Mufwene advises in his contribution to Blommaert's *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization* (2010),

some hegemonic languages, chiefly English, have spread world-wide, but have not only become "global", but also

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<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Fairclough 2006.

indigenized, both adapted to the new communicative habits and subjected to local norms. [...] These factors, determine not only whether a speaker is (fully) integrated or marginalized, but also what social representations their communication in English conjures up of the speakers or the writer.

The aural part is just as important as the visual one. Word's ability to convey emotions and transmit the structure and the organization of reality plays a crucial role in the processes of intercultural encounter and accommodation ("indigenization" as expressed in Stanford Friedman 2004). To reciprocate the transmission of emotions and structures of reality through dubbing would be fundamental if one wants to look at communication as a global phenomenon, if one wants to establish a dialogue between the societies in which both the adapted text and the adaptation are produced and received (Hutcheon 2006: 149). With dubbing, one is not forced to become marginalized simply for not speaking a hegemonic language. The adaptation of translation for dubbing ensures everyone is able to grasp information about other cultures without any single one of them becoming dominant.

## Conclusions

Subsequent to this analysis, it would not have been hasty to presume that the lack of reciprocity in dubbing non-American films translates into cultural supremacy<sup>7</sup>, as all countries whose languages are less widespread than English have automatically compromised their position on the market. Also, there is some value in taking into consideration that most Americans have always been deprived of the knowledge of other cultures through films<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> For further reading on the circulation of dubbed audiovisuals, Di Fortunato – Paolinelli 1996.

<sup>8</sup> On the linguistic and cultural transpositions in dubbing, Baccolini – Bollettieri Bosinelli 1994, Bollettieri Bosinelli – Heiss – Soffritti – Bernardini 2000; Cary 1960; Chiaro 1994; Chiaro 2000, Chiaro – Heiss – Bucaria 2008; Delabastita



While the expressive value of American films remains unquestionable, dubbing foreign movies to give Americans the opportunity to access a myriad of diverse cultural worlds is not at all taken into consideration by major film studios.

It is clear that in this type of situation, which is now unlikely to change any time in the near future, the only way to resist the cultural supremacy subtly spreading through audiovisual channels is the use of dubbing.

After all, given the fact that anyone who does not belong to the culture that dominates the audiovisual market becomes “local”<sup>9</sup> – «confined (and sometimes effectively imprisoned within) particular localities» (Fairclough 2006: 21), dubbing presents itself as a useful tool to overcome these difficulties. Spectators can take the signs and information concerning the Other culture, while still maintaining the local identities. They can be a part of the international community and learn about other cultures, without being “globalized”, or “Americanized”. In conclusion, dubbing allows for the adaptation and spread of cultures, thereby creating a global means of effective communication.

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1989; Heiss – Bollettieri Bosinelli 1997, Paolinelli – Di Fortunato 2005; Pavesi 2005; Taylor 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Bauman 1998.

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