

SEM22. The human factor in audiovisual translation history

22A 11 September h. 11:00-13:00, Terracini PN

22B 11 September h. 16:00-18:30, Terracini PN

Convenors

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Abstract

Audiovisual Translation is a complex intersemiotic practice whose historical developments are closely intertwined with the introduction and diffusion of novel screen technologies (Cornu, 2014; Cornu & O'Sullivan, 2019). The 20th century has witnessed the professionalization and specialization of a diversely skilled workforce, including linguists, script translators, dialogue adapters, voice actors and directors, subtitlers and editors, who have been engaged in various degrees in the linguistic adaptation of filmic, video, and digital content.

Catering to diverse tastes and sensibilities around the world, AVT work has been impacted by policies that control the production and circulation of screen media across national and linguistic borders, norms and regulations that have in turn shaped the socio-cultural and legal status of AVT professions throughout the 20th century. The more recent introduction of generative AI is now challenging the professional standards of a translation industry that has relied on technological innovation since its inception and thus poses new challenges for both highly specialized practitioners and those who are training and wish to enter the AVT field.

Taking a historical perspective, the proposed seminar aims to investigate the human element in audiovisual translation. It will host a selection of case studies which highlight continuities and disruptions in the *modus operandi* of audiovisual translators at key points in the history of screen media. Based on the analysis of archival materials and extant translations, this seminar ultimately aims to unravel the tension that exists between the human factor and technology-driven practices, assessing how this tension has in turn impacted AVT policy, quality standards and linguistic output.

Specific lines of investigation might include:

- Historical and archival approaches to AVT
- Diachronic perspectives: (shared) translation practices and their evolution
- Agents in AVT history
- Historical approaches to AVT reception: the role of audiences
- Developments in AVT policy and impact on linguistic output
- Changes in artistic, aesthetic and quality standards in AVT
- Becoming an audiovisual translator (linguistic and technical training, market forces etc.); Processes of professional specialization in a historical perspective
- The interplay between technological innovation and professionalization of the AVT workforce

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SEM22. Papers

22A 11 September h. 11.00-13.00, Terracini PN

- *Translating cinema in the silent era: from Charlie Chaplin to Buster Keaton* (Serenella Zanotti, Università di Roma Tre)
- *A matter of authenticity: Hollywood's wartime language units* (Carla Mereu Keating, University of Bristol, UK / Università di Cagliari)
- *"Per ragioni di ordine pubblico": Government control of British and American films in Italy in the aftermath of World War II (1946-1959)* (Valerio Monticelli, Sapienza Università di Roma)

22B 11 September h. 16:00-18:30, Terracini PN

- *TV Dubbing in Italy: A diachronic perspective on human translation, adaptation and dubbing practices* (Linda Rossato, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia)
- *The evolution of orality in Anglophone films and Italian dubbing: A diachronic study on hesitations* (Ludovica Calogero, Università degli Studi Roma Tre)
- *In-text intervention vs. paratextual guidance: A shift in the adaptation of sensitive audiovisual content?* (Chiara Bucaria, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna)
- *Resisting automation: Arnait Video Productions and the power of human subtitling in Inuit cinema* (Eleonora Sasso, Università degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio" Chieti-Pescara)

SEM22. Abstracts

In-text intervention vs. paratextual guidance: A shift in the adaptation of sensitive audiovisual content?

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The introduction of new distribution mechanisms such as streaming platforms on a global scale over the last decade has revolutionized not only the consumption of audiovisual content in general but also the practice, distribution, and access to audiovisual translation modes. Easier access to original and translated versions has also made audiences potentially more vigilant toward the accuracy of the translators' work, with social media and other online outlets empowering viewers to express their disagreement with certain adaptation choices (e.g. Bucaria 2023).

This paper focuses on one aspect of audiovisual localization that has been affected by these recent developments and looks at a recent shift in the adaptation of sensitive language and content that has been happening over the last few years in the dubbing and subtitling for the entertainment industry (Bucaria 2024). Previous research on the cross-cultural adaptation of sensitive and taboo language and subjects has pointed out that blatant examples of manipulation and censorship often occurred in dubbed and subtitled dialogue (e.g. Chiaro 2007, Díaz Cintas 2012, Díaz Cintas *et al.* 2016, Ranzato 2016). While the manipulation of audiovisual dialogue in translation is still practiced (especially in some linguistic-cultural contexts), this paper argues that recent changes in the distribution of audiovisual content – such as the global presence of streaming and on-demand platforms, and an increased linguistic and cultural awareness from certain audience segments – now tend to make it less likely for major cases of cross-cultural taboo manipulation to happen without going unnoticed or generating pushback. In particular, by looking at the cases of Netflix and Amazon Prime Video this paper discusses how the paratextual information available on the interfaces of these streaming platforms – in the form of synopses, extra-textual tags, and content advisories – reframes sensitive content for global audiences in a less invasive way when compared to the heavy-handed, textual manipulation that was common in dubbing and subtitling in the age of (exclusively) linear TV. Examples from the Netflix and Amazon Prime Video English- and Italian-language interfaces will be provided to support the idea that in these cases cultural and linguistic localization through paratextual information can play a crucial role in adapting sensitive content for global audiences and in affecting their viewing choices.

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The evolution of orality in Anglophone films and Italian dubbing: A diachronic study on hesitations

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Hesitations are natural occurrences in spontaneous conversations, resulting from the complex processes carried out by speakers who must both “plan and execute their utterances in real time” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 1048). In AVT, these features are part of what is commonly referred to as “prefabricated orality” (Baños-Piñero & Chaume, 2009); stylistic devices purposefully inserted in dialogues to convey a sense of orality and spontaneity to viewers, allowing to follow the narrative events and draw the correct inferences regarding the story, the characters and their interpersonal relationships (Jucker, 2015; Kozloff, 2000). In translation, however, elements of spontaneous conversation are commonly overlooked, reduced and simplified since their rendering, or lack of rendering, does not seem to alter the overall structure of the story (Bruti, 2019, p. 197; Valdeón, 2008).

By reviewing the communicative functions and meanings of hesitations in spontaneous speech (Kjellmer, 2003), the present study aims to compare the occurrences of hesitations — a phenomenon hitherto insufficiently researched — in both original and translated pre-planned dialogues. This is achieved through a corpus-based diachronic approach and a translation-oriented analysis of a parallel corpus of original Anglophone films and their Italian dubbed version, distributed between 1950 and 2020.

By observing the way hesitations are codified in film speech and their functions within the mechanisms of onscreen interactions, the diachronic analysis allows to attest the evolution of film dialogue over the years, namely any changes in the conventions regarding orality in audiovisual texts, as well as in the translation strategies employed to render hesitations in Italian dubbing. At the same time, in a context in which technological innovation and AI are said to jeopardize the professional role of both translators and dubbing actors, the study of hesitations brings the human element to the forefront, drawing attention to the role of these “paralinguistic alternants” (Poyatos, 2002) in the actors’ performances as conveying a variety of meanings and affecting the overall pragmatic interpretation of both the original and dubbed speech.

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A matter of authenticity: Hollywood’s wartime language units

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My intervention explores how localized practices of sound film translation were disrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War. It focuses on Hollywood’s relocation of their European-based translation activities to the United States in the early to mid-1940s. As restrictive quotas and wartime disruptions affected their film distribution and localization operations in the Continent, large film companies such as Warner Bros and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer began scouting for French, Italian and Spanish “linguists” and “authentic voices” in the United States in order to set up provisional translation units in their West and East Coast studios. In collaboration with the United States Office of War Information (OWI), the majors “hand-picked” some of their backlog films to be dubbed and subtitled in various languages, ready to be shipped to

various European and North African territories as soon as these were liberated by Allied armies (“American Distributors”, 1943; “40 Pix”, 1943).

Some difficulties, however, were encountered when setting up these units across the Atlantic. As experienced in the late 1920s during the transition to sound filmmaking, finding ‘a sufficient number of competent scripters’, translators, titlists and performers suitable for subtitling and dubbing work was not always an easy task; the cost of translating films in the United States was also an issue, as the majors had to pay “higher wages” to technicians and performers than in Europe (“Yank Cos.”, 1943). Discussing a selection of extracts from legal, administrative, press and script materials, I reflect on the role that practices of audiovisual translation had in the circulation of screen propaganda that accompanied the Allies’ advances in the European war theatre. I finally argue for the importance of thinking historically about translation standards, market expectations and geographical and contractual conditions of employment when assessing mode and quality of translation output.

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“Per ragioni di ordine pubblico”: Government control of British and American films in Italy in the aftermath of World War II (1946-1959)

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Foreign films’ censorship in Italy was mainly investigated in relation to the fascist era, a period of decrees aimed at controlling foreign narratives and suppressing representations deemed politically troublesome or morally inconvenient (Mereu Keating 2012, 2016; Ranzato 2016). In this perspective, Mereu Keating analysed the preventive censorship over foreign films guaranteed by dubbing (2016) and the policies adopted in relation to overseas productions (2012). The present study considers the immediate post-World War II period to demonstrate that the dubbing of foreign films in post-fascist Italy served similar functions of control and manipulation dictated by the predominant power structures of the time.

Even though the entire system of laws enforced on the matter was abrogated after the fall of fascism (*D. Lgs. Lgt. No. 678/1945*), the censorship practices related to audiovisual content operated in the previous decades continued to remain in place. The Central Office for Cinematography (Law No. 379/1947) – whose commission became part of the General Direction of Entertainment in 1948 and acted on behalf of the prime minister – consistently inspected all audiovisual products, imposing cuts and significant alterations to imported films to avoid issues of public disorder (Curti 2023). In the commission’s perspective, it was essential that the Allies were not negatively perceived by the Italian audience, and that the country’s national prestige remained unaffected by their narrative. Hence, examining a selection of films translated between 1946 and 1959, this paper explores how censorship was exercised by the Central Office for Cinematography on British and American productions of the period. By focusing on war films and crime drama through the lens of Descriptive Translation Studies, this study investigates how manipulation was effectively achieved through dubbing. The aim is therefore to analyse how Italian translators dealt with the conditions imposed by the Central Office’s commission, identifying the translational strategies they adopted to remove or avoid problematic references to Italianness and Italian institutions that occurred in the Allies’ productions.

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TV Dubbing in Italy: A diachronic perspective on human translation, adaptation and dubbing practices

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Research on audiovisual translation (AVT) has grown considerably within translation studies over the last 20 years. AVT practices have been studied in different language combinations and media. Approached from both linguistic and cultural perspectives and within different theoretical frameworks (Díaz Cintas 2009; Pérez González 2014), the more traditional forms of AVT, namely dubbing (Chaume, 2012; Ranzato and Zanotti 2019) and subtitling (Díaz-Cintas, 2010), as well as more accessible forms of translation, such as subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing and audio description for the blind and partially sighted, have increasingly received scholarly attention. Both diachronic studies (Mereu Keating 2016; O'Sullivan C. and Cornu 2019) and synchronic approaches (Antonini 2008; Chiaro 2021; Bucaria 2023) have been used to explore the many facets of dubbing and its recent evolution. However, a diachronic overview of dubbing for television in Italy, addressing the specificities of dubbing practices for television and taking into account the nature of the television industry, which differs from the film industry, is, to our knowledge, still lacking in the scholarly literature. From the early days of 'handmade' television dubbing, when dialogue writers had almost the status of literary authors, to the current revolution unleashed by on-demand video streaming platforms that control the dubbing process of globally distributed original TV series, this paper seeks to fill this gap. Based on a series of interviews conducted with Italian professionals in the dubbing industry and on the analysis of key issues of dubbed TV series from a cross-cultural, diachronic perspective, this paper offers an overview of the recent evolution of TV dubbing in Italy, from the 1980s to the present day.

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Resisting automation: Arnait video productions and the power of human subtitling in Inuit cinema

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Arnait Video Productions, a collective of Inuit women filmmakers dedicated to presenting Inuit voices in documentaries and narrative films, is a model for how Indigenous film can cope with the increasingly widespread application of AI in audiovisual production.

As a human-centered production that encourages the strength of community-driven narrative, particularly in opposition to technologies that can threaten cultural specificity, Arnait insists on human translation, cultural authenticity, and community authorship, reminding U.S. that technology needs to work for culture, not against it. In such Arnait movies as *Before Tomorrow* (2008) and *Restless River* (2019), digital editing and subtitling tools were used to streamline post-production, but the team relied on Inuit elders to ensure the Inuktitut dialogue was translated into English with respect to oral tradition and spirituality. From a historical perspective, Arnait's AVT exemplify the indigenous legacy of marginalisation and revitalisation.

Their method of subtitling is not just technical but it reflects decades of linguistic erosion, cultural suppression, and more recent efforts at decolonisation. Historically, Inuit stories were mediated through colonial frameworks, often translated without community consent or cultural accuracy. Arnait reverses this trend by asserting Indigenous agency in every stage of production and translation. I intend to track through these references and look at the issues – the human factor and technology-driven practices, Arnait AVT strategies for protecting against the homogenising tendencies of automation, resistance translation asserting cultural identity, etc – which they raise.

But my central purpose will be to re-read *Before Tomorrow* and *Restless River* through both historical and cognitive perspectives—two approaches that illuminate how subtitling practices serve as tools of cultural resistance, memory, and revitalisation. Historical translation analysis perspective foregrounds the material and ideological conditions under which translations are produced (O’Sullivan & Cornu 2019). Applying historical approaches to audiovisual translation involves understanding how translation practices evolve in response to sociopolitical forces, technological changes, and cultural movements. In the case of Arnait Video Productions, this approach reveals a trajectory of resistance and adaptation that aligns AVT with Inuit self-representation and cultural resilience. As cognitive agents (Rojo & Ibarretxe-Antuñano 2013), Arnait translators bring memory, affect, and local knowledge to each subtitle but their work also occurs with a historical structure. Individual translator choices (cognition) will be investigated as historically situated acts (power, resistance, and agency) in order to show not only the translator’s mental processes, but also the ideological environment shaping them.

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Translating cinema in the silent era: From Charlie Chaplin to Buster Keaton

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Silent film translation was a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon. As Ruth Vasey (1997) has shown, once films entered distribution, both domestically and internationally, they could be easily modified. The filmic text was vulnerable to intervention and transformation, ultimately shaped by the specific context in which it was exhibited.

Adapting a foreign film demanded a high level of expertise, encompassing complex operations such as translation, film editing and dialogue writing (O’Sullivan & Cornu, 2019b). Translation and re-editing were essential mechanisms for the films being marketed successfully abroad, with film distributors playing a decisive role in encouraging transformative approaches (Zanotti 2025a and 2025b).

This paper will focus on the “adaptive strategies” (Adamson, 2019: 32) employed by film translators to tailor silent films for local audiences, enabling them to transcend their original cultural boundaries. Drawing on contemporary periodicals, censorship records, production documents, and other archival materials, this paper will examine film translation practices in late 1920s Italy. The aim is to unveil the intricacies and complexities of the film translator’s craft, which extended beyond the translation of text on screen (Nornes, 2007).

By focusing on a specific context of reception, the analysis will delve into the notion of translation in the silent film world. It will be shown that, in the silent period, translation encompassed a wide range of transformative practices, including forms of “overtranslation” (O’Sullivan & Cornu, 2019a, 7). Through an analysis of some foreign-distributed versions of films, ranging from Charlie Chaplin to Buster Keaton, it will be shown that films were subject to a wide range of reworkings, confirming the view that “each act of translation create[d] a new filmic text, or ‘cinematic event’” (Serna 2014: 141). It will be argued that, through translation, films could be imbued with discourses markedly different from those of the original creator, thereby coming close to hijacking the original film text.

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