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The reception of professional and non professional subtitles:

Agency, awareness and change

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Abstract

The article offers insights into media content consumption, especially through subtitling, from the point of view of the users' awareness and agency as key factors for change. Starting from a redefinition of audience in relation to today's media and their viewers' proactive attitude (prosumption), the article reports on an experiment aiming to test the comprehension and appreciation of professional and non-professional subtitles for two popular series by Netflix, namely Black Mirror and Narcos. In its conclusions, the article reflects on changes in viewing habits as inspired, among other factors, by the viewers' active participation in the making of subtitles.

Keywords: subtitling, reception, prosumption, agency, awareness

On 30 march, 2017, Netflix issued a call for "the best translators around the globe"[1], a slogan to advertise its new online subtitlers' testing and indexing platform, Hermes. The next day, Forbes published an online article explaining why Netflix was looking for qualified translators, with its international market currently amounting to over 45% of the overall clients and bound to increase in the coming years. As Forbes put it, the new platform released by Netflix "will allow it to tap into translator talent across the globe"[2] and, hopefully, ensure smooth enjoyment of their entertainment media products. What Forbes did not mention, however, is the antecedent, i.e. the fast and occasionally fuzzy production of translations to accompany distribution of their products into non English-speaking countries,

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[1] See Netflix public announcement here: https://media.netflix.com/en/company-blog/netflix-is-looking-for-the-best-translators-around-the-globe (accessed September 2018).

[2] https://www.forbes.com/sites/greatspeculations/2017/03/31/heres-why-netflix-is-looking-for-translators/ - 6fd86b454823 (accessed September 2018).

which resulted in waves of criticism[3]. As often happens when it comes to home entertainment or VOD, fansubbing communities in several countries developed parallel versions of subtitles for many Netflix series, making them available in short times and occasionally encouraging their use by means of easy-to-use technologies. This is the case of Italy where, relying on a Chrome plugin that allows users to watch Netflix audiovisual products with customized subtitles, Itasa[4], i.e. one of the largest fansubbing communities, resynched all their subtitles to encourage a more widespread use with Netflix.

Due to the fast spreading of alternative subtitles such as those created by Itasa, we decided to embark on an experiment to test comprehension and overall reception of different subtitles for two popular Netflix series, namely *Black Mirror* and *Narcos*. This article reports on the experiment, but first of all it reflects on changes in the composition and role of media audiences in recent years, as well as on the growing importance of audience research in audiovisual translation studies (AVTS). A series of reflections on the role of non professional subtitling today is also offered in the following pages, with methodological suggestions for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and the analysis of subtitling reception, even in a predominantly dubbing country like Italy.

Keywords for this essay certainly include reception, but also agency, awareness and change, in relation to subtitling but also, more generally, to media content creation and consumption. Agency refers here to a major change in the audience role in today's consumption, or better *prosumption* (Toffler, 1980) of media texts, but also to the activity and force of fans as non professional subtitlers. Awareness applies to non professional subtitlers, their increasing tendency to claim, or conceive for themselves, a quasi-professional recognition, although preserving and complying with specific production standards. Awareness also refers to the viewers' acknowledgement of their foreign language competence and subtitling competence. As a matter of fact, it is a change in viewers' awareness that is here highlighted through the experiment results. As always happens with empirical research (Di Giovanni, 2018a), unexpected findings were obtained with this experiment and most of them are connected precisely with new or renewed awareness.

Last but not least, change here applies to all of the above, but also to AVTS and its mutation through audience reception studies. It encompasses changes in audience role when it comes to on-demand content and its consumption, to the overall subtitling production and fruition across legal and non-legal context, even in what are still predominantly dubbing countries.

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[3] See, for instance, consumers and critics protests at http://www.av-kaantajat.fi/in_english/netflix-s-translation-strategy-l/ or http://cphpost.dk/news/culture/netflix-success-marred-by-poor-subtitles-high-cost-and-limited-stock.html (accessed September 2018).

[4] Itasa is the short name for italiansubs.net: https://www.italiansubs.net.

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1. (Re)defining audience and its study

The concept of audience is at the core of media reception research and is undoubtedly one of the most difficult to define, especially in general terms. Many classifications of audience have been put forth by scholars in media and reception studies, according to age, education and often on the grounds of their attitude to media consumption. For instance, in *Researching Audiences* (2003: 114) Schroeder *et al.* classify audiences −mainly with reference to media advertisements− as *sympathetic*, *agnostic* or *cynical*, whereas in *Audiences* (1998: 40) Abercrombie and Longhurst define the concept of audience in relation to that of performance, which refers both to the show and to the active role of viewers as participants in that show. The authors make a distinction between *simple*, *mass* and *diffused* audience, all of them variously engaging in modes of performance, as is particularly relevant for the case discussed here.

Over the past decade or so, media and reception studies have been facing the challenge of audience (re)definition, especially with reference to mainstream, clear-cut media and their most recent and popular offspring, namely VOD platforms, internet-based series and streaming content. In particular, the linear model of communication - from producer to receiver - and the supposedly limited agency of the receivers have come to be increasingly challenged, to such an extent that the notions of producers and receivers are often blurred and the very word 'audience' may appear inappropriate:

> At times, it seems that the term 'audiences' became somehow limiting for media scholars in their effort to address the rising visibility of audiences' productive practices, and new concepts have been proposed to cover particular aspects of being an audience. (Pavlíčková and Kleut, 2016: 350)

Today, audiences do not only hold power over meaning in the consumption/reception phase: they have a proactive attitude to meaning making even in some stages of the production process.

In fact, such an attitude does not seem to belong to our days only: in 1990, Willis (cited in Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 25) defined audiences as cultural producers, whereas in the early years of this new century many scholars have evoked the notions of active, or creative audience (see, for instance, Ritzer, 2014).

One particularly valuable term used to view audiences as active creators is that of *produsage*. Bruns offers a compelling discussion (see Bruns and Highfield, 2012; Bruns and Schmidt, 2011; Bruns, 2008a, 2008b), whereby produsage not only refers to the active involvement of consumers in the production stage, but it also highlights their creative effort. Thus, a produser is a user-turned-producer in creative, often innovative ways. This is the case also for non professional translators, in many contexts, especially in relation to streaming and VOD content.

Interestingly, scholars such as Picone (2011) have also explored audiences who engage in media content production somehow casually, remaining predominantly consumers. This was perhaps the case for early attempts at producing fansubs, for personal use or for sharing within small communities of fans. Today, the phenomenon has spread and evolved so much that it is far from casual and it very often reaches out to the general audience, beyond fan communities. However, in response to the question "are we all producers now?" formulated in relation to the pervasive phenomenon of fan alteration and innovation of media content, Pavlíčkováand Kleut recall that the number of truly active audience members, classifiable as produsers, is still very limited and confined to the internet population. The concept of produsers, however, is indeed useful here and it will be borne in mind when exploring the agency of professional and non professional subtitlers in the following sections. Before proceeding to a more detailed analysis, let us reflect on the increasing importance and impact of reception research in AVTS.

2. The hype of reception studies in AVT

Although audiovisual translation has been practiced since the audiovisual media came into existence, well over a century ago, even before the advent of sound in cinema (Zanotti, 2018), the empirical study of its reception by the audience is a rather recent phenomenon, at least in an explicit, systematic way. If it is true that the audience reactions to translated versions of films, for instance, were often reflected in critics' accounts and printed press articles since the late 30s and 40s (Cornu, 2014: 15), and that film and media studies have touched upon crosscultural reception of translated audiovisual texts many times, the first experiments and investigations from translation scholars appeared at the end of the last century, mostly in the form of PhD research (Di Giovanni, 2018a).

Still in the last century, a lot of ground-breaking, pivotal research came in the form of experiments aiming to test and further develop specific AVT techniques, in particular those addressing special segments of the audience such as subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH) and audio description (Romero Fresco, 2018; Jankowska, 2015).

In relation to the former, Romero Fresco (2018) recalls that research aiming to test SDH appeared even before subtitles were aired on television, in the USA:

> Reception research on SDH started in the US in the early 1970s, a decade before subtitles were first used on TV, with a series of studies that have been largely overlooked in the AVT literature. Most of these were PhD theses analyzing the benefits of captions for deaf students. [...] The introduction of closed captions on US TV in 1980 led to the first large-scale research studies on user habits and preferences. In 1981, Blatt and Sulzer designed a national survey including

demographic variables, viewing habits and specific aspects of the Captioned ABC News. Data was obtained from 1475 people, primarily deaf (rather than hard of hearing) with a high level of education and TV viewing. (2018: 201)

In the case of audio description, significant research appeared in the USA in the late Fifties and in the Seventies, published respectively by a young scholar in the field of accessibility, Gregory Frazier, and by two early-day practitioners, Margaret and Cody Pfanstiehl (Di Giovanni, 2018b). However, in both SDH and audio description, steady research based on the end users' reception came before other more widespread and well-known techniques such as subtitling and dubbing, at the very dawn of this new century.

As the origins of AVTS are normally traced to the late Eighties/early Nineties (Pérez-González, 2014), making it a young sub-disciplinary area, it is understandable that reception studies were not immediately developed, all the more so as the investigation of consumption of audiovisual media, and the effects thereof, is indeed a complex matter and normally linked to idiosyncratic habits.

With reference to subtitling, reception studies were, once again, initiated by scholars outside translation-related research. Géry d'Ydewalle, a psychologist, started investigating subtitling reading patterns in the very early Nineties (early publications appeared in 1991 and 1992). However, although developed within cognitive psychology, his studies have been, and still are, among the most influential for subtitling scholars focusing on reception, as he foregrounded the onset of one of the most prolific strands to date, i.e. eye tracking research. Interestingly, AVTS scholars who started working steadily on eye tracking to gauge perception of subtitled audiovisual texts, are still constantly drawing inspiration from different areas of psychological research to better ground their studies (see, for instance, the work of Louise Fryer, Agnieszka Szarkowska, Jan Louis Kruger).

The phenomenon of non professional subtitling has certainly contributed to the development of reception research in AVTS: several scholars have, in the past few years, engaged in putting fan-produced subtitles to the test in terms of reception, obtaining varying results across countries and years. Bruti and Zanotti, for instance, provided a hybrid contribution to reception research in relation to fansubbing with an article published in 2013. They carried out a study mixing a comparative linguistic analysis of three sets of subtitles for a pilot episode of the American TV series *Lost* (provided respectively by the two largest Italian fansubbing communities and by professional subtitlers for the commercial DVD), with a questionnaire administered to over 230 university students whose aim was to test comprehension and preferences. Questionnaire results reveal selective, but generally higher, comprehension for fansubs over DVD subtitles. By 'selective' we mean that in the presence of orality markers, such as vocatives and interjections, comprehension is higher for fan-created subtitles, and this is matched by a greater attention to coherence in the translation of such markers on the part of fansubbers rather than professional subtitles. Keeping an eye on definitions of fan translation

activities, especially in relation to the concepts of agency and awareness, it is interesting to observe that Bruti and Zanotti refer to fansubbing as 'abusive, borrowing Marcus Nornes's popular definition (1999), but they also repeatedly lay emphasis on the creative, participatory, pervasive nature of this activity (2013: 121). Abusive subtitling in relation to fansubbing is mentioned also by David Orrego Carmona (2016 and 2017), whose contribution to the study of reception of non professional subtitling has so far been conspicuous. In a 2016 article, he reported on an experiment aiming to evaluate reception of subtitles produced by professionals and pro-am subtitlers, i.e. amateurs whose communities aim for quasi-professional standards. This definition also applies to the fansubbing community whose subtitling output we analyse in the following sections, and it is particularly interesting as it impinges on issues of agency and awareness in relation to both professional and non professional subtitling practices. Orrego Carmona's experiment starts from the general hypothesis, or "orthodox approach in audiovisual translation" (2016: 170), as he calls it, that professional subtitling is thought to be more easily and smoothly received by viewers. The experiment involved the viewing of 3-minute clips from *The Big Bang Theory* on an X120 Tobii eye tracker, with 3 different sets of Spanish subtitles, two from fansubbers and one from the Spanish DVD. The eye tracking tests were paired with questionnaires, mainly aiming to test reading efforts and what the author names reception capacity. The latter concept is inspired by Gambier's definition of reception through the three Rs (2006), where one of them, *responses*, includes three elements: iconic, verbal and narrative attention. Like Gambier, Orrego Carmona relates iconic attention to the intake of visual stimuli, whereas verbal attention refers to the understanding of dialogues. Narrative attention, in turn, refers to the plot and its comprehension. In an updated contribution centred on this analytical model, Gambier (2018) mentions these three elements as ideally tested via "controlled experimental procedures", including eye tracking and EEG. These tools, however, can account for an evaluation of perception rather than overall reception of subtitled media texts, and measuring responses as they are defined above requires more than an analysis of perception. Orrego Carmona, as said above, did complement his eye tracking experiment with a questionnaire.

At this stage, it may be worth expanding on perception and reception as they are intended in this essay. As discussed elsewhere (Di Giovanni, 2018a: 161), perception refers to "what is impressed on the eyes when watching media" and it "stops before any act of interpretation". Reception, on the other hand, is a broader concept and can be defined as "the way/s in which individuals and groups interact with media content, how a text is interpreted, appreciated, remembered" (ibid.). Therefore, the study of reception can and should encompass perception, but it goes beyond it, to include comprehension, enjoyment, self-reported difficulties, memory, cognitive load, etc.

In the following sections, we will discuss results from an experiment aiming to map reception of professional and non professional subtitles in relation to

comprehension, self-reported difficulties, enjoyment, linguistic and subtitling awareness. Comprehension, in itself, will be related to iconic and verbal attention as defined by Gambier and Orrego Carmona, whereas narrative attention will not be discussed, as it seems to be embodied in the very concept of comprehension.

Before embarking on the experiment description, let us reflect on professional and non professional subtitling from yet another point of view.

3. The impact of non professional subtitles

Although not focusing explicitly on reception, a great contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon of non professional subtitling is offered by Tessa Dwyer in *Speaking in Subtitles. Revaluing Screen Translation* (2017). One of the main tenets of her book is the revision, or revaluation, of the notion of quality in relation to subtitling. In line with, and beyond, Orrego Carmona's idea of an orthodox approach which sees quality as more frequently attached to professional rather than non professional settings by scholars and practitioners, Dwyer advocates for an overall revaluation of this notion "by elucidating connections between abstraction and practice" (2017: 5), i.e. by considering all possible variables and elements which have a bearing on translation and its assessment. Quite effectively, to this end, Dwyer evokes the notion of errancy as a complement to that of quality, as "it activates a process of reflection or re-conceptualisation by forcing a question as to where the value of translation lies" (ibid. 7). Errancy, to Dwyer, is related to "translation faults - errors, failures, mistranslations and misrepresentations" (Ibid: 109), which are to be taken as signals for pressure points or cracks vital to an overall revaluation of subtitling. In elaborating on quality and errancy, Dwyer always keeps in mind both professional and non professional settings, the latter more commonly defined by her as *amateur* practices. Her definition of amateur subtitling brings up the notions of agency and awareness yet again: fansubbing is, to Dwyer, "a guerrilla-type practice that rebels against legal media and translation frameworks" (ibid. 123), but it also occasionally claims recognition and aims for standardization. Also, in Dwyer's terms, errancy and the faults thereof stimulate rethinking, therefore renewed awareness and agency.

Guerrilla fan translation, just like Orrego Carmona's pro-am subtitling, occasionally mimics commercial norms: as Dwyer further asserts, "through such forms of imitation, guerrilla translation aims to achieve a level of invisibility. Instead, however, the act of translation is made doubly visible. Despite aiming to pass as professional and mainstream, guerrilla practices tend to announce themselves via overt flaws" (ibid. 125).

Dwyer's notion of errancy, seen mainly in terms of translation failures and misrepresentations, will be useful for the following analysis of questionnaire results. After focusing on reception as comprehension, self-reported difficulties,

enjoyment, linguistic and subtitling awareness, a reflection on the concept of errancy will lead us to conclusions and stimulate further research and action.

4. A reception experiment with Netflix series

These days, the debate on fansubbing versus professional subtitling is possibly more heated than ever: while the volume of subtitles produced worldwide increases and subtitling rates paid by large, multinational companies to professional translators hit bottom level, occasionally forcing them to a take-it-or-leave-it choice, fan communities expand in several directions, generally either increasing their shadowed competition with the professional world or defining a niche community for themselves, away from market circles and visibility.

As fast-growing, international colossi like Netflix become ever more pervasive, undoubtedly re-shaping our viewing habits, radical changes to the creation, distribution and consumption of subtitled texts proceed in parallel.

As mentioned above, Netflix has recently shown some efforts towards enhancing subtitling quality and the working conditions of their subtitlers, especially in the wake of complaints from viewers[5]. At the same time, fansubbing communities have been producing their own subtitles for Netflix series and made them not-so-covertly available to users in many countries. Itasa (https://www.italiansubs.net)[6], as anticipated, fastly resynched their subtitles for Netflix products so as they could be used by all viewers through Super Netflix, a Chrome plugin alowing for the replacement of Netflix official subtitles. This popular instance of pro-am attitude stimulated our curiosity as researchers, also considering the difficulties in reading Netflix-produced subtitles often expressed by viewers and critics[7].

A small team at the University of Macerata thus decided to choose two Netflix popular series, namely *Black Mirror* and *Narcos*, and test a selected sample of viewers for their comprehension and overall reception of subtitles by Netflix and Itasa. Use was made of a three-section questionnaire, comprising both open and closed questions and requiring on average 11.8 minutes to be filled out. The first and second section referred to either the clip from *Black Mirror* or from *Narcos*, according to randomization (see details below) and it comprised 9 questions, 5

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[5] It may be worth mentioning, however, that the platform developed by Netflix for testing subtitling competence - Hermes - is no longer in use.

[6] As of 15 September 2018, after 13 years of activity, the Itasa community made its own platform inactive.

[7] See, for instance, http://cphpost.dk/news/culture/netflix-success-marred-by-poor-subtitles-high-cost-and-limited-stock.html(accessed September 2018) or https://www.reddit.com/r/netflix/comments/3z7aig/subtitle_quality_has_been_going_downhill_us/(accessed September 2018).

open and 4 closed. 6 out of 9 of these questions focused specifically on comprehension as elicited through iconic and/or verbal attention for the selected clip, whereas the final 3 were repeated for both clips and aimed at eliciting overall comprehension. The third and final section of the questionnaire comprised 6 questions, with replies based on a 5-point Likert scale, aiming to stimulate further reflection on reception through self-reported difficulties, enjoyment, linguistic and subtitling awareness.

Before moving any further, let us recall here that the experiment did not aim at supporting, or even putting to the test, what Orrego Carmona calls the orthodox approach to subtitling, nor did it aim at showcasing fansubbing as a valid alternative to professionally created subtitles. Our aim was to evaluate audience response to viewing and understanding *à la page* media texts such as Netflix most popular series through two different sets of subtitles openly available to all.

Upon viewing several episodes of the above-mentioned series with subtitles both from Netflix and from Itasa, and noticing potential errancy issues in both, we aimed to see to what extent comprehension was supported, enhanced or hampered by the subtitles and the overall effect (reception, awareness) on the viewers.

The experiment set up and administration is detailed in the following section.

4.1 Set up and administration

Netflix is nowadays popular with people of all ages worldwide, although its active users tend to be mainly in the 20 to 40 age range[8]. We thus decided to limit our experiment to participants in the 20 to 30 age group, with an equal share of men and women. We were resolute in avoiding the so-called "student bias" (Di Giovanni, 2018a and b) in empirical research, therefore we planned our experiment away from the university premises. Students were not utterly excluded from our experiment, but they were not especially recruited. All language and translation students, however, were refused participation due to a potentially higher than average linguistic and translation competence. Overall, we had 30 participants, 15 male and 15 female, with an average age of 26.2. 60% of them declared to be university students, the remaining 40% were either looking for a job or in a professional position.

As stated above, our aim was to test comprehension and overall reception for two excerpts from *Black Mirror* and *Narcos*. The clips were selected on the grounds of the following parameters:

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[8] US figures for 2017 show that 77% of individuals in the 19 to 29 age group are active Netflix users, and for the 30 to 44 age group the percentage remains similarly high, i.e. 66%, much higher than older groups (https://www.statista.com/statistics/720723/netflix-members-usa-by-age-group/ accessed September 2018).

1) they were self-contained scenes,

2) they contained dialogue between two or more characters and additional verbal stimuli in the form of written text on screen,

3) they were essential for overall narrative comprehension,

4) they were of equal length.

The 3 minutes 20 second clip from *Black Mirror* was excerpted from episode 3 of season 3: it features a rather fast exchange between Hector and Karol at a gas station. The two are joined by teenager Kenny, who is running on a dangerous mission with Hector: they are guided by short, threatening text messages coming into Kenny's mobile phone. Hector and Kenny are about to hastily leave the gas station to reach their destination, but they are slowed down by Karol who asks for a lift. Hector does not manage to refuse it and the three embark on a very fast car ride. During the ride, Kenny's phone displays a mixture of navigator prompts and text messages guiding him and Hector to their destination.

The clip from *Narcos*, on the other hand, is taken from the opening scene in episode one of the very first series. It was chosen as it contains a variety of verbal stimuli beyond short dialogue exchanges, including initial scrolling text, voices off screen either from a narrator or through the phone, a few lines and names in Spanish. Basically, the scene introduces some of the series main tenets, i.e. drug traffic from Colombia to the United States, and some of the key agents involved: officers from DEA, the US government anti drug agency, men from the Pablo Escobar team. The scene also contains flashbacks and flash forwards, all elements being essential for an understanding of the overall narrative development.

The experiment was set up in the large, ground floor hall of a public library in the centre of Macerata and carried out over two days (11 a.m. to 6 p.m.). It featured four clips (two for each series, one with Netflix and one with Itasa subtitles), which were randomized as follows:

Narcos pro + *Black Mirror* pro-am
Narcos pro-am + *Black Mirror* pro
Black Mirror pro + *Narcos* pro-am
Black Mirror pro-am + *Narcos* pro

In terms of initial instructions, participants were told that we were working on research on translation for television series and that they would be required to watch two sequences and reply to short sets of questions after viewing each sequence. They were asked to wear headsets so as to avoid interference with room noise and so as not to bother other readers in the hall. In order to make each participant familiarize with the setting and the experiment, general demographic questions were asked prior to the first clip viewing, to elicit the participant's age, occupation and self-reported knowledge of English. The whole experiment remained anonymous and lasted on average 18.2 minutes.

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The three sections below discuss results from the questions related to *Black Mirror* (BM), those related to *Narcos* (NA) and the final set of general questions.

4.2 *Questions about* Black Mirror *with pro and pro-am subtitles*

As anticipated, the specific section of the questionnaire on BM contained 9 questions, both closed and open. The first two aimed at measuring verbal attention in relation to the opening sequence of the clip. Question one was closed and asked, "At the gas station, what does Karen ask Hector when Kenny is approaching?" The questionnaire offered four options, one of them being "I don't know"[9]. Participants who had watched the clip with Neflix subtitles provided only 33% of correct replies, whereas 27% of them chose "I don't know". The remaining replies were incorrect. Itasa subtitles generated 66% correct replies, with 20% of participants opting for "I don't know" and the remaining replies being incorrect.

The second question was open and asked participants to state how Karen describes herself to Kenny, still in the opening exchange. Several correct options were possible: Karen says she is head of the PTA in her kids' school, and she also remarks that Kenny's name and her own both start with K. On the whole, participants who watched the clip with Netflix subtitles provided only 27% correct replies, with a considerable 53% of "I don't know". Once again, the clip with subtitles from Itasa scored better results: 47% correct replies and only 33% "I don't know". Subtitle length is worth here mentioning as an influential issue: the original line by Karen is very short ("we're both Ks") and Itasa subtitles translate it as "entrambi con la K", whereas Netflix subtitles have a much longer "i nostri nomi iniziano tutti e due per K".

With question 3, iconic and verbal attention are both steadily called into play, although understanding speech through subtitles does also imply iconic attention. Question 3 was open, asking about the content of the first text messages sent to Kenny's phone. Once again, more than one option was correct and in counting all correct replies the percentages is higher for viewers of the clip with Itasa subtitles: 93% over 80% for Netflix subtitles. A similar, but closed question, asked about the content of the messages reaching Kenny's phone as Karen is enquiring about the boy's origins: with four options available, correct replies for Netflix subtitles amount to 86%, whereas for Itasa they scored 80%. When verbal attention is more central again, as in question 5 ("Where is Kenny going?"), participants watching the clip with Netflix subtitles provided 87% correct replies, whereas the percentage amounts to 80% in relation to Itasa subtitles. The sixth and final closed question stimulating iconic and verbal attention scored 47% correct replies for Itasa subtitles, whereas Netflix subtitles led to 40% of correct replies only.

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[9] For all closed questions, the four options included one correct reply, two wrong replies (connected to the visual and/or verbal stimuli) and "I don't know".
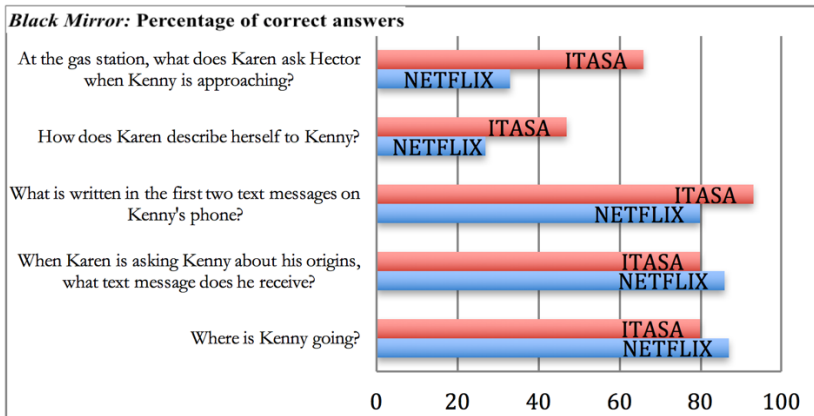
Figure 1. *Black Mirror* - The first five questions.

The three following questions aimed at eliciting reflections on comprehension, also through self-reported difficulties and subtitling awareness. Two were open (7 and 9) and one was closed (8). Question 7 asked participants to state if there was anything they thought they had not understood. Starting from those who watched the clip with Netflix subtitles, 6 out of 15 replied negatively, stating they thought all was clear. One specified that it was clear Hector and Kenny were being threatened. One participant only stated that s/he had perhaps missed something, without further specification. The remaining 8 participants all reported difficulties, focusing on several sections of the clip: 3 on the initial sequence at the gas station, 3 on the text messages, one on the relationship between Hector and Karen, and one on "what was actually happening throughout". These last two replies point to difficulties which may have been increased by using a clip which is not initial in an episode, although before the start participants were provided with a short recap of what had happened in the episode prior to the scene under analysis.

As for the clip with Netflix subtitles, participants who declared they had probably not missed anything were only 4. The other replies offer an array of self-reported difficulties: the initial sequence was not understood by 3, the text messages are reported to be impossible to grasp by 2, the overall scene is said to have been difficult by 2 more. Additionally, 2 participants said they had found the dialogues too fast and another said Karen's accent was difficult to understand. The last two replies are particularly interesting as they point to the confusion generated by fast sequences with equally fast subtitles. They may be viewed as attempts to grasp as much meaning as possible: to this end, it would seem that viewers try to rely on the original version, self-increasing cognitive load and probably losing even more of the overall comprehension.

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Question 8 was closed and asked, "Do you think you were always able to read the subtitles?" The replies given seem to be coherent with the results from the clip-specific questions reported above: 60% of viewers who had followed the Netflix subtitles said "no", whereas the percentage is lower (52%) for those who relied on Itasa subtitles. To close this section, a final question asked to express the reasons for the inability to read the subtitles (if any), thus stimulating further reflection on this issue. Participants who had watched the clip with Itasa subtitles provided 7 replies, mostly focusing on the difficulty of reading and listening, or reading + listening + reading (the text messages). For Netflix subtitles, 9 replies, were provided, of which 4 are particularly worth recalling: 2 participants stated that they decided to focus on the original audio, avoiding the subtitles, one declared that s/he doesn't normally use subtitles and this made comprehension through them more difficult. Finally, one person stated that the time given to read the subtitles was insufficient and this made overall comprehension of the sequence difficult.

These last replies provide valuable food for thought in relation to the linguistic and subtitling awareness which is stimulated by this type of experiment, both in positive and negative terms, and indeed call for further investigation across texts, genres and subtitles.

4.3 Questions about Narcos *with pro and pro-am subtitles*

For the NA clip, initial questions related to verbal but also iconic attention, elicited through the scrolling written text on screen in different colours appearing in the opening 30 seconds of the sequence.

Question 1 was closed, with four options provided as a possible reply to "Is the series inspired by fictional or real people and events?" Viewers of the clip with Netflix subtitles provided 73% correct replies, whereas the percentage goes up to 86% with Itasa subtitles. Question 2 was open, asking for a definition of magical realism, which again is provided in the scrolling text, in white and red types. For Netflix subtitles, viewers provided 33% correct replies, whereas for Itasa subtitles correct replies amount to 28%. Verbal attention is at the core of the following two questions, related to the voice off screen narrating the initial sequence in flash forward. Question 3 was closed and asked, "Who controls our phones and computers?" With four options offered, viewers of the Netflix subtitles provided 66% correct replies, whereas viewers of the Itasa subtitles amounted to 73%. Question 4 was open and asked where the episode takes place, and correct replies were higher for Netflix subtitles (60%) rather than Itasa (40%). In this case, however, Itasa subtitles overlap with the text on screen (Colombia, 1989), whereas Netflix professional subtitles appear at the top of the screen, thus allowing viewers to comfortably take in both pieces of information.

Question 5 involved both iconic and verbal attention, as participants were asked, through a closed question, how the American government controls certain

people's voices and the correct reply could be inferred from the images and the voice off screen: 80% of viewers of the clip with Itasa subtitles provided correct replies, whereas 67% of viewers of the Netflix subtitles were able to do the same. The final content-specific question asked, through a closed question, who is Steve Murphy. In this case, a striking 100% correct replies were given for the clip with Netflix subtitles, whereas Itasa subtitles yielded 86%.
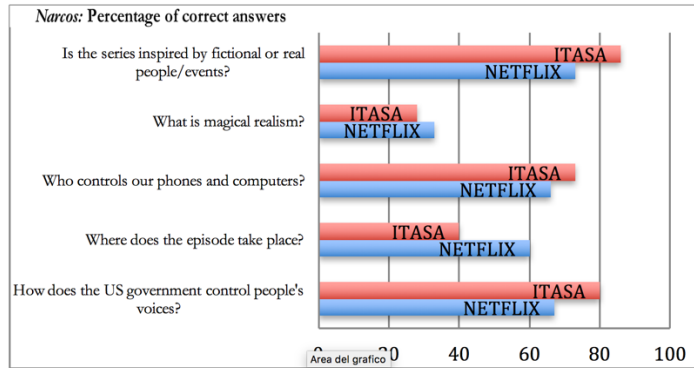

Figure 2. *Narcos* - The first five questions.

As for the *Black Mirror* clip, question 7 asked participants to state if there was anything they thought they had not understood. For the Netflix subtitles, 8 out of 15 participants declared they thought they had fully understood, one stated s/he was almost sure, but not 100%. Of the remaining participants, 3 stated they had not understood the off-screen voice, which again points to the recourse to the original version, in this case not motivated by particularly fast subtitles. 2 participants mentioned they had not understood what magical realism was, but these remarks were probably stimulated by the content-specific question on the issue, which may have otherwise been lost altogether.

Interesting results come, in this case, from the replies to question 8: when asked whether they thought they could always read the subtitles, 60% of viewers of the clip with Itasa subtitles replied no, whereas the percentage goes down to 53% with Netflix subtitles. Although this scene is generally slower in verbal and narrative pace than the other, thus allowing for more subtitle reading time, Netflix subtitles were generally longer for this clip, as for the one from BM. However, comprehension of the Itasa subtitles may here have been hampered by the lack of change of positions for titles which overlapped with written text onscreen, and by occasionally more radical translation solutions: some proper names are domesticated from the very beginning (Lagarto becomes Lucertola even before the character is shown), some foreign words are left in the Italian subtitles (guapa).

Finally, when asked to specify the reason for possibly not following the subtitles, 2 participants relying on the Netflix subtitles specified that they were too

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fast in disappearing. More interestingly, 5 participants mentioned a greater attention to the images in this clip, to the detriment of the subtitles, but only one refers to the original dialogue as a source of comprehension for the verbal information. For Itasa subtitles, 3 respondents remarked that subtitles were fast and only one said s/he mainly concentrated on the images. Two participants, on the other hand, referred to a greater interest for original dialogue rather than subtitles, which they declared not to use, normally preferring dubbing.

4.4 Difficulties, enjoyment, linguistic and subtitling awareness

The final section of the questionnaire invited participants to add comments to their overall experience and provided us with their own views of the reception of the two clips. Questions stimulating reflections on language competence, subtitling competence and enjoyment were also added. The results from this short sequence of questions, based on a 5-point Likert scale, are indeed worth considering.

First of all, participants were asked to rate their comprehension of the *Black Mirror* clip, from very low (1) to very high (5). Those who had to rely on the Netflix subtitles provided 20% of replies for the lower values (1/2), whereas point 3 (average) scored 46.7% of replies, point 4 (high) 13.3% and very high 20%. With Itasa subtitles, points 1 and 2 scored 26.7% taken together, point 3 26.7%, whereas option 4 (high) scored 46.7% and option five was not selected at all.
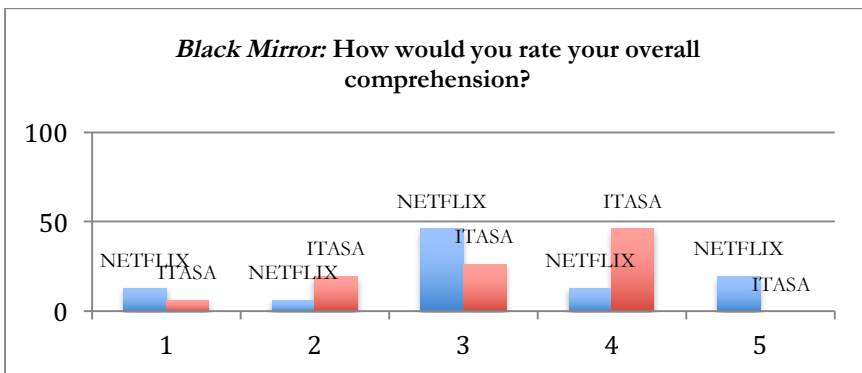

Figure 3. Self reported comprehension for *Black Mirror* (Likert scale)

For *Narcos*, viewers of the clip with Neflix subtitles scored 6.7% for the lower points (1 and 2), whereas the intermediate option scored 26.7%. Options 4 and 5 (high/very high) yielded 33.3% each. For Itasa subtitles, the two lower points scored 0%, whereas the middle point (3) scored 20%. Options high/very high (4 and 5) yielded 46.7% and 33.3% respectively, thus confirming overall higher scores

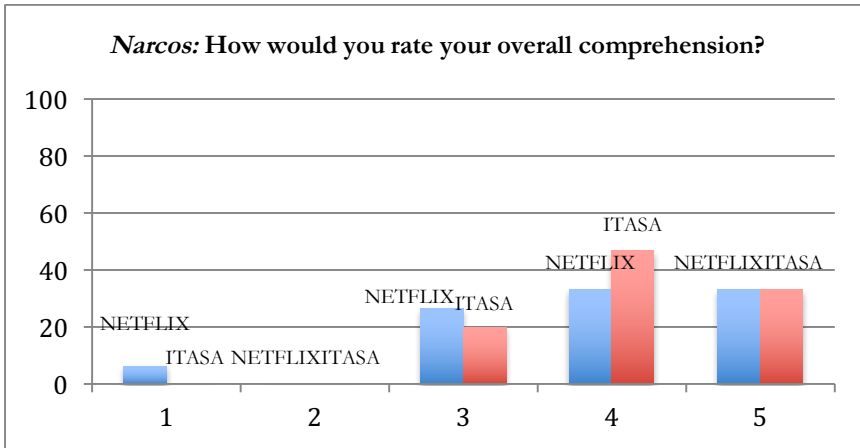for the clip viewed with Itasa rather than Netflix subtitles, even more than for the *Black Mirror* clip.

Figure 4. Self reported comprehension for *Narcos* (Likert scale)

The next question asked all 30 respondents[10] to generally rate the usefulness of subtitles in watching the clips: 10% of the participants rated it as very low (1), 13.3% as low (2), 23.3% as medium (3), whereas a rather striking 53.3% opted for high and very high (4 and 5). This datum, stimulated by a direct question, is somehow in contrast with several open replies provided in the first two sections of the questionnaire, which refer about the urge to resort to images or to the original dialogue. By way of explanation, we may argue that the open replies above were provided as an immediate reaction to watching the clip, whereas this question was part of a more comprehensive, non-content based section. The next question, on the other hand, provided coherent responses, as participants were asked to state how useful the images were for the overall comprehension of both clips: from very low (1) to medium (3), participants scored 46.7%, thus proving that more than half of them (53.3% opted for 4 and 5) are well aware of the overall importance of subtitles with and over the images. Further asked to specify if they thought their comprehension would have been higher if they had watched the clips in the original version without subtitles, participants selecting "absolutely not" (1) and "probably not" (2) amounted to 63.3% of the total, with a further 30% selecting

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[10] From this question onwards, all replies referred to the same object, without any separation between viewers of one clip (Itasa subtitles) or the other (Netflix subtitles).

the middle point (3). The following question asked whether they thought watching the clips with Italian dubbing would have increased comprehension: suffice it to say that 46.7% of the participants selected the highest value, 5, corresponding to "absolutely yes".

These last replies are particularly interesting in that they point to an essential element to be considered when evaluating the impact of subtitles on audiences, even the younger generations: exposure to dubbing or subtitling for mainstream media texts, from childhood onwards, keeps playing a major role in preferences and enjoyment of translated media texts, but also on foreign language competence and awareness.

5. Discussion

One of the most surprising results of this experiment concerns self-reported foreign language competence. When asked, prior to watching the clips, to rate their knowledge of English from very low to very high, again on a 5-point Likert scale, participants mostly replied either average (point 3) or high (point 4), for an overall 76.7%. (22 people out of 30). At the end of the experiment, perhaps stimulated by the final set of questions, 12 out of 30 participants spontaneously added comments, stating that they should review the declared language competence and that their knowledge of English was clearly lower. This may be the result of frustration generated by the experiment in many ways: clips were rather dynamic and fast, on the visual and verbal level, and no familiarizing excerpt had been presented before those used for the questionnaire. However, most participants declared they were generally familiar with the series and often exposed to Netflix products. Another reason for this revised linguistic awareness almost certainly lies in the use of subtitles over dubbing, as anticipated in the previous sections. Although another orthodox approach generally accepted in AVT today claims that younger generations in dubbing countries are more inclined to use subtitles, this is hardly what emerges from empirical research to date, either as a result of direct questions or experiments like the one here discussed. Furthermore, such final considerations are most likely to have been stimulated by cases of errancy found throughout the subtitled clips, both with Netflix and with Itasa subtitles. In the case of Netflix subtitles, lack of understanding, as reported through the questionnaire results, is very often connected to excessive length: subtitles are either as long as the original dialogue, or even considerably longer. When confronted with the presence of text messages and dialogues as essential verbal information, Netflix subtitles just seem to fall short of readability. Even in the clip from NA, the overall tendency of Netflix translators is to be explanatory and detailed, hardly considering condensation. In the clip from BM, moreover, Netflix subtitles display another important case of errancy: segmentation appears to be random, thus making the reading process more difficult.

With Itasa subtitles, the BM clip reveals fairly good condensation, although typical examples of non professional subtitlers' deviations from generally accepted professional standards can be found, such as the use of repetitions ("No, no, no") and interjections ("Oh", "Ah"). As the clip is taken from the third series of BM, subtitles are generally more accurate than those found on the first, even within the fansubbing context only. Subtitle position can vary, as happens in the case of text messages, for which they appear at the top of the screen. In the clip from NA, errancy in Itasa subtitles is more pervasive, probably due to this being the first ever subtitled episode of what was to become an extremely popular Netflix product. As anticipated above, subtitles are always placed at the bottom of the screen, occasionally overlapping with written text. More significantly, some translation solutions seem to more clearly address 'specialized' viewers, i.e. fans not expecting full meaning explicitation. This, notwithstanding generally acceptable segmentation and condensation, may have hampered comprehension and overall reception from non-fans. This last example, like the use of translated proper names and untranslated foreign words mentioned in section 4.3, stimulate a reflection on the very notion of errancy when seen across the spectrum of subtitling produsers and consumers: faults are indeed to be seen as relative, according to audience type, knowledge and expectations.

6. Conclusions

After reflecting on reception, agency and awareness in the previous sections, let us come to a conclusion by focusing on change. This essay has, in fact, highlighted change from the very beginning: from prosumers to produsers, a complex change has been discussed in relation to the very consumption/creation of non translated and translated media products.

Within the realm of subtitling, besides the well-known, nowadays reductive pair (not necessarily opposition) of professional and non professional subtitling, change has been identified in the form of varying attitudes on the part of both, but mostly non professional subtitlers, whose aims and aspirations are manifold.

Changes in viewing habits have also been discussed in the early sections of this essay, mainly spurred by new media colossi like Netflix. Yet, such changes come with some sort of price, as has emerged from the questionnaire results: creative and innovative as they may be, they require time and adaptation on the part of the receivers, and indeed constant monitoring, and a dynamic, critical approach, on the part of scholars.

Although some of the limitations of the study here presented are quite evident, such as the number of participants and the recourse to two clips/texts only, its results are nonetheless interesting, calling for replication and expansion of empirical research on the produsage and reception of subtitling today, in dubbing and non-dubbing countries.

As the results point to various types of changes in foreign language and subtitling competence, within and beyond the experiment presented here, this will be a preferred point of departure for further studies in the near future.

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