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# A New Development in Audiovisual Translation Studies: Focus on Target Audience Perception

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## *Abstract*

Audiovisual translation is now a well-established sub-discipline of Translation Studies (TS): a position that it has reached over the last twenty years or so. Italian scholars and professionals in the field have made a substantial contribution to this successful development, a brief overview of which will be given in the first part of this article, inevitably concentrating on dubbing in the Italian context. Special attention will be devoted to the question of target audience perception, an area where researchers in the University of Bologna at Forlì have excelled. The second part of the article applies the methodology followed by the above mentioned researchers in a case study of how Italian end users perceive the dubbed version of the British film *The History Boys* (2006), which contains a plethora of culture-specific verbal and visual references to the English education system. The aim of the study was to ascertain: a) whether translation/adaptation allows the transmission in this admittedly constrained medium of all the intended culture-bound issues, only too well known to the source audience, and, if so, to what extent, and b) whether the target audience respondents to the e-questionnaire used were aware that they were missing information. The linked, albeit controversial, issue of quality assessment will also be addressed.

*Keywords:* audiovisual translation, source audience, target audience, perception, e-questionnaire

## *1. Audiovisual translation research in Italy*

Audiovisual translation studies have definitely 'come of age', to use the words of Jorge Diaz Cintas (2008), a leading researcher in the field and past president of the European Association for Studies in Screen Translation. A

clear marker of this development is the appearance of chapters on the subject in two recent companions to translation studies (O'Connell 2007; Chiaro 2009), several special numbers of well-known TS journals (*The Translator* 2003 and *Meta* 2004 among others) and a seemingly unending flow of conferences, the most recent of which were held at the University of Pavia in October 2012. One centred on subtitling, the other on dubbing, both also addressing the link with language teaching. The bibliography, especially since Delabastita's seminal article (1989) has now gone well past the 1,000 item mark<sup>2</sup>.

It is arguably more to this than any other area of translation studies that Italian academic and professional circles have made a major contribution, a brief overview of which will be attempted here. An initial article by Nicoletta Maraschio (1982), brilliantly illustrating the evolution of the language of Italian dubbing from somewhat stiff 'bookish' beginnings to a more fluent style closer to spontaneous orality, remained a rather isolated event until, shortly after the setting up of the Scuola Superiore di Lingue Moderne per Interpreti e Traduttori by the University of Bologna in Forlì, systematic research into the most extensive translational phenomenon – to which Italian receivers are exposed (i.e. translation for the large and small screens overwhelmingly by means of dubbing) – began what was to be a stimulating and enormously rewarding journey. An ambitious research programme also involving the sister and elder institution in Trieste, as well as the University of Pavia was first introduced by a ground breaking article by Rosa Maria Bollettieri Bosinelli (1994), one of the first members of staff of the Forlì institution, which also contained some fascinating hints at what were to become major developments there (i.e. the issue of audience perception/reception). In her article Bosinelli wrote, along the lines of George Steiner's (1998 [1975], 28-29) view of the constant role of the receiver as translator within his/her own speech community: "film viewing, like reading, involves an act of translation from the text to the internalised discourse of the reader" (1994, 12). A long series of conferences began (Baccolini, Bollettieri Bosinelli, Gavioli 1994), expanding in size and coverage to include other areas of multimedial transfer, as well as international participation (Heiss and Bollettieri Bosinelli 1996; Bollettieri Bosinelli, Heiss, Soffritti 2000; Chiaro, Heiss, Bucaria 2008)<sup>3</sup>. A major detailed analysis of the Italian dubbed versions of a specific film maker (Licari 1994) was published early on and the continuing vitality of research in Forlì in the special area of translating humour in the media is to be found in a very recent volume (Chiaro 2010). Forlì has also produced a corpus of original and translated film dialogue including film clips (Valentini 2008; Heiss and Soffritti 2008).

One of the characteristics of the Forlì conferences has always been involvement of members of the profession connected with the practice of screen translation (or 'adaptation' as they prefer), i.e. dubbing script writers, dubbing directors and dubbing actors and more recently subtitling compa-

nies, and this was an important part of a conference held in Trieste in 1996 (Taylor 2000), which also covered the history of dubbing in Italy. Pavia has been involved with the issue of screen translation (with special reference to subtitling - Caimi ed. 2002) and language teaching, even going so far as to suggest that dubbed films (where the language is more standardised and the diction actually clearer than in original language films) could be particularly useful and stimulating for the teaching of Italian to foreign students. Pavia has seen important progress in the comparison of spontaneous, original film and dubbed film Italian, revealing hitherto unexpected parallels in syntactic structure (Pavesi 2005), all this made possible by the creation of a corpus of original and dubbed film dialogue (Freddi and Pavesi 2009; Pavesi 2009). Elisa Perego, initially in Pavia (2005) and now in Trieste, together with Christopher Taylor (Perego and Taylor 2012) has done much to communicate results to a wider readership (especially in the area of subtitling), in the second volume introducing recent concerns such as subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing, audio description for the blind (one of Taylor's research areas), fan-subts (i.e. amateur subtitling) and audience reception and perception.

One should not overlook the interest shown by Italian linguists, following in the footsteps of Maraschio, not only in the language of the Italian cinema (Rossi 1999a), but also that of so-called 'dubbese' (Raffaelli 2001, 890-901; Rossi 1999b; Rossi 2007), including its influence on contemporary Italian usage, considering that the majority of feature films and a considerable portion of fictional TV programmes, sit-coms and soap operas watched by Italians are translated products.

As already mentioned members of the (mostly) dubbing professions have been involved right from the outset in the debate on screen translation in Italy, usually in the above mentioned conferences, as well as working as collaborators in training programmes organised at university level. We have a number of interviews with dubbing script writers (Arcolao 1995; Depietri 1994) a conference, this time organised by the professional side, with invitations to university researchers to participate (Di Fortunato and Paolinelli 1996), as well as short statements (Jacquier 1995) and book length studies (Paolinelli and Di Fortunato 2005) by professionals<sup>4</sup>. A study of the leading dubbing script writers was carried out by Pavesi and Perego (2006) showing the limited number of professionals involved in the adaptation of a large number of films and discussing the language attitudes of the protagonists (often somewhat prescriptive – which does not come as a great surprise), thus leading to the hypothesis of a kind of collective stylistic approach to the process of linguistic adaptation (the term 'translation' being rarely, if ever, used). The role of an influential (though not perhaps as influential as they would like to be) association, AIDAC (Associazione Italiana Dialoghisti Addattatori Cinetelevisivi) is of particular relevance here, together with its online newsletter *aSinc* (rivista in rete di critica del doppiaggio), which contains numerous reviews of

dubbed films foregrounding the characteristics of the actual dubbing (hardly ever referred to in regular film criticism).

### 1.1 Audience reception and perception

In a scene in the film *The Pelican Brief* (Alan J. Pakula 1993) reporter Gray Grantham (Denzel Washington) has arranged to meet his boss an assistant managing editor of the (fictitious) *Washington Herald* Smith Keen (John Lithgow) on a lawn in front of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century style country house. A group of musicians are playing baroque chamber music in 18<sup>th</sup>-century costume and guides, also in period costume, are talking to groups of visitors. Presumably source film audiences (especially Americans) will have recognised the house as Mount Vernon, the country retreat of George and Martha Washington. In case they did not, the name of the house is mentioned, as well as those of the first US president and his wife, though only by their first names. The dialogue is given below. The Italian dubbed version follows as do the subtitles on the DVD of the film:

Keen: What the hell's this all about?

Grantham: I thought a trip to Mount Vernon might do your soul some good.

Keen: Are you losing it? First I order you to go to Little Rock and you refuse to go. You refuse to tell me why. Then you order me, your boss, I might add, to drop everything and meet you at George and Martha's place.

Italian dubbed version:

Keen: Beh, che diavolo ti ha preso?

Grantham: Ho pensato che una gita a Mount Vernon ti avrebbe fatto bene.

Keen: Che fai? Dai i numeri? Prima ti ordino di andare a Little Rock e ti rifiuti di andarci, e ti rifiuti di dirmi perché. Poi ordini a me, il tuo capo, vorrei aggiungere, di mollare tutto per raggiungerti a casa di George e Marta.

DVD subtitles:

Keen:

Di cosa si tratta?

Grantham:

Venire a Mount Vernon ti farà bene.

Keen:

Sei impazzito?

Ti ordino di andare

a Little Rock e ti rifiuti.

Non vuoi dirmi il perché

e poi ordini a me...

... il tuo capo, oserei aggiungere...

... di lasciar perdere tutto  
e di incontrarti da George.

The words “at George and Martha’s place” are accompanied by the editor’s thumb pointing at the house behind him. This is a common occurrence in translated film dialogue where a close translation of the source text is presumed to cause comprehension difficulties for the target audience. The original script writer obviously expected the audience to be familiar with Mount Vernon and to know that it had belonged to George and Martha Washington. In cognitive linguistic terms the original audience was expected to have a “George Washington” frame made up of varying numbers of slots and fillers stored in their memories, as well as a “Mount Vernon” visual frame, making the scene a familiar one<sup>5</sup>. The same is not necessarily true for an Italian audience, who are provided with no further information as to the house or its former inhabitants. In written translation “It is generally acknowledged that if the target text addressees lack relevant background knowledge, due to cultural differences, it should be supplied, or compensated for, by the translator” (Schäffner 1993, 159). “References to people require knowledge of who they are and what their function in the respective culture is” (ivi, 161). Otherwise a “cultural bump” (Leppihalme 1997) or information gap will occur<sup>6</sup>. Of course supplying this knowledge in an audiovisual text is notoriously difficult, at least through the verbal acoustic channel, owing to medium constraints. A caption could have been inserted, however, in the Italian version of the type “Mount Vernon – residenza storica di George Washington e famiglia”.

Until quite recently researchers would have stopped at this point, hypothesising target audience comprehension problems. Thanks especially to the team of researchers in Forlì we have now passed from the ideal (Kovacic 1995) to the empirical end user. Admittedly a start was made in Spain (Fuentes Luque 2003), but the answer to Gambier’s remarks on the scarcity of reception/perception studies (Gambier 2003, 184-187) came from Forlì. The Forlì team prefer the term “perception” to “reception”. The former is closer to Bosinelli’s already mentioned “act of translation from the text to the internalised discourse of the reader”. Large scale research of the type pioneered in Forlì is costly and time consuming. Fortunately the necessary funds and energy were forthcoming. Several articles (e.g. Antonini 2007, 2008; Bucaria and Chiaro 2007; Chiaro 2006, 2007; Rossato and Chiaro 2010) have illustrated methods and results, and research carried out along the lines of the Forlì methodology (albeit on a smaller scale) is presented in section 2 of this article.

### 1.2 *Quality in audiovisual translation: a controversial issue*

In Descriptive Translation Studies ‘quality’ is, to say the least, controversial, implying, as it does, value judgments, which in the DTS tradition are

neither possible nor desirable. However, particularly in audiovisual translation, in all its branches, the issue does not necessarily have to be in simple terms of “good” or “bad”, which is still understandably “taboo” (Schröter 2010, 143). With dubbing it is legitimate to assess the efficiency of lip synchronisation (Chaume Varela 2006), a technical problem the aim of which is to create the illusion that the actors are actually speaking the language of the target audience. The professional association of dubbing script writers AIDAC (mentioned above) combats the employment of unqualified practitioners and, obviously, academic institutions offering courses in the practice of the profession are strongly committed to promoting high level language, cultural and technical skills with a view to possible work opportunities (unfortunately mostly illusory). Chiaro (2008) challenges academic caution over judgmental attitudes to translation quality in the controversial area of the success or lack of intercultural translation strategies. As an expert on the language of humour she is right to castigate close translation of humorous discourse that turns out to be incomprehensible or unfunny (and this is only too often the case<sup>7</sup>). Source vs. target oriented translation strategies which do not contain primitive translation mistakes or nonsensical discourse are another matter.

## 2. Audience perception: an empirical study<sup>8</sup>

### 2.1 *The film: The History Boys (Nicholas Hytner, GB, 2006)*

*The History Boys* takes place in 1983 in Yorkshire. At an average grammar school in Sheffield, a group of sixth-formers achieve unusually good A-level history results. They are streamed off as an elite set, to stay on an extra term and sit Oxbridge entrance exams. To prepare the students, the headmaster recruits Irwin, a young supply teacher who studied at Oxford and who therefore knows the tricks that will get the boys through: cynical tricks like reducing history and culture to gobbits of relevant information. Conflicts ensue between his pragmatic style of teaching and the idealist one of Mr Hector, a chubby old teacher who took his degree at Sheffield and believes in the importance of learning for its own sake. After the preparation session, the boys sit their entrance exams and have their interviews at Oxford or Cambridge. They all get a place and are naturally all proud of it. The only one who looks unhappy, although he has been admitted to Oxford, is Rudge, a student who is not particularly good apart from playing rugby. He says that as soon as the dons found out that he was the son of Bill Rudge, an ex-scout at the college, he was told that he was exactly what the college rugby team needed. He comments, “It’s not like winning a match”.

Addressing an audience with a medium-high level of education, the comedy is meant to be satirical. The screenplay is by Alan Bennett<sup>9</sup>, a contemporary British playwright, screenwriter, actor and author whose works mostly involve sharp-eyed satires of contemporary England. In *The History Boys*, he deliberately

reproduces the lively current debate about class obsession in higher education in England: the film is permeated with snobbery and sarcasm against “redbrick”<sup>10</sup> universities, and the headmaster’s craving for his students to be admitted to Oxbridge embodies the competition for social prestige between state and public schools<sup>11</sup>. These socio-political themes manifest themselves through a network of allusions and jokes which serve as a *fil rouge* throughout the film.

As can be deduced, from a linguistic and intercultural point of view, the film contains a plethora of verbal and visual references to features specifically pertaining to the English education system. Not only are there references to tangible institutions and procedures (e.g. grammar schools, A-levels, the procedure to get into Oxford and Cambridge), but the film also contains numerous allusions and jokes referring to background socio-political themes, namely class obsession and Oxbridge elitism. Culture-specific references in *The History Boys* play a crucial role in the development of the plot. Consequently, the degree to which a viewer understands them corresponds to the degree to which h/she understands the whole plot of the film.

## 2.2 *The study design*

The high concentration of culture-specificity in *The History Boys* poses a major problem when the film has to be translated. Culture-specific references may cause difficulties in understanding if they are not part of the viewer’s cognitive encyclopaedia. This study seeks to ascertain whether the translation strategies followed in the Italian dubbed version<sup>12</sup> allow the transmission of all the intended culture-bound issues, and if so to what extent.

The first stage consisted in providing a working taxonomy by classifying the references identified in the film into two categories:

1. Verbal culture-specific references;
2. Visual culture-specific references.

Subsequently, the references belonging to each category were divided again into two thematic areas:

1. Institutions and procedures pertaining to the education system;
2. Jokes and allusions about class obsession in higher education.

The assessment and evaluation of Italian receivers’ perception was carried out along the innovative lines followed by researchers at the University of Bologna’s Department of Interdisciplinary Studies in Translation and Cultures (SITLeC) in Forlì (e.g. Antonini 2005, 2007, 2008, Antonini and Chiaro 2005, Bucaria and Chiaro 2007, Rossato and Chiaro 2010), whose aim was to assess viewers’ individual responses to translational solutions adopted by the authors of the target versions. Therefore focus was directed on the audience, who are the target of translation strategies, but whose reactions have rarely been tested by researchers (Antonini and Chiaro 2009). Antonini (2005) foregrounds the fact that audiovisual translation studies present contrastive

analyses between source and target films emphasising texts, translators and translations. On the other hand, this new approach starts off from the premise that audiovisual translation is a service. Quality should therefore be assessed on the basis of the reactions of end users (Chiaro 2008).

The method used in this case study closely followed the Forlì model. Data were gathered by means of two e-questionnaires, whose structure derives from it (especially Antonini 2008). The questionnaires were created by means of Polldaddy, online survey software which is widely used in marketing research for gathering feedback from consumers. Two questionnaires were created containing ten web pages each. Using multiple questionnaires instead of one avoided posing an excessive number of questions to single participants.

Each questionnaire was made up of ten web pages structured as follows:

Page 1: a short explanation of the aim of the questionnaire;

Page 2: a short synopsis of the plot of the film;

Page 3: a yes/no question asking whether the participant was familiar with the English education system;

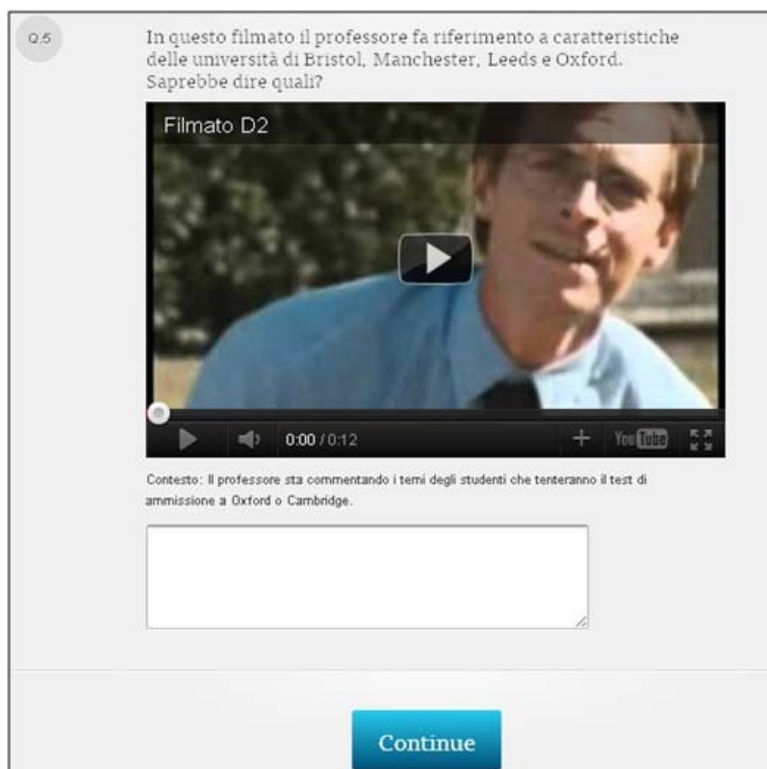


Fig. 1 - A Sample of one of the pages of the questionnaire



Pages 4-9 (see Fig. 1): in each page one clip showing a scene containing a verbal or visual culture-specific reference, some information about the context, and one open question asking the participant to explain the reference in his/her own words. The scenes were extracted from the DVD film as .mp4 files and uploaded on the video-sharing websites Youtube and Vimeo. These provided a link to use in Polldaddy;

Page 10: a clip showing all the scenes again, and a matrix to rate the participant's level of understanding of each reference on a 0-3 rating scale<sup>13</sup>.

Each questionnaire was available in its own website. Questionnaire A can be retrieved from <<http://tesiunifi.polldaddy.com/s/doppiaggioepercezione>>; questionnaire B from <<http://tesiunifi.polldaddy.com/s/doppiaggio-e-percezione>>.

Between September and October 2011, a sample of Italian respondents contacted by means of personal networking through Facebook and Twitter was invited to fill out one questionnaire or both. 30 respondents for each questionnaire (= a total of 60 respondents) were involved. 27 responses for each questionnaire were deemed valid for the purposes of the study. All the participants (from 20 – 50 yrs.) had a medium-high level of education (so that they resembled, *mutatis mutandis*, as far as possible the presumed source audience) and most of them (an average of 78% from the two questionnaires) declared that they were not familiar with the English education system.

### 2.3 Results

By using data filters, the explanations provided by the participants were classified into two categories:

Understood;

Not-understood.

As regards category 1 (the 'understood' sample), two levels of understanding were distinguished:

Full understanding – the respondents understood the reference entirely;

Basic understanding – the respondents understood the basic information.

As regards category 2 (the 'not-understood' sample), the various levels of non-understanding were distinguished, thus showing all the wrong interpretations participants gave.

Audience perception was assessed on twelve culture-specific references, however, for reasons of space, only three examples will be illustrated.

#### 2.3.1 A-levels

One of the opening scenes of the film shows the students reading and commenting on their A-level results. These are on the school notice board under a sign saying 'A-levels' left untranslated. The students ask each other what they got and respond by mentioning three letters. The boys exchange the following dialogue:

Posner: Tre A! Ho preso tre A!  
 Scripps: Chris, quanto ti hanno dato?  
 Crowther: Il massimo!  
 Timms: Tre A! Tre A! È pazzesco!  
 Lockwood: Te l'ho detto che ce la facevamo!  
 Timms: E tu che hai preso?  
 Rudge: Una A e due B.  
 [...]

which in the original version is:

Posner: Three A's! I got three A's!  
 Scripps: Chris, what did you get, man?  
 Crowther: Full house!  
 Timms: Three A's! Three A's!  
 Lockwood: Told you you would.  
 Timms: Hey what did you get?  
 Rudge: A and two B's.  
 [...]

As Fig. 2 shows, most participants (52%) were able to understand the scene. However, it is interesting to notice that there are two levels of understanding: only a few respondents achieved a full understanding, while most of them only understood basic information.

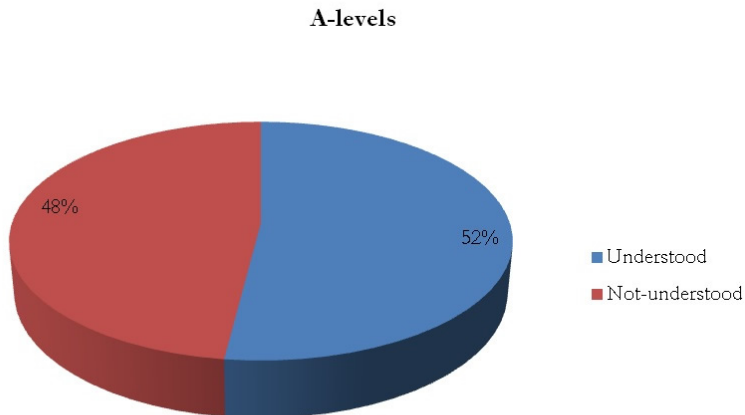


Fig. 2 - Understanding of the reference to the A-levels

As Fig. 3 illustrates, most of the respondents from the ‘understood’ sample (86%) realised that A-levels are a final examination, but were not able to give any more information. Most of them used adverbs of possibility and probability (e.g. *‘forse si tratta degli esami di maturità’* – literally, ‘perhaps it deals with final exams’), meaning that it is very likely that an understanding of the reference was achieved thanks to the context. In effect, the boys’ excitement and the fact that holidays are about to start may be interpreted as a hint.

The ‘understood’ sample

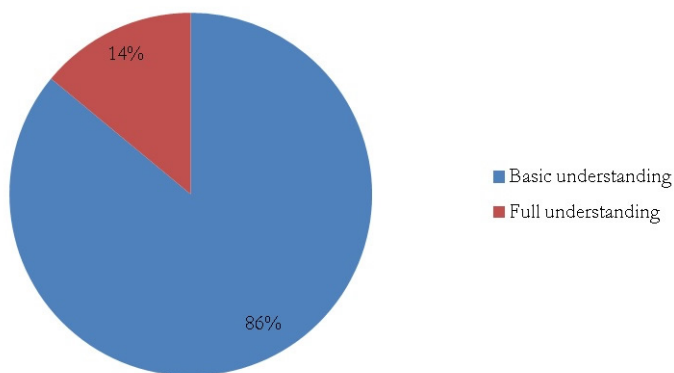


Fig. 3 - Full understanding vs. basic understanding of the reference to A-levels

Only 18% of the ‘understood’ sample showed a full understanding of what A-levels are. They identified that A-levels are an examination that students take in their final year of secondary school. They understood that when the boys in the film mention three letters, they are referring to the marks they got on a scale A-E in the three subjects of interest they chose to study in their final years at school. They added that this kind of examination is extremely important for applying to university because each university has its own entrance requirements (often one or two A’s). By cross-tabulating results, this level of knowledge of A-levels correlates with a familiarity with the English education system.

On the other hand, a considerable sample of participants (48%) did not understand the reference. As Fig. 4 illustrates, most of them (62%) thought that the students were getting the results of a specific test for university admission which is independent from school exams. Almost all the respondents made a comparison with the USA (e.g. *‘come fanno in America’* – literally, ‘as they do in America’), showing that the popularity of American films set in high schools has determined a tendency to interpret any English speaking film set in a school on the basis of American culture. 23% of the sample declared

that they had no idea of what A-levels were, while 15% gave an interpretation from the Italian school system by resorting to typically Italian aspects of final exams such as '*i risultati degli scritti*' – literally, 'the results from the written part [of the final examination]' –, which precedes the oral part. This interpretation denotes a deeply domesticating attitude from the audience towards otherness.

#### The 'not-understood' sample

- A specific test for university admission -interpretation from USA films
- Bewilderment
- Interpretation from the Italian school system (i.e. written part of final exams)

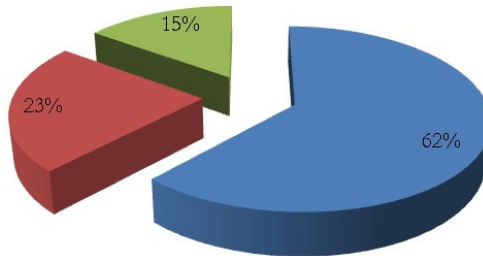


Fig. 4 - Wrong interpretations of the reference to the A-levels

#### 2.3.2 *The test for Oxford and Cambridge*

After the students get their A-level results, the Headmaster appears saying,

Dopo le vacanze dovreste tentare il test per entrare a Oxford e Cambridge. I vostri risultati sono i migliori che abbiamo mai avuto, ed esigono che voi torniate per un altro trimestre, in modo da prepararvi all'esame d'ammissione alle nostre più antiche università

which in the original version is:

After the holidays you will be coming back to try for Oxford e Cambridge. You're a-level results are the best we've ever had and they demand that you return for an extra term to work for the examination to our ancient universities.

As Fig. 5 shows, misunderstanding prevailed in the interpretation of the reference to the test for Oxford and Cambridge. Most respondents (55%) used a domesticating attitude by giving an interpretation on the basis of Italian culture. According to this sample of respondents, Oxford and Cambridge are the only

universities which require an entrance test in England, whereas admission to all the other universities is open. The following explanation given by a participant provides an example of the responses from the ‘not-understood’ sample: “A differenza delle altre università, che invece sono ad accesso libero, per entrare a Oxford e Cambridge bisogna superare un test d’ammissione in quanto sono università private a numero chiuso, come la Bocconi in Italia” (literally, “Unlike the other universities, which allow free admission instead, to get into Oxford and Cambridge it is necessary to pass an admission test because they are private, closed number universities, like the Bocconi University in Italy”).

### The test for Oxford and Cambridge

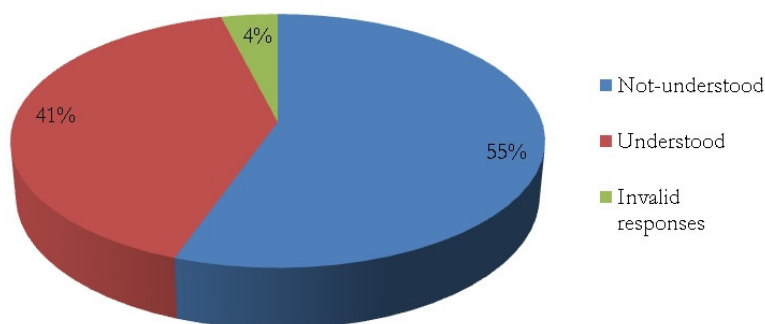


Fig. 5 - Understanding of the reference to the test for Oxford and Cambridge

On the other hand, 41% of respondents explained that whatever university students apply for, the norm is to manage to get a place; to get a place into Oxford and Cambridge is particularly difficult because these are elite institutions. However, two levels of understanding can be identified: most respondents limited themselves to being aware of the prestige of Oxbridge as a good university, whereas a few not only were aware of this but also reported a detailed account of Oxbridge as a major socio-political concern in England.

As Fig. 6 illustrates, 91% of the “understood” sample limited themselves to knowing about the prestige of Oxbridge, making use of words belonging to the semantic field of elitism such as “le università più prestigiose” (literally, “the most prestigious universities”) and “le università più illustri” (literally, “the most famous universities”).

## The 'understood' sample

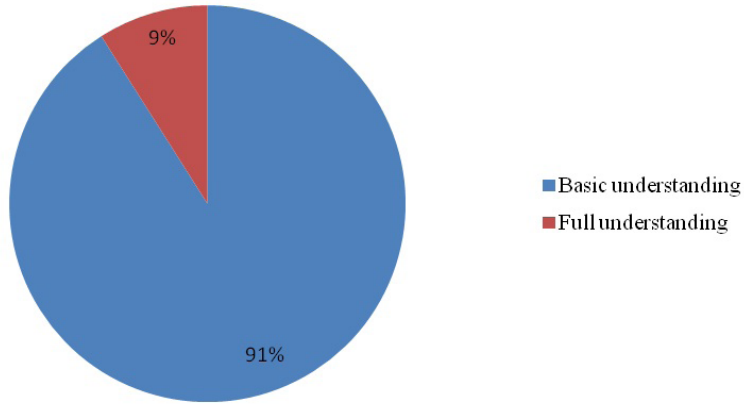


Fig. 6 - Full understanding vs. basic understanding of the reference to the test to Oxford and Cambridge

Only 9% of the responses highlighted that Oxbridge and elitism represent a major concern in English society. For example, a respondent included an account of the social consequences for the schools whose students manage to get into Oxbridge by affirming, “Per una data scuola superiore o Secondary School avere degli studenti con ottimi risultati che poi entrino nelle università sopracitate [Oxford and Cambridge] è un fattore di prestigio” (“for a certain secondary school, having some students who achieve excellent results and then get into the above mentioned universities [Oxford and Cambridge] is a prestige factor”).

This information is certainly true, as Oxbridge elitism is a theme that carries considerable weight in English culture as one of the shapes in which social class obsession manifests itself. It frequently represents a discussion topic among politicians and journalists. Journalist John Sutherland writes (2006): “Class is a very slippery thing. And class values riddle British universities much more confusingly than elsewhere – so much so that only comedy, it seems, can deal with it. *And it’s a quintessentially British thing* [my italics]”.

### 2.3.3 *The grammar school for boys*

In one of the opening scenes, students are heading towards the school, greeting each other; it is the first day of the new term after the holidays. This scene perfectly shows the setting where all the events take place throughout the film. Students are of all ages and are wearing their uniforms, which consist of ties and blazers with the special badge of the school on them. Also, they are carrying leather school bags. Their clothes and hair look very neat and tidy. Throughout the film no mention is made about what type of school students

are attending; the only hint is given in the second part by two signs saying 'Cutler's Grammar School for boys' left untranslated.

As Fig. 7 shows, in the absence of verbal clarifications, the majority of the respondents (63%) gave a wrong interpretation of the visual elements. The fact that students are wearing their uniforms was a determining factor in causing misunderstandings.

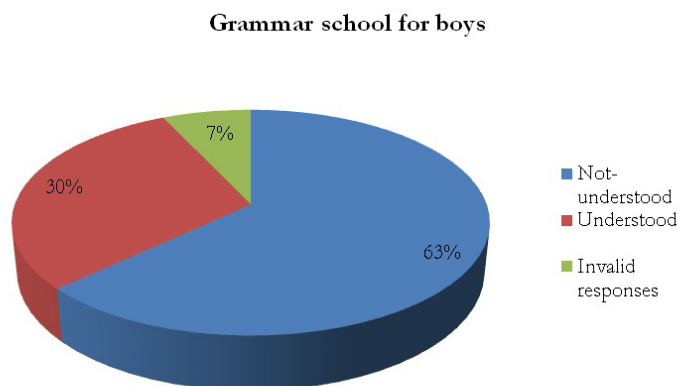


Fig. 7 - Understanding of the visual reference to the grammar school for boys

As Fig. 8 illustrates, 59% of the “not-understood” sample believed that the students were wearing their uniforms because the school they are attending is “una scuola per ricchi” (literally, “a school for rich people”). Clearly, not knowing that most schools in England require their students to wear uniforms, they interpreted the reference on the basis of Italian culture.

### The 'not-understood' sample

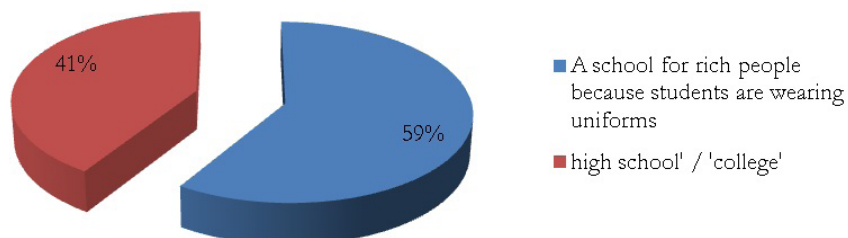


Fig. 8 - Wrong interpretations of the visual reference to the grammar school for boys

Another extremely interesting case are the responses from the rest (41%) of the “not-understood” sample, reporting that the film is set in a ‘high school’ or a ‘college’. Since these are two entities pertaining to the USA, the usage of this terminology leads to a few considerations from the point of view of linguistic influence. The fact that the respondents used these terms wrongly and that they even did it very self-confidently shows how, ‘high school’ and ‘college’ are a classic example of those English words which are used by foreigners to sound up-to-date without knowing exactly what they mean.

On the other hand, 30% incurred no misunderstandings. However, as Fig. 9 shows, most of them (75%) limited themselves to affirming that the school is “una scuola superiore” (‘a secondary school’), showing they were quite surprised by the fact that boys of all ages are in the same school. Only a small sample of respondents (25%) were able to identify that the school is a grammar school for boys, explaining that it is a selective and academically oriented type of school. By cross-tabulating data, of course these respondents are the ones who declared that they were familiar with the English education system.

The ‘understood’ sample

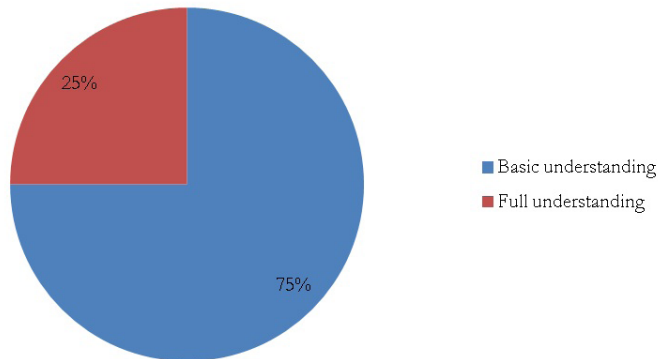


Fig. 9 - Full understanding vs. basic understanding of the reference to the grammar school for boys

## 2.4 Discussion<sup>14</sup>

The question which the present study aimed to answer was whether the culture-specific references in *The History Boys* were understood by Italian receivers, and if so to what extent. What emerges from the responses provided by the participants in the questionnaires is that 50% of the viewers understood the references and 50% had not (see Tab. 1). Even in the case of understanding, however, the culture-bound issues have seldom been transmitted entirely. A



full understanding only occurred in the case of the few respondents who were familiar with the English education system, whereas the rest only understood the basic information.

	Declared understanding	Declared Lack of und.	Actually understood	Actually not understood
Culture-specific references	69%	31%	50%	50%

Tab. 1 - Declared vs. Actual understanding

Before analysing the reasons why a sample of the viewers did not understand the culture-specific references, a premise is necessary. The audience can gain an understanding of cultural references occurring in a film in three ways:

Encyclopaedically or intertextually;

Deictically (through the co-text or the context);

Through the intervention of the translator (Pedersen 2010) (e.g. “chunking” strategies (Katan 2009), compensation).

By examining the translations provided for each reference in *The History Boys*, no significant intervention from the translator occurs. Consequently, the interpretation of the references depends on the audience’s ability to deduce information from the co-text and context. However, in many cases even these elements do not help, and the viewers get stuck in their lack of cognitive frames. This is what occurred to the references to the test for Oxford and Cambridge illustrated in 2.3.2 and the grammar school for boys in 2.3.3.

Another reason why a sample of the viewers did not understand the references is the presence of mistranslations. A case in point is given by Manchester Grammar School, which occurs in the first part of the film. The phrase is translated as “la scuola di grammatica di Manchester” (literally, “Manchester school of grammar”). This solution led to a series of wrong interpretations from the viewers, the weirdest of which was believing that a grammar competition was taking place between the schools. An analysis of lip synchronization proved that this solution is clearly a case of mistranslation rather than a technical constraint, thus raising doubts about the cultural knowledge of the translator who dealt with the *mot à mot* version.

On the other hand, as concerns the viewers who did not run into any misinterpretation of the culture-specific references, as previously said, the vast majority did not manage to achieve a full understanding. The culture-specific items and themes are only transmitted to a minimal extent, so that the viewers only understand the basic information.

It seems that the translators generally operated on the basis of Hönig and Kussmaul’s (1982) “principle of the necessary degree of precision”. This is one of the functionalist approaches which reformulate the *Skopos* rule, according to which the translator can give *more* or *less* information than is in the source text, depending on the purpose of the translation.

To explain his theory, Hönig provides the example of the term ‘public school’, which turns out to be relevant to the present study:

The term ‘public school’ implies such a large amount of culture-specific knowledge that it is impossible to render its meaning ‘completely’ in a translation. Within a functionalist approach, however, the function of a word in its specific context determines *to what degree the cultural meaning should be made explicit* [emphasis added]. In a sentence such as [emphasis added]:

(2a) In Parliament he fought for equality, but he sent his son to *Eton*.

The translation will have to be different from translating the identical term ‘Eton’ in the sentence:

(3a) When his father died his mother could not afford to send him to *Eton* any more.

The following translations would be sufficiently detailed:

(2b) Im Parlament kämpfte er für Chancengleichheit, aber seinen eigenen Sohn schickte er auf eine der englischen Eliteschulen.

(...one of the English elite schools)

(3b) Als sein Vater starb, konnte seine Mutter es sich nicht mehr leisten, ihn auf eine der teuren Privatschulen zu schicken.

(...one of the expensive private schools).

Of course, there is more factual knowledge implied in the terms ‘Eton’ or ‘public school’ than expressed in the translation, but the translation mentions everything that is important within the context of the sentence, in other words, the translation is semantically precise enough. (Hönig and Kussmaul 1982, 53)

The rendition is simply “good enough” for the situation concerned. It is as if the translator assumed, “this is all my readers have to know”, and no more needed to be said. On the contrary, translating (3a) as

konnte es sich seine Mutter nicht mehr leisten, ihn nach Eton zu schicken, jene teure englische Privatschule, aus deren Absolventen auch heute noch ein Großteil des politischen und wirtschaftlichen Führungsnachwuchses hervorgeht. [his mother could not afford to send him to Eton, the expensive English private school that still today produces a large part of the political and economic elite]

would give an excessive amount of information because, in the context of the mother’s financial difficulties, the reader only ‘needs to know’ that Eton is expensive (Pym 2010, 53).

In *The History Boys*, it seems that the translators assumed that the purpose of the film was to be a comedy, not an ‘intellectual’ film or a treatise on education in England. For this reason, the cultural meaning of the references was only made explicit to a minimal extent. For example, consider the sample of the viewers who were classified as those who understood the references to the test for Oxford and Cambridge and the grammar school illustrated in 2.3.3. Their understanding is limited to the basic information which allows them

not to run into any misinterpretation, yet they miss a substantial portion of information about the socio-political implications of these cultural entities.

Now, the question is, is it fair to reduce the satirical value of a film produced by such a politically active author – well-known to be so in England – as Alan Bennett? In translational terms, are Italian audiences not entitled to be made privy to the semantic values that the English-language audiences of the source version activate immediately from the cognitive scripts, frames and schemata stored in their memory databanks? A step forward might be made beyond the descriptive approach adopted so far by dealing with the thorny issue of the rights of consumers. A question becomes relevant: are the viewers of the Italian dubbed version of *The History Boys* aware that they are missing information?

An answer to this question is given by comparing the viewers' actual and declared understanding of the clips (Antonini 2008). These were obtained by analysing two sets of data. The former, actual understanding, was calculated by dividing the descriptions provided to explain the clips viewed into two categories: 'understood' and 'not-understood'. The latter, declared understanding, was calculated by introducing a matrix in the last page of the questionnaire where the respondents were asked to rate their level of understanding of the clips previously viewed on a rating scale from 0 to 3. Scores from 0 to 1 were classified as "not-understood"; rates from 2 to 3 as "understood".

What emerges from elaborating data is that there is a discrepancy between a declared and an actual lack of understanding: 50% of the respondents failed to understand the references but only 31% were aware of it (see Tab. 1). If translation is considered a service (Chiaro 2008), should the viewers' unawareness be seen as a form of deceit toward consumers?

As a solution to improve the quality of the product under examination, firstly, mistranslations should be avoided by means of a more accurate lip synchronization analysis; secondly, an explicatory section might be added to give some information about Alan Bennett and the satirical values he introduced into the film. In the DVD version, the new section might be placed in the space dedicated to the 'special contents' of the film; in the TV version, it might be made available as a teletext by resorting to digitalization and interactive technology. Dealing with the version shown in cinemas is more complicated, however a preface or a post-faction might be added as is common practice in literary translation.

### 3. Conclusions

Italy is predominantly a dubbing country, though subtitling (mostly on TV) is more common than it used to be, and it is the former medium of interlingual transfer for the screen that has attracted a great deal of the research in the discipline of translation studies carried out in the country's academic institutions. It is arguably only Spain that can equal Italy in the quantity and quality of research in this particular field. The first section of this article has

singled out some of the contributions by Italian researchers (especially in Forlì, Pavia and Trieste) to this relatively recent branch of translation studies, while the second section presents a case study, based on a longer piece of research with more examples, of audience perception of the Italian dubbed version of a British film teeming with cultural references in the area of education at school and university levels (and thus potential ‘culture bumps’ for the target audience). The perception of the dubbed version by a sample of empirical end users was studied along the lines of the methodology followed by researchers in Forlì, and they are responsible for a true turning point in audiovisual translation studies.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sections 1 and 3 were written by John Denton, Section 2 by Debora Ciampi.

<sup>2</sup> Gambier (2008) gives a critical survey of research in the field indicating areas which are under researched and provides a substantial bibliography. Diaz Cintas (2009) provides a useful historical sketch of research from the early days till the present.

<sup>3</sup> The series continued with “Screenit, the changing face of Screen Translation” in October 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Two other volumes of interest also contain numerous contributions from professionals as well as academics: Massara 2007; Patou-Patucchi 1999. From 1996 to 2006 a festival entitled “Voci nell’ombra” devoted to the Italian world of dubbing was held in Finale Ligure, continued, under another name, in San Remo (2007-2008) and Imperia (2009) and in 2010 and 2011 in Genoa under the auspices of the University.

<sup>5</sup> For further examples see Denton 2007, 28-31.

<sup>6</sup> Different ways of dealing with this problem are discussed in Denton 2000 and 2001.

<sup>7</sup> A frequently mentioned exception is described in Denton 1994.

<sup>8</sup> This section partially draws on material from Ciampi (2012).

<sup>9</sup> Alan Bennett, born on 9 May 1934, first appeared on the stage as one of the authors and performers of the revue *Beyond The Fringe*, which contributed to fuel the 1960s satire boom by licensing disrespect for authority. His output includes the play *The Madness of George III* (1991) and its film version *The Madness of King George* (1995). The screenplay of *The History Boys* is an adaptation from his earlier stage play of the same title premiered at the National Theatre in 2004.

<sup>10</sup> The term “redbrick universities” was coined in the forties by Edgar Allison Peers, Professor of Spanish at the University of Liverpool – under the pseudonym of Bruce Truscott – in a book which first revealed the state of affairs within British higher education. It refers to the universities founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in addition to Oxford and Cambridge, which were the only universities existing until then. This new generation of universities was created to provide opportunities in their cities for middle- and upper-working-class families, but were often regarded suspiciously as arriviste. This dichotomy and this prejudice continue in contemporary society. “Redbrick” is linked to the red pressed brick from which the Victoria Building at the University of Liverpool is built, as a synecdoche to indicate all the new generation of universities (Peers, 1943).

<sup>11</sup> In the section devoted to socio-political issues of *The Guardian*, journalist Jeevan Vasagar (2011) reports that, according to a recent study by the Sutton Trust, there is a significant divide between the state and public sectors, with pupils from public schools being seven times as likely as pupils from state schools to get into Oxbridge. The higher the number of students sent to Oxbridge, the higher the prestige attributed to the school. This is to be framed within a society where class constitutes an extremely important value.

<sup>12</sup> Italian title: *The History Boys*. Release date: 25 May 2007. Distribution: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. Dubbing by CIS Comunicazione Immagine Suono (2007). Italian dialogues: Valerio Piccolo. Dubbing director: Liliana Sorrentino.

<sup>13</sup> The purpose of the last page of the questionnaire will be illustrated in 2.4.

<sup>14</sup> The discussion carried out in this section concerns the responses to all the culture-specific references included in the questionnaires, not only the three examples illustrated in 2.3.

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