

The British will use question-tags, won't they?
The case of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*

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1. Introduction

There is little doubt that Italian television is dominated by American programmes. Even when a programme is not a dubbed version of what is screened in the United States, it may well be an imitation of a formula, such as a quiz programme or a chat show which has already been tried and tested across the Atlantic such as *Blind Date* which becomes *Il gioco delle coppie* or *The Wheel of Fortune* which is transformed into *La ruota della fortuna*. There are, in fact, so many American TV films, series, situation comedies and cartoons on the Italian screen that it is actually difficult to find much material which is dubbed into Italian from varieties of English other than US English, including British English itself. The comedy programme *Mr Bean*,¹ starring Rowan Atkinson is one of the few British productions on the air, nationally at least. Rowan Atkinson's style of comedy, however, is mainly silent; lines are limited to internationally understood 'hello', 'please' and 'thank you', hence the programme needs no translation. Dubbing or subtitles would be superfluous. In such a situation of both cinematic and linguistic dominance, research on dubbing runs the risk, at least as far as English is concerned, of being limited to a single variety, or rather to the numerous varieties of US English, leaving out the difficulties which the many other varieties of English may present to Italian adapters.

If Italian television is being literally swamped by American programmes, the movie scene is hardly different. There is no doubt that the majority of films on the Italian circuits are produced in Hollywood. However, in recent years the British cinema appears to be going through a low-profile Renaissance especially thanks to film versions of literary classics. Firstly, in the 1980's audiences were presented with adaptations from Foster such as *Passage to India* (Ivory, 1984)

1 *Mr Bean* is broadcast at regular intervals throughout the year at 'off-peak' times (i.e. Sunday lunchtime) on *Canale 5*, one of the three commercial channels belonging to the *Mediaset* group owned by Silvio Berlusconi. Interestingly, other British programmes which suffer a similar fate are Benny Hill re-runs. Like Bean, Hill too is silent.

and *Room with a View*, (Ivory 1986) then the 1990's produced a series of 'Brannagh' Shakespeares which, in turn, were followed by a series of Jane Austen revivals – classics such as *Sense and Sensibility* (Ang Lee 1995), and *Emma* (McGrath 1996). As these films are set in the past, the language in which they are couched does not (and indeed should not) include dialogues which reflect anything like mainstream everyday English conversation of the present. At the same time a translation of a period classic can be seen as a fairly straightforward task if we consider that the Italian adopted can cohere with parallel screen adaptations of Italian literary works of the same period. On the other hand, when the opportunity of a challenging translation arises, as in the case of successful British films like *The Commitments* (Parker 1991), *Trainspotting* (Boyle 1996) and *Secrets and Lies* (Leigh 1996) inevitably the richness of both traditional and modern dialects of Great Britain are glossed away in favour of a flat, classless Standard Italian totally lacking in any regional inflection. Furthermore, it would appear that this Standard Italian is in itself an untrue reflection of the language in which the inhabitants of Italy actually converse, but rather a variety which is limited to television and cinema screen and theatre.² Unlike the British media, where regional accents occur alongside more conservative RP/BBC Englishes even in genres such as news broadcasts, (which are traditionally RP territory) it is only recently that a hint of regionalisms can be detected in Italian newscasters for whom the use of *dizione* still tends to be the norm. If we consider that *dizione* is a theatrical standard rather than a sociolinguistic one and that this form of speech has migrated from the spokesperson to the average actor dubbing a film, are we then to deduce that Italian audiences are ready to suspend disbelief and accept the Italian of elocution with which the screen presents them, as a real substitute for everyday speech?

1.2. The Linguistic Britishness of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*

Mike Newell's *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1995), a world wide hit, replacing *A Fish Called Wanda* (Crichton 1989) as the international British box office success of all times³, contains (like *A Fish Called Wanda*), several varieties of Standard turn of the twentieth century English. Unfortunately for Italian audiences, as might be expected, upper class landowners, grunge-style

2 For a detailed discussion of Italian of the spoken media see Tullio de Mauro *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita*. Bari, Laterza, 1983.

3 Since going into print the comedy film *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo 1997) has in its turn overtaken both. It is worth noting that all three blockbusters are comedies.

Cockneys, Texans, Scots and speakers of Estuary English are all transformed into speakers of an identical variety. Naturally, the film is much funnier to English audiences than to the Italian audiences, not so much because Italians are subjected to the odd badly translated quip and the general toning down of sexual innuendo, but more because of the lack of recognition of the various stereotypes in the film. The linguistic levelling of accent, for example, places characters in the film who are supposedly there to represent the English upper classes in the same social grouping as a grunge shop assistant. Hence a non-English speaking audience is forced to miss out upon an entire dimension of the film.

In contrastive terms it is also worth noting that the Italian film is generally noisier than the original. In numerous shots the so-called 'rhubarb' is replaced with real comprehensible conversation, at times this is possibly necessary, as in an early scene in which characters mouth words at each other, but generally the extra exchanges are superfluous.

Four Weddings and a Funeral is also famous for its generous use of taboo language and content. As often happens, the language is toned down,⁴ for Italian audiences so that, for example, the item 'bugger', which is used with an affectionate connotation at Gareth's funeral, is translated with the neutral term *omosessuale*; 'bonking' is replaced by the nonce term *impallinare* and the numerous examples of 'fuck' are reduced to *cavolo*. As for word play, the newly-ordained priest, played by Rowan Atkinson, makes several disastrously funny gaffes while trying to marry a couple. In Italian his gaffes have managed to come across with equally 'silly' results where, for example, 'The Holy Goat' is replaced with *Lo spiritoso santo* and 'awful wedded wife' with *illegittima sposa*.⁵

However, as in *A Fish Called Wanda*, in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, the British are given the chance to laugh at themselves and at their Britishness and un-Americaness, with Hugh Grant typecast as Charles, a rather dithering overgrown ex-public schoolboy who is unable to get his act together with cool, confident American belle Andie McDowell. Furthermore, Charles' sexual insecurity is reflected in his speech as well as his actions as he verbally trips and stumbles through his lines. This verbal insecurity is stereotypically British. A glance at any corpus of spoken English will reveal that hesitation, repetition and general mental treading of water are extremely common amongst speakers in England. As might be expected vague language such as '... sort of ...', '... or something ...', '... or anything ...', 'and everything' etc. is extremely common, as are classic fillers like 'you know', 'sort of' and 'I mean'. Much of this vagueness is lost in the Italian version thus transforming our dithering Charles into an assertive Charles and consequently rendering him less amusing.

4 See Pavese in this volume.

5 For a full discussion of the translation of wordplay on screen see Chiaro 2000.

2. Question tags

As well as general vagueness, (see 3.1.) question tags also abound in *Four Weddings*. Robin Lakoff (1974) claims that in conversation, tags are used more by women than by men. While having no scientific evidence for her claim she justifies her claims by explaining that a tag is

... midway between an outright statement and a yes-no question: it is less assertive than the former ... a tag question is used when a speaker is making a claim, but lacks full confidence in the truth of that claim. (1974: 15)

Lakoff is arguing her case in favour of women who, in her opinion, have a tendency to hedge more than men, and thus generally seek to avoid strong statements. Tags provide a mechanism by which a speaker can avoid coming into conflict with the addressee, but which at the same time, may well give the impression that the speaker is unsure of herself. Furthermore, through tags the speaker may also seek corroboration through some kind of plea for the interlocutor's approval. In *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, the twenty-two tags are uttered both by female and male characters and are mostly of the approval seeking variety, in other words they belong to one of the following categories:

POSITIVE + NEGATIVE

RISING TONE

(i) + S – T He likes his JOB,
DOESn't he?

FALLING TONE

(iii) + S – T He likes his JOB,
DOESn't he?

NEGATIVE + POSITIVE

RISING TONE

(ii) –S + T He doesn't like his JOB,
does he?

FALLING TONE

(iv) – S + T He doesn't like his JOB,
DOES he?

(Quirk *et al.* 1985: 811)

Each of the utterances involves a statement followed by a question which asserts something and then invites the interlocutor's response. Thus sentence (i) means "I assume he likes his job, am I right", while (ii) means the opposite. One sentence is oriented positively and the other negatively. Similarly, the falling tones in examples (iii) and (iv) require the listener's confirmation of the initial statement, in other words the expected responses will be positive for example (iii), and negative for example (iv).

Question tags must certainly pose a problem when dubbing if we consider that Italian has no real equivalent of the form. The stock translation of *vero/non è vero* appears to be more of a solution to explain to Italian speakers what tags may mean rather than to suggest that such a form is actually part of real Italian usage. After all, both *vero* and *non è vero* can also occur in initial position of an utterance, and can thus no longer be considered tags as such⁶. Unless great care is taken when translating them, the text may well end up containing heavily anglicised syntactic structures. Furthermore, if tags are totally ignored, as Lakoff suggests, an unassertive character may suddenly find himself transformed into someone totally confident. Let us examine what happens to these structures in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*.

2.1.1. *vero/non è vero*

Thus *vero/non è vero* are adopted as a frequent solution to the problem. Consider the utterance:

- (i) You're not suddenly going to go away again, are you?
translated with a natural sounding,
Non sparirai di nuovo, vero?

Similarly:

- (ii) You like this girl, don't you?
becomes
Ti piace molto, vero?

However, an attempt to emulate the English structure with this solution is not always so successful as occurs when Henrietta tries on her bridal headdress and announces 'It does work, doesn't it!'. The Italian *Mi dona, non è vero?* hardly corresponds to what an Italian bride-to-be would say in the same circumstances, but then the entire utterance is unnatural and not only the tag.

2.1.2. Items inserted in initial and final position

Another solution adopted in the film is to substitute the question tag with an item either at the beginning or at the end of the Italian utterance. Consider the remark:

⁶ Some regional varieties do however have a similar form. For example, several dialects in Campania include the tag *ne?* which similarly to English requires confirmation of some sort from the listener.

(iii) Something of a dish, isn't he?

In this case we have an adverb which if anything supports the value of what is said in the predicate. In Italian we find:

Certo che è un bel bocconcino.

However, what appears to be missing is the attempt to involve the listener. In other words, a conversational gambit is transformed into an aside.

In substitution to *certo* we also find *già* in initial position, followed by a closing *vedi* as in:

(iv) Extraordinary thing, isn't it?

which becomes

Già straordinario vedi

which, again, is hardly natural Italian at all, let alone the expression of tentative phatic communion which the original utterance was supposed to express. This type of expression, uttered by Charles in a conversation with Carrie, is clearly amusing to British audiences, as among other things it emphasises his ineptness at socialising, thus reinforcing the stereotype of the Englishman who is ill at ease in matters of romance. Whether this comes across in the Italian version is extremely doubtful.

2.1.3. Use of 'credere'

The insertion of the verb *credere* is also used to translate tags in this film. For example,

(v) It must be the right decision, mustn't it?

becomes

Dovevi essere quanto meno convinto, credi?

which does indeed appear to involve the listener, while the effect of:

(vi) I remember you telling me you were going out with a girl, Helena, was it?

translated with

Ricordo quando frequentavi quella ragazza, Elena credo.

results in a more assertive rendering.

Naturally, intonation plays its part. In the source version, the tag is delivered in a very tentative high key while in the target version, the low key of the final *credo* leaves no space for a response. It is a highly affirmative 'I believe' in which the speaker feels no need to seek approval.

2.1.4. Solutions to tags as conversational linkers

Some tags seem to function as conversational linkers, for example, a rather interesting example of conversational cohesion occurs towards the end of the film when the vicar asks Charles whether he is:

(vii) Ready to face the enemy, are we?

The response is given by best friend Matt but aimed at Charles;

are we?

he repeats, so that the effect is

Ready to face the enemy, are we?

Sei pronto ad affrontare il nemico?

says the Italian clergyman, to which Italian Matt responds

Siamo pronti?

Here the rejoinder in the dubbed version cleverly picks up the underlying paternal 'we' of the original .

On the other hand, Charles' rejoinder to Fiona's

(viii) You see, I've abandoned my traditional black

is

So you have,

which is transformed into

si hai fatto bene

does not work quite as well. This rejoinder, in fact, functions as an additive adverb equivalent in meaning to 'too' or 'also' – it is elliptical, you could add

what's missing, furthermore, Charles is not trying to appear encouraging, as he does in Italian

2.1.5. Invariant 'eh?'

The film also includes occurrences of the invariant tag 'eh? ' which also invites the listener's response, for example:

(ix) What's the use of studying the novels of Wordsworth, eh?

which remains untranslated in:

Che cosa serve conoscere i sonetti di Shakespeare?

On the other hand, in the exchange between Fiona and a rather nosy fellow guest at wedding number two the 'eh' is translated with a laugh:

(x) ... just never found the right chap eh?

is transformed into

Non hai trovato l'uomo giusto, hah!

to which Fiona replies that she is in love with someone who doesn't reciprocate her feelings,

(xi) Bad luck!

retorts her listener

Yes, isn't it

replies Fiona. This kind of typically English rejoinder (Conservative RP) is not a tag as such and is common in this film which mainly portrays the upper classes. Thus the exchange becomes: '*Che disgrazia!*' '*Direi di sì*'. This kind of banter is stereotypically posh and consequently aims at being amusing, especially the utterance 'Bad luck!' and the understatement of the response. On the other hand, the Italian exchange is to be taken with the seriousness of its face value.

2.1.6. Untranslated tags

However, most frequently the tags remain untranslated thus not only rendering characters more self-confident and assertive but also depriving the listener of an opportunity of perfect empathy in terms of conversational flow. Charles'

(xii) Our timing's been rather bad hasn't it?

is a clear cry for sympathy from Carrie while

Ci incontriamo sempre nei momenti sbagliati

requires no response. Similarly

(xiii) Yes it's odd isn't it?

which means 'I think it's odd, am I right in thinking this?' is transformed into

Forse c'è una ragione

and

(xiv) It's not easy, is it?

into

Non deve essere stato facile

when what is actually meant is 'I assume it isn't easy, am I right?'

In the translations of examples xii, xii and xiv the element which makes the utterance a conversational gambit is missing. Finally, Carrie's comment as she tries on a rather outrageous wedding dress:

(xv) But it would be wonderful wouldn't it?

for some unknown reason becomes

Un po' azzardato ma notevole

While not being a tag, Scarlett's rising tone in

(xvi) Isn't she lovely?

referring to bride number one walking down the aisle, indicates positive expectation through its exclamatory force which is missing in

non la trovi bellissima?

Here the exact opposite is occurring to what was seen before, as Italian Rossella is more tentative.

2.1.7. Miscellaneous solutions

On other occasions in the film, however, more successful, even if highly overt solutions to the problem of approval seeking have been found. Consider:

(xvii) I mean, a lot of weddings blend into each other, don't they?,

translated with

erano tutti così noiosi, non siete d'accordo?

This is certainly more credible than *vero/non è vero*. Similarly, Scarlett's opening lines to her handsome Texan cowboy are

(xviii) I always thought Americans are gonna be as dull as shit, of course you're not, are you? Steve Martin's American, isn't he?

which becomes

Ho sempre pensato che gli americani fossero sbiaditi come la merda secca, ma questo non vale per te. Steve Martin è americano, non è così?

Scarlett's initial '... you're not, are you' is actually an attempt to involve the gentleman in question into a conversation with her. Notice that the Italian translation of the tag, *ma questo non vale per te*, apart from merely being a space filler (i.e. Scarlett's lips are mouthing the tag therefore for reasons of lip-synchronisation she has to say something in Italian) the Italian rejoinder is more of an attempt to cover up a gaffe than a conversational gambit.

3. Other conversational gambits

The film also contains many examples of conversational gambits which do not fall within the category of question tags. The under translation of such items results in characters who are out of character in their Italian personae.

3.1. Vague language

When Carrie suggests Charles announce their engagement after their having spent the night together, his response is: "Gosh, you know, that takes a lot of

thinking about, that kind of thing'. Charles is surprised and at a loss for words, so he blurts out a pretty vague utterance in an attempt to disentangle himself from a sticky situation. He starts off with two fillers as he tries to think up a plausible excuse for not marrying the girl. He follows this with a 'that' construction – a vague, but at the same time substitutive 'that' as he continues to play for time. He finishes off the whole utterance with a nervous 'that kind of thing' to mean marriage. It is worthwhile noting how he manages to avoid any negative form. Italian Charles is far more brutal and consequently out of character: *Queste sono decisioni che non si prendono su due piedi bisogna pensarci con molta calma*. In fact, in the Italian film there appears to be a tendency either to tone down vagueness, or else ignore it. Thus, Charles' embarrassing 'We slept together and everything' is simplified to the blunter *siamo andati a letto insieme ...* while his phatic 'Any children, or anything?' becomes *Bambini niente?* which actually distorts an embarrassing, but open-ended question into one which expects a negative response. Finally, ... *essere amici non è male, essere amici è sempre meglio di niente* for '... friends isn't bad you know, friends is quite something', once more distorts the original meaning.

3.1.2. Phatic communion

British insecurity is, of course reflected in other ways too. What follows is a short conversation between two guests at a wedding:

- (ixx) Tom: Splendid I thought, what did you think?
 Bernard: I thought splendid! What did you think?
 Tom: Splendid I thought!

The exchange is a clear parody of the typically British habit of conversing for the sake of conversing. The syntactic structures are perfectly symmetrical, with the adjective 'splendid' shifting leftwards twice. Although a perfectly adequate solution has been found in Italian, the polite uncertainty and embarrassment, and silliness of English phatic communion, is lost.

Splendida cerimonia, a te e' piacuta?
Per me e' stata bellissima, a te come e' sembrata?
Meravigliosa, davvero meravigliosa

Four Weddings and a Funeral, as the title suggests is about saying 'I do' which creates a further problem in translation where traditionally dubbed screen brides and grooms say '*lo voglio*' (literally, 'I want to') although real couples at real weddings say '*si*'. When Charles finally summons up the courage to ask Carrie to live with him he says:

- (xx) Do you think ... you might agree not to marry me, and do you think not being married to me may be something you might consider doing for the rest of your life? I do, do you?

Italian Charles is far more self confident:

Tu credi che ... tu saresti d'accordo di non diventare mia moglie? e credi che il fatto di non sposarmi è una possibilità che potresti valutare voglio dire per il resto della tua vita? Vuoi?

The target version is actually more verbose than the original, almost as though silence must be avoided at all costs, English Charles hesitates in silence as well as through redundancy and stuttering. But above all, 'do' is functioning as a substitute verb, as a dummy operator used with quasi ellipsis, as opposed to *vuoi* which functions rather differently. Naturally, the choice of *vuoi* is compulsory when an Italian gentleman pops the question in a dubbed film because of the stock response *Lo voglio*. Something similar happens when the vicar at the last wedding, interrupted by Charles' brother who tells the congregation that the groom may well love someone else, asks:

- (xxi) Do you? Do you love someone else Charles? / *E così sei innamorato di un'altra Charles, è così?*

Not being able to exploit an elided form, Italian is forced to resort to *è così*. At this point, the irony of Charles' response 'I do' to the vicar's question rather than to his marriage vows is lost to an obligatory Italian *si*.

4. Conclusions

The experience and expertise of the Italian dubbing industry is certainly extremely valid. It would appear that much care and attention are invested in adaptations, especially as far as lexical choices are concerned. This article, however, is an attempt to illustrate that what may appear to be apparently unimportant words, in the sense of their not being content words but *function* words instead, are often not given due importance and this can greatly distort original meaning.

More attention to such detail both at the level of translation and adaptation could lead the Italian dubbing industry from the present situation of extremely good products, to products of true qualitative excellence.

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