

# Translating Compliments in Subtitles

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The present paper is part of a wider project that aims to analyse how socio-linguistic and pragmatic traits are transposed in the two main modes of film translation, dubbing and subtitling. In film translation, where contextualised communicative events have to be transposed, the socio-linguistic and pragmatic aspects of face-to-face interaction depict real cultural scenarios and are meant to represent a wide range of situational variables. Hence, when turning from one language into another, perfect correspondences (i.e. equivalent linguistic signs – comparable socio-cultural meaning) rarely occur. The constraints due to the polysemiotic nature of film texts (Gambier 1994) on the one hand and the customary difficulties of mediating between source- and target language and culture on the other often cause inevitable clashes on the level of social and cultural meanings, if not their complete deletion. As has often been remarked (Kovačič 1996; Blini and Matte Bon 1996; Hatim and Mason 2000), it is especially in inter-linguistic subtitles, which reduce the original of at least 40% of its length, that emotive meanings (e.g. terms of address, discourse markers, politeness formulae, reformulations, dysfluencies, etc.) undergo a severe process of reduction and transformation. This contribution aims to analyse and evaluate the rendering of compliments, ubiquitous and widely researched speech acts, from English soundtracks (either British or American) into Italian subtitles.

## 2. COMPLIMENTS

Compliments are speech acts that are primarily aimed at maintaining, improving, or supporting the addressee's face (Goffman 1967). They can in fact be used for a variety of reasons: to express admiration or approval of someone's work/appearance/taste; to establish/confirm/maintain solidarity; to replace greetings/gratitude/apologies/congratulations; to soften face-threatening acts such as apologies, requests and criticism; to open and sustain conversation; to reinforce desired behaviour.

Compliment-giving and responding behaviour is used to negotiate social identities and relations. As a consequence, inappropriate choice of responses can lead to a loss of face. The preferred sequel to compliments is acceptance, but in American English, for instance, two thirds of the time respondents to compliments do something other than overtly and fully accept them (e.g. mitigate, deflect or reject, request interpretation; Herbert 1990).

On the basis of several socio-pragmatic studies it is evident that speech acts are subject to cultural and socio-linguistic variations (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989). Apart from macroscopic cultural and linguistic differences in the giving and accepting of compliments, some interesting changes can also be observed depending on socio-linguistic variables (age, gender, status, etc.).

So far compliments and responses have been studied in a wide number of languages. The majority of the studies are devoted to varieties of English: American English (Herbert 1989, 1990, 1991, Holmes 1986, 1988, 1995; Holmes and Brown 1987; Wolfson 1981, 1983; Wolfson and Manes 1980), British English (Lewandowska-Tomaszyk 1989; Creese 1991; Yläanne-McEwen 1993; Lorenzo-Dus 2001), South African English (Chick 1996; Herbert 1989, 1990; Herbert and Straight 1989), Australian English (Cordella, Large and Pardo 1995) and New Zealand English (Holmes 1986, 1988, 1995; Holmes and Brown 1987)<sup>1</sup>.

In Italian, to my knowledge, there are up to now only a few published studies (Frescura 1996; Alfonzetti 2006 and in press). Frescura has examined a corpus consisting of 979 compliment events, 90% of which were annotated by the fieldworker; the remaining 10% has instead been recorded. The main preoccupation of Italian speakers seems to be that of finding a balance between the "agreement" and "modesty" maxims (Leech 1983), whereas, for example, American speakers are mainly concerned with agreement and Chinese speakers with modesty.

### 2.1. COMPLIMENTS IN DISCOURSE

Even though compliments can serve a plurality of functions in different contexts, there is widespread agreement on their nature of «social lubricants» (Wolfson 1983: 89), i.e. strategies that aim to establish or reaffirm common ground, mutuality or social solidarity. Often compliments – or the compliment event if we also mean to include the response to the compliment – are quite independent from the linguistic environment in which they occur, although they are frequently related to the topic of the exchange<sup>2</sup>. This independence makes them suitable tools to use in opening sequences such as greetings or in thanks.

It is however true that like any speech act, compliments are embedded in a larger discourse structure. As Golato (2004) claims, despite their flexibility,

compliments need to have some “hooks”: in fact, when the speaker pays the addressee a compliment, he/she needs to know and recognise the “assessable”, that is the «object/talent/character trait» the compliment is about (Golato 2004: 27). Golato shows how this aspect is closely related to a careful choice of referential expressions<sup>3</sup>. Secondly, a certain degree of “positiveness” also needs to clearly appear in the utterance. This aim can be achieved through semantic and syntactic means, but also – and to a larger extent – through the context in which they are uttered.

In the literature compliments have often been described as flexible speech acts, i.e. speech acts that apart from having a status and function of their own can take on an ancillary function and thus contribute to – or even supplant – other speech acts. Wolfson (1983: 88) states that compliments can «strengthen or even replace other speech-act formulas» such as apologies, thanks and greetings and can downgrade the force of face-threatening acts such as criticisms, reproaches, directives of various types (that is displaying different degrees of strength, e.g. requests and orders; cf. on this Holmes 1986: 488). The picture is however by far more intricate than this, as it often happens that compliments do not differ significantly from general assessments. In fact, there are utterances whose positive meaning is to be gleaned from the context and that pragmatically speaking count as compliments even though they do not look like them. Furthermore, there are also utterances that employ semantically positive material but turn out not to be attending to a praising function (if uttered ironically they may count as reproaches).

## 2.2. SOME FEATURES OF COMPLIMENTS: SYNTAX AND SEMANTICS

Research on compliments, no matter in which language, has incontrovertibly shown that they are quite formulaic in nature. The most interesting results for American English are those that emerge from the studies by Manes and Wolfson (Manes and Wolfson 1980; Wolfson and Manes 1980). On the basis of their investigation of a corpus of 686 compliments collected by the authors and their students at the Universities of Virginia and Pennsylvania from a wide range of everyday interactions<sup>4</sup>, Manes and Wolfson recognise the repetitiveness of both lexicon and constructions and identify nine syntactic patterns that account for the majority of the structures in their data. In particular the first three patterns cover 85% of the compliments in their data-base<sup>5</sup>.

The patterns are the following:

- |                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| 1. NP is/looks (really) ADJ     | <i>Your sweater is really nice</i>      |
| 2. I (really) like/love NP      | <i>I like your car</i>                  |
| 3. PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP   | <i>That's a good question</i>           |
| 4. You V (a) (really) ADJ NP    | <i>You did a great job</i>              |
| 5. You V NP (really) ADV        | <i>You sang that song very well</i>     |
| 6. You have (a) (really) ADJ NP | <i>You have a beautiful living room</i> |
| 7. What (a) ADJ NP!             | <i>What a pretty shirt!</i>             |
| 8. ADJ NP!                      | <i>Good shot!</i>                       |
| 9. Isn't NP ADJ!                | <i>Isn't that ring pretty!</i>          |

Formulaicity is also to be observed in the limited choice of vocabulary. Manes and Wolfson observed that *nice* and *good*, among semantically positive adjectives certainly two that are characterised by low specificity, cover together 42% of ad-

jectival occurrences in compliments. If *beautiful*, *pretty* and *great* are added to the group the percentage increases to reach two thirds of all adjectival compliments. Among verbs, *like* and *love* are the most frequent and occur in 90% of verbal compliments<sup>6</sup>. Semantically positive nouns and adverbs (e.g. *genius*, *well*) are very exceptional, showing that compliments are preferentially expressed with a positive adjective or a verb of liking (Manes and Wolfson 1980: 400-401). Intensifiers (*really*, *very*, *such*) often accompany verbs of liking to emphasise the expression of appreciation, whereas the presence of deictics (mainly *this* and *that*) helps establish reference to the object of the compliment.

As compliments can occur at any stage of an on-going conversation, quite independently from the choice of the current topic, Wolfson and Manes argue that it is their formulaic quality that allows speakers to understand them as an expression of solidarity and to recognise them in any context (1980: 405; cf. also Herbert 1991: 382). Similar results pointing to the use of a limited number of lexical and syntactic formulae emerge from studies on South African English (Herbert 1989) and Polish (Herbert 1991)<sup>7</sup>.

Holmes (1988: 453) proposes a schema based on her analyses of compliments uttered by males and females in New Zealand English with six syntactic patterns.

- |                             |                                   |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1.a NP be (INT) ADJ         | <i>That coat is really great</i>  |
| 1.b NP be looking (INT) ADJ | <i>You're looking terrific!</i>   |
| 2. I (INT) like NP          | <i>I simply love that skirt</i>   |
| 3.a PRO be a (INT) ADJ NP   | <i>That's a very nice coat</i>    |
| 3.b PRO be (INT) (a) ADJ NP | <i>That's really great juice</i>  |
| 4. What (a) (ADJ) NP!       | <i>What lovely children!</i>      |
| 5. (INT) ADJ (NP)           | <i>Really cool ear-rings</i>      |
| 6. Isn't NP ADJ!            | <i>Isn't this food wonderful!</i> |

Holmes's corpus was collected with the same methodology used by Manes and Wolfson, i.e. field observation. Type 1 and 3 accommodate however subtypes. The interesting difference that emerges when comparing Holmes's account with Manes and Wolfson's findings is the absence of patterns containing full clauses, e.g. types 4, 5, and 6 in Manes and Wolfson's classification. In these cases the expression of approval is quite homogeneously entrusted to all clause constituents: an adjectival compliment (4 and 6), an adverbial compliment (5), and a semantically positive verb (especially 4 and 5).

The distribution of the syntactic patterns according to sex does not show marked differences for the first three most frequent formulae. A more remarkable difference is instead to be observed when comparing the use of patterns 4 and 5 by women and men. Pattern 4 (*What a neat blouse!*) is used significantly more by women than men. This can be explained with the rhetorical emphasis attached to its exclamatory word order and intonation. Pattern 5, on the other hand, is syntactically reduced (e.g. *Great shoes*, no determiner, no verb phrase) and seems therefore to attenuate the addressee-oriented function of the compliment.

It has been noticed that sometimes complex structures may be substituted by very short appreciatory sounds like "gustatory" markers (e.g. *mmmh*) or other sounds that convey appreciation such as *ohh*, *ahh* etc. Studies in this direction have pointed out that these tokens are used in some varieties of English (Australian English, cf. Gardner 1997; American English, cf. Wiggins 2002) and in German (Golato 2004: 78-79) in association with drinking and eating.

### 2.3. VARIATION ACCORDING TO TOPIC, GENDER, STATUS

Studies on compliments point out that even though an ample variety of topics would at least be possible, only a few account for the majority of compliments in the data (cf. Holmes, 1986, 1988). The topics that occur with high frequency are: appearance, ability, skill or performance, possession, personal traits or qualities. Compliments on appearance are the top-rank items but it is of particular significance that they have their highest proportion in female-to-female interactions. In New Zealand English (Holmes 1988), differently from American English, males are often complimented on their appearance. Complimenting on appearance across sexes may yet be perceived as too intimate or containing seductive overtones; therefore, males prefer to compliment females on performance or skills, not only or not always as a sign of their superior social status, but so as not to be perceived as inappropriate or sexually biased.

Correlations between complimenting and gender can be observed. On the whole it appears that women tend to compliment more than men and normally perceive complimenting as affiliative or cooperative, whereas men sometimes see it as competitive and face-threatening. However, if on the one hand women are deemed to be better addressees of compliments because of their lower social status (Wolfson 1984: 243), it is also true that women see compliments as an appropriate strategy to strengthen rapport in a wide variety of contexts. Men, on the contrary, seem to express solidarity and in-group membership in different ways (e.g. the use of slang, swear words, insults; cf. Holmes 1995: 10).

As for the status of complimenters and recipients, Holmes (1986, 1988) points out that 79% of the compliments she collected occur between equals, a result that is confirmed for American English by Wolfson (1983). However, when compliments are exchanged in asymmetrical dyads, they are preferentially addressed to higher status females, probably because they are considered less intimidating than higher status males.

### 2.4. SOME DISTINCTIONS WITHIN THE CLASS OF COMPLIMENTS

The speech act of complimenting is not only versatile in that it can achieve different perlocutionary effects, but it is also characterised by a variety of sub-types. C. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1987) draws some distinctions within this class: first of all she discriminates between *direct* and *indirect* compliments, the former concerning the addressee, the latter given to a person who is associated with the addressee and therefore metonymically reverberating on him/her. She also differentiates between *explicit* and *implicit* compliments. Explicit compliments may take recourse to performative formulae or to assertions where the judgement is openly expressed; in implicit ones, on the other hand, this judgement is either presupposed (e.g. "Hi, beauty") or implied (e.g. "Your husband has very good taste"). The categories are not always neatly separated and many combinations are possible. For instance, an indirect explicit compliment like the following also contains a direct presupposed compliment: "Your daughter is very nice. She has the same beautiful eyes her mother has". In the case of the so-called "cruel compliments" (*compliments perfides* 1987: 7), an explicit praising content may hide a more implicit anti-compliment: "How can it be that your children are so intelligent?" or "This dress really suits you. It makes you look slimmer".

Another interesting difference is that between *solicited* and *unsolicited* compliments. Solicited compliments do not deserve the status of real compliments, as real compliments are expected to be spontaneous and the act of “fishing for compliments” is in fact socially sanctioned. Furthermore, a compliment that somehow responds to a request is a reactive act and not an initial intervention in a sequence.

### 3. COMPLIMENTS IN FILMS

The most inspiring study on the structure and distribution of compliments and compliment responses in films is that by Rose (2001), whose findings are quite surprising in comparison with those in the various articles published by Manes and Wolfson.

Firstly, Rose establishes the validity of film language in the teaching of pragmatics in language classes. Secondly, he shows that it is undoubtedly representative of naturally-occurring exchanges, especially from a pragma-linguistic perspective (perhaps less so from a socio-pragmatic one, as the scenarios that occur in films can be somewhat idealised and often stereotypically played out). His focus of attention is the compliment event, for which he keeps Manes and Wolfson’s description as a reference model. His findings are however remarkably different from those arrived at for naturally occurring compliments. In fact, he found that the second frequent type in Manes and Wolfson corpus, i.e. the type I (*really*) *like/love NP*, is not particularly frequent in the corpus of films that he collected and analysed. Furthermore, he also discovered a certain number of syntactic patterns that are not included in the nine types of Manes and Wolfson’s taxonomy (Rose 2001: 315). In his corpus adjectives also tend to vary a great deal and are therefore not limited to the restricted selection of the five top-most recurrent ones (*nice, good, pretty, beautiful, and great*). Quite predictably, Rose also found that *nice* occurs less frequently in films than in the reference database: the adjective is in fact semantically quite vague and therefore scarcely informative in a compliment event.

Another feature that emerges from Rose’s research is that in films the distribution of compliments in relation to gender does not resemble Manes and Wolfson’s findings on casual conversation, for quite a high proportion of compliments are exchanged between males.

Rose’s analysis offers interesting and provoking results for further investigation. My task, however, is not limited to the analysis of compliments in the original English soundtrack of the audiovisual material I have selected, but also involves their translation in the Italian subtitles.

#### 3.1. COMPLIMENTS IN FILMS: ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK VS. ITALIAN SUBTITLES

My interest in analysing socio-pragmatic meanings and pragmatic routines like compliments in subtitles arises from the observation that these are usually the features that tend to be cut due to severe space/time constraints. In fact, in the creation of subtitles three transformations are involved: a translation proper, i.e. from one language into another, a diamesic shift from oral to written and a reduction from longer units to shorter ones. The latter aspect depends on both ob-

jective and subjective constraints: on the one hand factors such as viewing time, good readability, synchronisation but also the audience's reading skills, which in turn depend on its age and on its linguistic and cultural background, and the balance between length and informative load (cf. Caimi and Perego 2002).

In deciding what to omit, the ideational function (in Hallidayian terms) is well taken care of, whereas the interpersonal and the textual ones are considered less important (Kovačič 1996: 299), despite the loss of important pragmatic-linguistic meanings that this choice usually involves. The transfer from oral to written seems to be responsible for the quality of the language of subtitles, which is adapted to the conventions of the written language with the inevitable consequence that the natural flavour of speech and the effects of socio-linguistic variation are almost completely obliterated. This is especially important when the portrayal of characters is entrusted to language only (Blini and Matte Bon 1996: 329).

Presumably, therefore, the utterance of compliments should be profoundly affected by the reduction process at work in the creation of subtitles, as they belong to the realm of expressivity and do not provide the viewer with strictly factual information. On the contrary, it is undeniable that the compliment event performs a variety of pragmatic functions, especially in establishing or reaffirming common ground, mutuality or social solidarity, so if compensation strategies are not acted out in the subtitles, the risk of distorting the original message is quite high.

### 3.2. EXAMPLES FROM THE CORPUS

As this research is part of a larger project, the film material used for the analysis is being constantly extended. However, for the purposes of this paper the following films have been considered: *Bend it like Beckham* (2001, Gurinder Chadha, UK), *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999, Stanley Kubrik, UK), *Mickey Blue Eyes* (1999, Kelly Makin, USA), *Philadelphia* (1993, Jonathan Demme, USA), *Sabrina* (1954, Billy Wilder, USA), *Shallow Hal* (2001, Farrelly Brothers, USA), *Sliding Doors* (1998, Peter Howitt, UK), *There's Something about Mary* (1998, Farrelly Brothers, USA), *Tootsie* (1982, Sydney Pollack, USA).

#### 3.2.1. Non formulaic language in films

As Rose himself noticed (2001), films seem to use more varied vocabulary and structures geared to the expression of compliments. A brief survey on the choice of adjectives, which due to the limited number of films considered does not aim to provide statistical evidence but just to reveal some trends, shows that adjectives other than *nice*, *good*, *pretty*, *beautiful* and *great* occur with remarkable frequency. Among them there are *brilliant*, *cool*, *cute*, *terrific*, *tremendous*, *yummy*. Some of them are most typical in British English (e.g. *brilliant*), but most of them appear in both varieties. Let us provide a few examples.

(1)<sup>8</sup> Film: *Tootsie*

ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK

Tootsie: Oh, **what a big apartment!**

Julie: Yeah.

Tootsie: And **what a lovely, lovely room.**

ITALIAN SUBTITLES

**Che casa grande!**

**Che adorabile soggiorno.**

Julie: Is it?

Tootsie: **Yes, it's yummy.**

Julie: I had a decorator do it. Before the show, no money. Since the show, no time.

(2) Film: *Tootsie*

ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK

Michael: I was looking at you from over there. **You've a terrific face.** Are you an actress? You ARE an actress.

Woman: Sometimes.

Michael: You were in Dame at sea!

(3) Film: *Sliding Doors*

ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK

Anna: Is Gerry excited about being a daddy?

Helen: I haven't told him yet. Never seems to be the right moment somehow.

Anna: Come on, let's celebrate with a proper drink.

Helen: **Bloody marvellous idea.** I really shouldn't in my condition, but I'm really going to.

(4) Film: *Bend it like Beckham*

ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK

Girl: Who's that gora watching her?

Boy: Come on, Jess! It's all yours!

Jules: Hi!

Jess: Hi!

Jules: **That was brilliant!** Do you play for any side?

Boy: Yeah, like whose? Southall United Sari Squad?

Jules: I play for Hounslow Harriers Girls. It's closed season at the moment, but we've got a summer tournament coming up.

You should come and have a trial.

Jess: A trial? Think I'm good enough?

Jules: Yeah. **You're really good.** It's up to our coach, but we could do with some new blood.

Trovi?

**Sì, è un amore.**

Ci ha pensato un arredatore.

ITALIAN SUBTITLES

Ti stavo guardando da lì.

**Hai un viso fantastico.**

Sei un'attrice?

Qualche volta.

Eri in Dame al mare!

ITALIAN SUBTITLES

Gerry è contento del bambino?

Non gliel'ho ancora detto.

Non so perché non mi sembra mai il momento adatto.

Avanti.

Festeggiamo come si conviene.

**Questa sì**

**che è un'idea meravigliosa./**

Veramente, nelle mie condizioni non dovrei, ma lo facci lo stesso.

ITALIAN SUBTITLES

Chi è la bionda che la guarda?

Così!

Gol!

Ciao.

Ciao.

**Vai fortissimo,**

in che squadra giochi?

Squadra delle femmine col "sari".

Io nella squadra femminile di Hounslow Harriers.

La stagione è finita, ma facciamo un torneo estivo.

Vuoi fare un provino?

Mi trovi tanto brava?

**Sei veramente brava.** È

l'allenatore che decide, ma ci serve gente nuova.

Examples 1 to 4 above support Rose's findings about different adjectives that appear with a certain regularity in typical syntactic structures. One can easily expect *terrific* and *marvellous* to occur quite regularly in compliments, even though in (3) *marvellous* is associated with *bloody*, which in this context works as an intensifier. Another common adjective in compliments, especially in British English, is *brilliant*. Quite interestingly, in Creese's study on compliments in British English (1991) adjectives that belong to the core language and are positively connoted like *brilliant* and *terrific* do not play any key role. This might be imputed to the limited size of the material she investigated (138 compliment events), where *brilliant* appears 3 times, *terrific* never. *Brilliant* seems to be quite an interesting case: it appears 10 times in the film *Bend it like Beckham* to express as many compliments, once in *Sliding Doors* and in *Mickey Blue Eyes*, which is an American production but whose protagonist, Michael, is an Englishman. The possible reason why the adjective is so pervasive in *Bend it like Beckham* in a script of approximately 9,000 words is that it is a privileged item in youth language (cf. Stenström, Andersen, Hasund 2002). In (4) the adjective refers deictically to the superb way Jess kicked the ball. The attempt at rendering it with a colloquial expression typical of youth language is shown in the subtitles, where the adverb "fortissimo" has been used. The translation of such vocabulary in Italian subtitles does not pose major problems, apart from the use of taboo language, which, as a rule, is typically neutralised in both dubbing and subtitles (like in ex. 3; cf. Pavese 2002, 2005).

### 3.2.2. Discrepancies in the translation of subtitles: different syntactic structures and lexis, different pragmatic effects

An analysis of compliments in the films in the corpus has shown that the syntactic patterns used to perform compliments are more varied than expected. The translation of compliments in subtitles sometimes shows discrepancies across the two languages involved. This may be due to systemic differences between the languages at stake, to the constraints imposed by subtitles, to cultural preferences and to idiosyncratic choices. In many examples the trend seems to be towards the expression of compliment on performance in the English original and on personal traits in the Italian subtitles. In this concern, it is perhaps fruitful to recall the results Creese (1991: 53) obtained in her comparison of British and American English: although she worked with a limited corpus, she came to the conclusion that whereas authors agree that the largest topic category in American English is appearance, for British English it seems to be ability. The number of examples, especially in British films, is too limited to allow us to draw any accurate generalisation on the differences between British and American English. As will be shown, however, it appears that in Italian compliments on appearance or on qualities are preferred to those on performance.

Let us consider some examples.

(5) Film: *Philadelphia*

ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK

Andy: Anthea, **just the paralegal extraordinaire I was hoping to see.**

Anthea: I know what that means. The answer is no.

ITALIAN SUBTITLES

Anthea, **proprio l'assistente legale che speravo di incontrare.**

La risposta è no.

Andy: I'm talking of dinner at Felicia's.  
 Anthea: I've got a class.  
 Andy: I've got some crazy compelling  
 briefs that need proofing.  
 Anthea: You've got to exploit somebody  
 else. Since you've asked...  
 Andy: Your exam!  
 Anthea: Thank you. 98.  
 Andy: 98! 98? Congratulations!

Cena al Felicia.  
 Devo andare a lezione.  
 Ho dei casi che vanno rivisti.  
 Sfrutta qualcun'altro.  
 Non dimentichi nulla?  
 Il tuo esame!  
 Ho preso 98.  
 98! Congratulazioni!

Example (5) illustrates two interesting phenomena. Syntactically, it can be classified as a reduced form of pattern 3 “Anthea, (you are) an extraordinary paralegal”, which is enriched by a relative clause and which subverts the normal order ADJECTIVE + NOUN because the French-derived adjective “extraordinaire” can only be used in post-nominal position, e.g. extraordinary paralegal > paralegal extraordinaire. Furthermore, the vocabulary that has been chosen to express the compliment rests on the combination of adjective + noun, where the adjective is a superlative that is used, often humorously, to describe someone who is very good at doing something, and is reinforced by the verb in the relative clause “I was hoping to see”. The subtitles almost completely obliterate the compliment. In this case the adjective “extraordinaire” is omitted, therefore the compliment is visibly watered down because the expression of praise is entrusted only to the relative clause “I was hoping to see”. The humorous tone conveyed by “extraordinaire” is also lost.

Sometimes the translation changes the topic of the compliment. The results so far are far from statistical precision, but the trend is always the same: a compliment on performance in the English original is usually turned into a compliment on some qualities of the addressee in the subtitles.

(6) Film: *Tootsie*

ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK

Tootsie [the sound is not heard but we can see her lips uttering the word]:

**Perfect.**

John: Julie, **that was great.**

Julie: Thanks, John.

Rita [off-screen]: **Lovely job. First rate.**

Woman: **You were wonderful.**

Julie: Yeah. Thanks to my coach.

ITALIAN SUBTITLES

**Perfetta.**

**Sei stata grande.**

Grazie.

**Buon lavoro. Ottimo.**

**Sei stata magnifica.**

Grazie alla mia maestra.

(7) Film: *Shallow Hal*

ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK

Hal: And in summation, I feel that these measures will help JPS and all of our customers. Ok.

Colleague 1: **Nice job**, Hal.

Hal: Thank you.

Colleague 2: **Nicely done.**

Hal: I appreciate it.

ITALIAN SUBTITLES

Insomma, credo che sarebbe positivo sia per la JPS che per i nostri clienti.

**Complimenti**, Hal.

Grazie.

**Bravo.**

Grazie molte.

(8) Film: *Philadelphia*

ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK

Joe: You saw me on TV? It's a good school, Penn. What year are you in?

Student: Second. Listen, I just wanted to tell you **this case is tremendously important** and I wish you to know **you're doing a fantastic job**.

Joe: Thank you. When you graduate, give me a call.

ITALIAN SUBTITLES

Mi hai visto in TV?

L'università di Penn è molto buona.

Sono al secondo anno.

Volevo solo dirLe-

**questa causa è tremendamente importante**. E Lei è fantastico.

Quando ti laurei, fammelo sapere

In example (6) both “It’s a good one” and “That was great” are compliments that refer to a scene that has just been performed by Julie, an actress starring as a nurse in the soap *Southwest General*. Reference is therefore quite easily exophorically established. The use of a pronoun is possible because reference is being made to an action or an event that is currently relevant and therefore easily accessible. Deictics are in fact a typical feature of spontaneous conversation, where participants rely on such extra-linguistic cues as facial expressions, mimicry, gesture, posture and, above all, a shared context of situation to make sense of what their partners say. The translation of the second compliment in the subtitles also shifts the focus from the performance, the shooting of the scene, and insists instead on one of the character’s personal qualities. In the subtitled version the compliments uttered by John and Rita have therefore the same syntactic pattern, whereas they differ in the original.

In (7) the topic of the compliment is Hal’s successful presentation of his new proposal to implement business in the company where he works. So he is praised for his well-argued talk and the brilliant ideas that he has put forward. In the translation, instead, little importance is attached to his performance, for the first compliment (“complimenti”) is very generic. The second, “bravo”, is also quite vague as it refers to people and not to performance, but is an adjective that can be used on an unlimited number of occasions and, unless reinforced otherwise, is weekly informative.

In (8) as well, in the original the second compliment concerns a successful performance, whereas it is turned into a recognition of some stable personal qualities in the subtitles.

### 3.2.3. Omissions and reductions in subtitles

Considering the technical requirements that the medium imposes (length of the subtitle, i.e. not more than 40 characters, readability, different medium of communication, synchronisation with the image, etc.; cf. Kovačič 1996; Caimi and Perego 2002), omissions and reductions (cf. in Gottlieb 2000 condensation, when the expression is reduced but the content of the message is approximately the same, and reduction, where both expression and content are reduced) are very frequently and extensively resorted to. The aspects that are usually elided from the linguistic code pertain to the emotive, conative and phatic functions, but they may be more or less successfully conveyed by the other codes in the film. With the utterance of compliments, it can be hypothesised that both the visual and the auditory code are ancillary to the performance of the speech act. There-

fore if the linguistic form of the compliment is somehow reduced, the tone of the voice of the character and his/her attitude can be charged with the expression of the appreciation of the interlocutor. Reductions seem to be more likely than complete omissions, which would drastically subvert the pragmatic texture of an interaction (cf. Hatim and Mason 2000: 438).

(9) Film: *There's Something about Mary*

ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK

Mary: Tucker, what happened to your crutches?

Tucker: Uh, well, uh yeah. **That's a very good query, Mary. Well done.**

Healey: Come on! Tell her the truth, pizza boy.

ITALIAN SUBTITLES

Tucker...

che ne è delle tue stampelle?

Beh, ehm ...

**Ottima domanda, Mary.**

Forza diglielo, "portapizza".

(10) Film: *Mickey Blue Eyes*

ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK

Uncle Vito: Now tell me what you think of this one. You like it [= a painting]?

Michael: **Wow. It's very...intriguing, isn't it?**

Tell me, why does Jesus have a machine gun?

ITALIAN SUBTITLES

Dimmi cosa pensi di questo.

Ti piace?

**È molto...**

**intrigante, no?**

Perché...

Gesù ha una mitragliatrice?

È simbolica. Devi chiedere a Johnny.

Dipingere per lui è terapeutico.

**Tuo figlio ha un grande talento, Vito.**

Uncle Vito: It's symbolic. You have to ask Johnny. He does them as part of his therapy.

Frank: **You have a very gifted son, Vito. No two ways about it.**

Michael: Well, I must say, **I like the way... the blood oozes out of his cranium.**

Frank: **I like that. He's very talented**, wouldn't you say that, Michael?

Michael: **Yes, I think he certainly has something. Sì, ha qualcosa di speciale.**

Devo dire che **mi piace...**

**quel sangue che sgorga dal cranio.**

**È vero.**

**Ha talento**, non credi?

In (9) the original contains two compliments, the first belonging to type 3, and the second, which is a slightly modified version of type 5 (*You V NP (really) ADV*). They are syntactically different but both of them concern Mary's behaviour, therefore a performance. They are condensed in the subtitle, where emphasis is placed on Mary's question, which is qualified as "ottima".

In (10) the interjection "Wow" is omitted and the adjective "intriguing" is badly translated into Italian. This is in fact a typical example of a false friend. The English adjective shows approval, even though something intriguing may not be fully understood or penetrated (e.g. *an intriguing remark*). The second compliment paid by Frank is translated with a different syntactic pattern and is certainly less strong in the Italian subtitle: in English the syntactic pattern is type 6 (*You have (a) (really) ADJ NP*), whereas in Italian the initial pronoun "you" is replaced by a full noun phrase. The focus of the compliment is therefore shifted from "you", referring to Uncle Vito, to "tuo figlio", pointing to his son, the author of the painting that is being commented upon. Furthermore, the strength of the compliment is reinforced by Frank, who emphasises the certainty of his assertion with the idiomatic expression "no two ways about it". The reinforcement of the commitment

to the truth of the compliment is irreparably lost. The remainder of the exchange contains some more compliments which have been quite faithfully and effectively transposed (expectedly, a repetition by the second speaker, i.e. Frank, has been cancelled): in particular, “he’s very talented” becomes “ha talento”, which is certainly more natural than the uncommon and ornate adjectival form *talentuoso*, but the adjective *dotato* could also have been used; “something” is made more explicit with an elucidating adjective, “speciale”. The original, however, is purposely ambiguous, as Michael is trying to please Uncle Vito without saying something he does not believe in.

### 3.2.4. *Implicit compliments in subtitles*

In the plethora of studies devoted to the compliment event, the majority of scholars agree that compliments are formulaic in nature, with frequently repeated syntactic patterns and lexical material, and that, at least in Western languages, they contain an expression of admiration on the part of the speaker concerning a possession, accomplishment or personal quality of the addressee (cf. Holmes 1988; Herbert 1991). Yet, as Boyle advocates (2000), compliments are not necessarily formulaic and in certain genres there is a marked preference for implicit forms (cf. also Herbert 1991: 383). By implicit compliments Boyle means two different speech acts: one that refers to the addressee’s achievement, whose recognition strongly depends on indexical knowledge; and one that compares the addressee to someone he/she thinks highly of. The latter type also requires a great deal of indexical knowledge and reciprocity of perspective in order for the compliment to be taken as such. The expression of praise rests on a comparison, whose interpretation depends on the addressee’s knowledge of the object of the comparison. Both implicit compliments referring to achievements and involving comparison seem to be able to solve the dilemma posed by compliments (Pomerantz 1978), i.e. reconcile the need to agree with assessments and to avoid self-praise. Furthermore, both types obey to a phatic function not only in the sense that they use small talk to establish rapport, but also because they reach greater affiliation with others.

Lewandoska-Tomaszcyk (1989: 77) also considers non-canonical compliments and contends that the less formulaic, i.e. more indirect, praising and complimenting forms, the better social effects in terms of solidarity they may bring about. In other words, the choice of non-routine language presupposes the special care the speaker takes in uttering a compliment, hence his/her personal involvement and sincerity. It is however also true that less conventional instances of compliments may engender more ambiguity and consequently require more interpreting on the part of the addressee (1989: 82).

On the whole, it can be argued that a higher degree of indirectness in uttering compliments seems preferable for several reasons: on the one hand, the choice of an original wording better supports the sincerity of the locutor and lends more force to his/her utterance. This strategy also involves the addressee by asking him/her to cooperate to construct the implied meaning. On the other hand, implicitness most strategically redresses the balance between positive and negative face thereby reducing the possibility of getting too close to the addressee and invading his/her territory, for example by embarrassing him/her (for a more detailed analysis of implicit compliments cf. Bruti 2006). For these reasons, it

seems important to preserve these aspects in translation, by reconstructing – as far as possible – the role configurations as they are in the original. When the positive evaluation derives from the whole sequence of words, the removal of some elements or the rephrasing of the original wording may downgrade the illocutionary force of the compliment. Let us consider some examples of implicit compliments.

(11) Film: *Bend it like Beckham*

ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK

Jess: **That was so brilliant the way you came to my house.**

**You were brave enough to face my mum!**

Your dad can't be as mad as her!

Joe: Your mum's a barrel of laughs compared to me dad!

I don't need to feel close to my family, Jess.

I don't need you to feel sorry for me.

ITALIAN SUBTITLES

**È stato fantastico quando sei venuto a casa mia.**

**Hai avuto il coraggio di affrontare mia madre.**

Tuo padre non può essere peggio di lei

Tua madre è un agnellino in confronto a mio padre.

Non ho bisogno della mia famiglia e non voglio la tua compassione.

In (11) there are two compliments, one with “brilliant” in a sentence with an extraposed subject, a phenomenon that is typical of the difficult on-line planning of oral discourse, and the second with the adjective “brave”. Apart from a general “watering down” effect (repetition and intensification are in fact almost always wiped out), the subtitles convey the same pragmatic meaning as the original.

Examples (12) to (15) contain a mixture of strategies, i.e. non formulaic vocabulary, some taboo expressions and implicit compliments. (12) describes a conversation between Frank and Michael in which the former is expressing his happiness for the fact that Michael is the right man for his daughter Gina. So the whole sentence “I’m so thrilled that she met someone who knows exactly how she deserves to be treated” acts as an indirect form of praise, which is reinforced in Frank’s following turn, where he specifies the manner, “like a fucking princess”. The Italian subtitles obliterate the taboo word with a heavy loss in the intensity of the compliment and in the characterisation of Frank’s speech, which is quite often interspersed with four letter words.

In (13) there are two instances of compliments the first of which relies on a positive noun, “mouthful”. Interestingly, Antoinette is expressing her admiration for Michael/Mickey Blue Eyes as if he were not present, thereby relegating him to the role of a side-participant in the ongoing conversation. She is in fact more preoccupied of pleasing the two mafia bosses that she already knows and therefore addresses to them. The second instance of compliment is instead implicit. The girl asks Mickey where he comes from and when she learns that he comes from Kansas City, she declares her interest in him by uttering the words “Kansas City here I come”<sup>9</sup>, by which she means that she fancies him a lot. The translation in the subtitles is faithful to the original.

Examples (14) and (15) represent instances of implicit compliments. In both cases the compliment is implicit as no positively denoted item is used in the wording. In (14) Sabrina is explaining to David that she was waiting for her fa-

ther to pick her up at the station and David very gentlemanly remarks that he is happy that her father did not turn up, thus having the chance of meeting her. In (15) Linus is praising his brother for his way with women by recognising him an uncommon talent. Therefore in (14) the compliment obviously refers to Sabrina by way of mentioning her father's delay and in (15) it refers to David's achievement but we can read between the lines a note of sarcasm and criticism because David shows a complete disregard for anything but fun, women and cars. In (13) the translation closely reproduces the original and preserves the implicit nature of the compliment, but in (14) the universal of normalisation is applied (Laviosa-Braithwaite 1998: 289) by removing the cultural reference that the Italian audience might not understand, i.e. Vassar, an exclusive college located in the heart of the Hudson Valley. This choice however drives to a loss of the positive connotations attached to the referent.

(12) Film: *Mickey Blue Eyes*

ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK

Frank: **I'm so thrilled that she met someone who knows exactly how she deserves to be treated.**

Michael: Right.

Frank: **Like a fucking princess.**

ITALIAN SUBTITLES

**Finalmente ha incontrato qualcuno che sa trattarla come merita.**

**Come una principessa.**

(13) Film: *Mickey Blue Eyes*

ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK

Boss: You got company while you are in town? Hey, Antoinette! Come here. This here's a very good friend of us. Kansas City Little Big Mickey Blue Eyes.

Antoinette: **That's a mouthful.**

Boss: Sit down. Say hi to the nice man.

Antoinette: Hi.

Mickey: Hi.

Antoinette: Mickey Blue Eyes. Why do they call you that? So what part of Kansas City?

**Kansas City, here I come!**

ITALIAN SUBTITLES

Hai compagnia in città?

Ehi, Antoinette!

Vieni qui.

Questo è un nostro caro amico.

Big Mickey Junior Occhi Blu, di Kansas City.

**Accidenti, quanta roba.**

Siediti e saluta il ragazzo.

Ciao.

Mickey Occhi Blu.

Perché ti chiamano così?

Di quale parte di Kansas City sei?

**Kansas City, vengo subito.**

(14) Film: *Sabrina*

ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK

David: Are you stranded?

Sabrina: My father was supposed to pick me up but something must have happened.

David: **Whoever your father is, I'll be grateful to him.**

ITALIAN SUBTITLES

È rimasta a piedi?

Papà doveva venirmi a prendere.

**Chiunque sia suo padre, gli sarò eternamente grato.**

(15) Film: *Sabrina*

ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK

David: Well, I may know nothing of Dow Jones, but I do know something about kisses.

Linus: **You could lecture on that at Vassar.**

ITALIAN SUBTITLES

Non ne saprò nulla del Dow Jones, ma di baci sono esperto.

**Potresti tenere un corso universitario.**

### 3.2.5. Explicitation in subtitles

Sometimes, more exceptionally though, it may also happen that the speech act in the subtitles is richer than that in the original, not so much quantitatively (cf. Gottlieb 2000 on expansion), but qualitatively, because the expression, and consequently the message that is conveyed, is richer. Let us consider the following case.

In (16) the subtitles are more explicit (cf. on explicitation Perego 2003) than the original, as the sincere, deep admiration for Jess's outfit is more strongly and effectively conveyed:

(16) Film: *Bend it like Beckham*

ENGLISH SOUNDTRACK

Jess: I didn't bring anything for a club. I didn't know they would take us clubbing. I bet it's too gloat! [pointing at a T-shirt].

Jules: [dialling Mel's extension] Mel? We need some help.

Girl 1: Jess!

Girl 2: Oh, wow! You look good!

Mel: [following Jess, who's wearing a sexy outfit] **She looks good?**

ITALIAN SUBTITLES

Non ho niente per uscire, non sapevo

che ci portassero per locali.

Mel? Ci serve aiuto.

**Non è una meraviglia?**

Here the subtitle translates more explicitly what is already conveyed by the visual and aural codes, i.e. Mel's smiling look of approval and admiration and the cheerful tone in her voice.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

On the whole, most of the findings in Rose (2001) have been confirmed by this study. Compliments in film language seem to exploit a more varied repertoire of linguistic expressions than the few, stereotypical formulae identified in the socio-linguistic studies by Manes and Wolfson (cf. examples 1-4). Some adjectives tend to occur with regularity: *brilliant* (especially in Br.E., cf. *Bend it like Beckham* and *Mickey Blue Eyes*, where Michael/Mickey is an Englishman), *cute* and *terrific* (cf. *Tootsie*, *Sliding Doors*). Actual frequency of occurrence should be checked in corpora of natural dialogue.

The limited data that has been analysed so far suggests that in the Italian subtitles there appears to be a preference to compliment people on their personal qualities rather than on their performance (examples 6, 7 and 8). This tendency should however be double-checked both in more film subtitles and also in original data in Italian, to see whether this is a feature of subtitles or a general preference of Italian.

Generally speaking, there is a marked preference for omissions and reductions in subtitles (examples 9 and 10), where any small change, if not compensated by the other communicative codes, drastically affects pragmatic meaning. In a few cases, however, more explicit compliments (example 16) show that the translator may decide to reinforce through the subtitle what is expressed by the images (i.e. look, posture, facial expression, etc.) or by the non verbal qualities of the auditory channel (i.e. tone of voice, speed of speech).

Finally, it has been observed that implicit compliments are successful in the Italian subtitles when the original wording is closely reproduced so as to involve the addressee in the co-operative decoding task of contributing meaning to the speaker's utterance. Otherwise, if something is expunged, the effect might turn out to be scarcely convincing, especially in a language that tends to favour exaggerated forms of approval (cf. on this Bruti 2006). Needless to say, all the above trends should be confirmed by investigation of more data, both from film language and from corpora of spoken Italian.

- <sup>1</sup> For a survey of the studies on compliments in different languages cf. Golato (2004: 213).
- <sup>2</sup> The compliment can however be an unrelated insertion in a conversation, a sort of aside comment which has no evident link with the current topic.
- <sup>3</sup> In her recent monograph on compliments Golato (2004) interestingly associates the sequential organisation of compliments to discourse anaphora (in the tradition of Fox 1987, 1996).
- <sup>4</sup> As some researchers have pointed out, the procedure that Manes and Wolfson used, i.e. field observation, has some limitations, because researchers have to rely on their memory and observational skills with inevitable qualitative and quantitative losses. Redundancies, dysfluencies and modalising elements such as hedges and discourse markers are usually neglected as well as non linguistic cues (Golato 2003: 95). On the whole, though, field observation can be useful especially when the focus of the research is the speech event and the identification of the most recursive syntactic patterns.
- <sup>5</sup> «Really» stands for any intensifier; look stands for any linking verb other than *be*; *like* and *love* stand for any verb of liking; ADJ stands for any semantically positive adjective; NP stands for a noun phrase that does not include a positive adjective;
- PRO stands for *you, this, that, these or those*» (Wolfson and Manes 1980: 408).
- <sup>6</sup> Quite interestingly, in German the positive value is very seldom expressed by a verb. As Golato shows (2004: 78), 35% of compliments contain no verb at all, 35% use the verb *sein* (=“to be”) and another 10% the verb *haben* (=“to have”), which are semantically neutral verbs. The only exception is the verb *freuen* (=“to be happy”).
- <sup>7</sup> Herbert shows that, differently from English, Polish compliments are practically never expressed with the first person singular. The most frequent formula is in fact *Masz* (= “you have”) (Herbert 1991: 391). Consequently, it is quite obvious that the largest proportion of compliments in Polish concerns possessions, particularly new possessions.
- <sup>8</sup> Compliments are in bold in both the original and in the subtitles. In transcribing the Italian subtitles I have followed the following conventions: a slash (/) indicates the border between two different subtitles and dashes (-) indicate that two turns belong to the same subtitle.
- <sup>9</sup> Two readings are viable here, the second of which exploits the sexual meaning of the verb to come.

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