

Stai scherzando? ‘Are you kidding?’: Investigating the influence of dubbing on the Italian Progressive

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While it is not surprising that English would influence certain domains such as international trade, information technology, and academia, to name a few, the impact of English on non-domain specific elements remains less vigorously studied. In Italian, for instance, an increase in the use of present progressive constructions in dubbed products has been reported by a number of authors (i.e., Ferro & Sardo 2008) who have also hypothesised that such an increase may have passed into real use Italian and that it may be due to the influence from English during the translation process. In consideration of the fact that in Italian the progressive form is not obligatory and that there are limitations on the possible semantic and morphosyntactic combinations, a general low frequency is expected. However, in this study, the diachronic quantitative investigations from written and spoken data of real use Italian have revealed that, from the Unification of Italy (1861) to 2011, the frequency of use of such a construction has more than quadrupled in writing and that, from 1965 to 2004, has more than tripled in speech. The paper also explores the hypothesis that such a phenomenon may go beyond a mere frequency increase; our data show that the process may be so deep that it has affected formulaic expressions such as *scherzi?* [do you joke?] ‘are you joking?’, which traditionally existed only at the simple form, by generating a progressive variant (e.g., *stai scherzando?*). The preliminary findings from the diachronic investigations also show plausible correlations with an English influence via dubbing.

KEYWORDS: Italian language change, English in contact with Italian, Corpus Linguistics

1. Introduction

English is the most widely non-native language used around the world; the incorporation of English domain-specific terminology into other languages (i.e., international trade, diplomacy, media, information technology, and academia to name a few) is therefore not surprising. What remains less apparent is the influence of English on linguistic elements that are NOT domain specific. In Italian, some authors (e.g., Ferro &

Sardo 2008) have for instance pointed out an increase in the use of the Present Progressive form (*stare* + gerund) claiming that such an increase may be due to the influence of remote contact with English via translations, mainly dubbing.

Dubbing is an audiovisual translation (AVT) technique which consists in “replacing the original track of a film’s (or any audiovisual text) source language dialogues with another track on which translated dialogues have been recorded in the target language” (Chaume, 2012: 1). In literature (i.e., Patuelli 1936; Rando 1973; Maraschio 1982; Dardano 1986; Pavesi 1994, 2005, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Paolinelli & Di Fortunato 1996, 2005; Galassi 2000; Bollettieri Bosinelli 2002; Alfieri et al 2003; 2008; Ferro & Sardo 2008; Rossi 2010), the research hypothesis of the influence of dubbing on (Italian) language in use is based on the assumption that, as any other form of translation, dubbing generates interference in the target text. As viewers have been regularly exposed to these instances of interference so generated and repeatedly used over the years, it is thought that their language may have been affected by such exposure and that these interference phenomena have now become entrenched in real use Italian. Moreover, the Italian language would be particularly subject to this type of interference as in Italy, over 90% of all the audiovisual (AV) products are imported, and therefore dubbed (Paolinelli & Di Fortunato 2005); finally, dubbing has been steadily in use since 1932.

The first consideration to be made is that, regardless of the specific objective, these works share a fundamental limitation: they all claim that numerous present-day Italian expressions are the result of translation interference that originated during the AVT process, but none of these claims has been based on objective investigations. The instances of translation interference are identified according to the scholar’s sensitiveness and personal intuition of what was perceived as ‘non Italian’, or ‘not traditional’ at the time the study was carried out. Even when corpora of dubbed products are used to investigate the presence of translation interference in Italian dubbing (Alfieri et al 2003, 2008; Pavesi 2005, 2008, 2009; Ferro & Sardo 2008) or to demonstrate the presence of recurrent patterns in dubbed products by providing frequency wordlists (Freddi 2008), no proof is ever provided that the identified expressions may be the result of the English influence. What we do gather from these works is some evidence that a number of (American) English expressions are recurrently translated in the same way in different Italian AV products; however, a systematic investigation of the extent to which such alleged interference instances may have passed into real use Italian or whether the alleged change may be attributed to the English influence has not been conducted yet.

For instance, with specific reference to the Progressive, some authors have observed that the frequency of occurrence of this form is particularly high in Italian AV products

translated from English (i.e., Alfieri et al 2003; Ferro & Sardo 2008). However, although the authors make use of quantifiable data to substantiate their claims, there are limitations in both their analyses and the way they present their results. For example, the corpora themselves are not available and only partial and nonspecific details of the Progressive frequency of occurrence (raw or relative) are given. Thus, the terms of comparison used to qualify such frequency of occurrence as high are not clear and that the identified occurrences would not belong to natural use of Italian (i.e., they are the result of English influence) is not further explored. In other words, though the Progressive has been recurrently found in dubbed products from (American) English, the results cannot be considered as conclusive.

Similarly, Pavesi (2005: 48) highlighted the increase in the use of the response/reaction marker *stai scherzando?* 'are you joking?' over the Simple Present variant *scherzi?* [do you joke?] 'are you joking?' which, according to the author, would be traditionally preferred. Her hypothesis is once again that, because of the English influence, the Present Progressive variety has been generated; such new expression, she claims, has now replaced the original expression. Her conclusions are drawn from the analysis of a small parallel corpus of AV products (55,830 words in English and 51,538 words in Italian); this is a sample of a larger corpus – the Pavia Corpus of Film Dialogues (PCFD) (Freddi & Pavesi 2009) – and it is made up of 5 films released in Italy between 1995 and 2000. The corpus is mainly used to demonstrate how Italian dubbing is characterised by a repeated use of identical solutions to translation problems which have been so frequently employed over time that they have led to the establishment of a norm; *stai scherzando?* would be an example of such automatism. In the sample analysed, *stai scherzando?* is identified as more frequent than *scherzi?*; however, the relevant data are once again not provided and overall, the influence from English is hypothesised rather than effectively proven.

Finally, diachronic studies on the Italian Progressive (Squartini 1990; Bertinetto 1996) with no specific reference to AV Studies have shown that this construction had already gone through a process of increase in the first half of the 19th century (i.e., before dubbing) when then it dropped dramatically before rising again in recent times (especially after World War II). Durante (1981) has also advanced the hypothesis that the more recent rise can be explained as caused by the English influence, but once again, no evidence has been provided to support the claim. On the whole then, it appears that regardless of the approach and the framework employed, the claims about an Anglicisation of the Italian language with respect to the Progressive have so far outpaced evidence.

In this study, verifiable and objective data, such as historical dictionaries and language corpora of written and spoken data, are used to diachronically investigate the frequency of

occurrence of the Present Progressive in Italian, understood as its formal representation of *stare* + gerund. These linguistic resources have been selected according to criteria of completeness, authoritativeness, and representativeness of diaphasic, diastratic, diamesic, diatopic, and diachronic variation. The written corpora (DiaCORIS and CORIS) gather authentic Italian texts from 1861 to 2011 (about 160 million words) while the spoken corpora (LIP, LABLITA, CLIPS¹) collect oral dialogues from 1965 to 2004 (about 1 million 400 thousand words). To compare the findings of the lexicographic investigations with dictionaries of Italian from 1965 to present day, a number of modern and contemporary dictionaries are also used. The complete list of the resources used is provided in the reference list. Such investigations will allow us to give empirical substantiation to previous claims of an increase in the use of the Progressive in real use Italian; crucially, the data will also provide valuable information about the *when* the changes started to happen so as to draw reasonable conclusions on any possible direct correlation with the role played by dubbing.

The same procedure will be applied to the investigation of the formulaic² expression *scherzi?* [do you joke?] ‘are you joking?’ vs *stai scherzando?* ‘are you joking?’ to determine: 1) if it is true that *scherzi?* was the expression traditionally used in similar communicative situations, i.e., *stai scherzando?* has only recently appeared in Italian and 2) when the phrase started to be used. Such investigations will provide us with the dataset necessary to support the hypothesis of any relevant and plausible influence from English, mainly via dubbing translations. Therefore, the study does not try to claim that language change can occur without live social interaction (Giles & Powesland 1975; Giles 1984; Giles et al 1991) which clearly still plays a concurrent fundamental role in diffusing certain language features, nor it claims that dubbing is the *only* direct cause for the increase in the use of the Progressive and the origin of the expression *stai scherzando?*.

First, I will describe the sociolinguistic context in which Italian dubbing developed and the wider repercussions in terms of Italian dubbing as a major form of remote language contact with English (§ 1.1). I will then compare the two ways the English and the Italian language have to express progressivity in § 1.2. The results of the investigations are outlined in § 2.1, while conclusions are finally drawn in § 3.

1.1 The sociolinguistic context of Italian dubbing

In Italy, sound cinema came in the 30s, at a time when Fascism was exerting a strong pressure towards the process of Italianisation, a ‘purist’ cultural and linguistic regulation³. The task of operating a strict surveillance of foreign content in imported films therefore

became particularly hard for the Italian censorship committee. For this reason, on 22nd October 1930, the Government issued a formal notice according to which any foreign films and, in general, any film containing dialogues not spoken in Italian, must not be authorised.

To access the Italian market, at first North American motion pictures attempted to produce several versions of the same film in different languages; the initiative, however, turned out to be a fiasco as the actors were not Italian mother tongue speakers and often there were mispronunciations. In 1932, the multiple versions technique was put to an end by the introduction of dubbing which, shortly afterwards, was declared mandatory by the Fascist law of 5th October 1933. This decision was taken for two reasons; first of all, in this way the need for safeguarding the ‘purity’ of the Italian language could be assured by professional Italian mother tongue dubbers. Secondly, dubbing gave the censorship committee the considerable advantage of accessing the original versions so as to easily manipulate the scripts during dubbing.

Being the preservation of language ‘purity’ one of the priorities of Fascism, dubbed Italian was based on the literary variety of standard Italian, it employed a formal lexicon and, on the whole, a high register (Raffaelli, 1996: 27). Foreign words were systematically banned. This levelled, hyper-correct and rigorous Italian became the established language variety spoken in dubbed products, normally referred to as *dubbese* (“doppiaggese” in Italian) (D’Aversa 1996). Even after Italy had become a Democratic Republic (1946) and fascist laws were no longer in force, all imported movies continued to be dubbed. Moreover, dubbing language had remained essentially unvaried; according to Raffaelli (1996: 27), the main reason is to be found in the fact that the dubbers trained during the Fascist period seemed to have retained the pedantry and rigor typical of the regime.

As time passed, dubbed Italian gradually became closer to everyday Italian and its strict formalism gave way to a more familiar language. Scholars nowadays agree that current dubbed Italian is much closer to oral Italian than it was in the past; on the whole, however, it still does not entirely replicate real use (Pavesi 2005, 2009). Antonini (2008: 136), for instance, claims that Italian dubbese is “the language variety that most Italian screen translators resort to when they translate and adapt a film or any other fictional and non-fictional programme”. In other words, it tries to emulate real language, but it still has features of its own which clearly distinguish it from real use Italian.

Although a small minority of AV products makes use of subtitling or voice-over⁴ as the preferred AVT technique, today dubbing remains the most widely used translation format for AV products in Italy which, as any other form of translation, is exposed to a high level of linguistic interference (among others, Zaro 2001, Gottlieb 2001). Linguistic interference is defined by Weinreich (1953: 1) as “those instances of deviation from the norm of either

language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language, i.e. as a result of language contact”. Linguistic interference may also be understood as an induced language change, that is to say, as a process by which some elements, originally foreign to a given language, enter that language and modify it (Payrató 1985: 22). Such considerations have important sociolinguistic repercussions in terms of the relationship between the viewer’s exposure to such interference phenomena and their assimilation and subsequent entrenchment in language in use.

In the past, interference phenomena were thought to be brought about mainly by translated books, albeit to a fairly limited extent, as these books were accessible to a minority of highly educated people and any potential impact on the language was certainly restricted by their limited readership. Even as recently as after the Second World War, the number of illiterates in Italy was still 14% and among those who were not illiterate, only 18% had a post-elementary education (De Mauro, 2005: 431-432). On the contrary, unlike books and printed media, cinema spread evenly across the country; in 1958, for example, 64.9% of Italians went to the cinema on a regular basis (ISTAT 2012). At the same time, TV became easily accessible to everyone and quickly entered the living rooms of all social classes, regardless of literacy levels. As both TV and cinema have become predominant in people’s everyday life, and the amount of broadcast dubbed products has increased exponentially, Italian viewers have been constantly exposed to dubbed Italian for about seven decades now and, in the case of TV, also for many hours a day.

Today, it appears that the main linguistic unifying medium is still the AV product as, according to the Associazione Italiana Editori – AIE (Association of Italian Publishers), 54.7% of the Italians read less than one book per year, 45.6% are occasional readers (from one to three books per year), and only 13.8% of the population read more than 12 books per year (AIE, 2013: 1). According to the 11th survey on TV consumption carried out by Eurodata TV Worldwide and Auditel (Cassi and Karsenty, 2014: 1), Italian children are among the biggest consumers of small screen content in Europe, with a daily viewing time of 2 hours 51 minutes, 7 minutes longer than in 2013. It should also be noted that the TV consumption on other screens is not included in this calculation and that children and adolescents do not exclusively watch cartoons and youth series but they also appreciate family films and series, thus increasing their viewing time. Moreover, as it has already been said, Italy is a leading country regarding the overall import of AV products, especially for television broadcasting; RAI (the Italian national television broadcast corporation) import about 88% of films and series; products imported by Mediaset (one of most popular private television corporations in Italy) comprise up to 97% of all broadcasts (Paolinelli & Di Fortunato 2005). About 80% of these products are imported from English-speaking

countries, predominantly from the USA, and 20% from other European and Latin American countries (Antonini, 2008: 135). These general sociolinguistic considerations validate dubbing as a potential major source of remote language contact between the Italian and the English language.

1.2 Progressivity in English and in Italian

English and Italian have different rules to express progressivity. For example, in Italian the use of progressive forms is not possible with stative predicates, such as postural or locational verbs (Schneider, 2009: 290), or with the copula *essere* 'to be' in sentences such as: "John is being silly again" (Giacalone Ramat, 1997: 269). Such sentences describe a contingent state as a gradual incrementative process or a temporarily valid statement which in Italian cannot be expressed with the progressive form. Moreover, unlike the English language, in the verbal system of Italian the progressive form is not an obligatory category and overall, progressive constructions are an optional variant of the simple forms.

Unlike English where the use of the Progressive can be extended to non-progressive contexts, in Standard Italian the construction appears to be limited to instant-focused situations (Squartini, 1990: 133). In this respect, an important difference concerns the contexts that refer to future time, where the English Present Progressive can be used to express expected or durative situations, or future schedules (Schneider, op.cit: 291). Though in earlier stages of Italian (17th century) attested cases of uses of the Progressive for durative situations, most typically in perfective tenses, have been found (Bertinetto, 2000: 564), in Modern Standard Italian these possibilities are lost as progressivity cannot be used to express anticipation of forthcoming events or durative situations (i.e., *I will be waiting...*). Yet, the use of the Progressive with stative verbs is in fact not at all infrequent in the southern and Sardinian varieties of Italian, due to the influence of the local dialects (Bertinetto 1986, 1994, 2000; Bertinetto et al 2000). In this study, however, I will focus exclusively on the frequency counts of the formal manifestation of the Progressive (*stare* + gerund) and of the expression *stai scherzando?*, thus leaving aside both their contingent contexts of use and the other two relatively popular Italian progressive periphrases *andare* + gerund (to go + gerund) and *venire* + gerund (to come + gerund). It is in this regard worth reminding the reader that the aim of this study is to corroborate previous claims on an increase in the use of the Progressive in Standard Italian, understood as *stare* + gerund, and to explore how plausible is that such increase may be related to the influence of

dubbing; the results of these analyses will be instrumental to verify if the conditions for future and more in-depth analyses exist.

Finally, at the morphosyntactic level, English progressivity can be combined with all tempo-aspectual forms, while in Italian only imperfective constructions are allowed. As Bertinetto (2000: 565) notices, English differs from Italian (and Romance languages) because, in order to perform an instant-focused function, it can only resort to the Progressive whereas Italian can employ the Present, the Imperfect or the Simple Future, depending on the particular point in time the action is situated. In this respect, it is once again interesting to notice that documented cases of uses of the Progressive with compound tenses have been found in stages of Italian up until the 19th century (Durante 1981; Bertinetto 1986, 2000) proving that this particular construction has undergone major changes in the course of time. Similar significant changes affecting English throughout the centuries have also been reported by Bertinetto et al (2000) who have also hypothesised that such parallelisms may have been common to most languages in the early stages of the evolution of the Progressive.

This brief outline of the differences between English and Italian progressivity reveals that in English, progressive constructions are expected to appear in a higher number of contexts and in a higher number of texts occurrences than in Italian. Although the Progressive in Italian has been proven to have shown increasing and decreasing patterns throughout history alongside other important changes, it is fair to say that due to its optionality, overall, a low frequency of occurrence is presumed.

2. *The analysis*

As clarified in § 1.1, the research hypothesis is that, over time, the Progressive has been increasingly used and that the contact with English via dubbing translations may have played a crucial role in this process. Although a number of authors (i.e., Ferro & Sardo 2008; Alfieri *et al* 2003) have pointed out the phenomenon by analysing both dubbed and original Italian AV products, the claims of the Anglicisation in the use of the Progressive in real use Italian have never been supported by any empirical evidence yet.

This study, on the contrary, develops upon an evidence-based approach where in-depth rigorous investigations are pursued across a range of verifiable data. To assess any increase in the use of progressive constructions in Italian, it is therefore first necessary to empirically verify its diachronic trend; thus, queries for *stare* + gerund are launched in the DiaCORIS and the CORIS Corpus. The results of the quantitative investigations are presented in tables

and figures which show the number of occurrences in each corpus (raw frequency) and the corresponding proportions in parts per million (p.p.m.). The calculation of the proportion is essential to understand the actual frequency of an item when the corpora used are different in size. Arithmetical frequency does not indicate the occurrence of an item in a corpus in proportion to its presence in another corpus; in that, proportional calculations present frequencies in a much more clear way (McEnery & Wilson, 2001: 82-83). The figures, in particular, visually display the diachronic trend of the frequency of use of the constructions under analysis.

It has already been said that the DiaCORIS and the CORIS corpus have been built according to criteria of representativeness. The two resources sample a broad range of authors and genres which may be considered as to even out and provide a reasonably accurate picture of written Italian as a whole. As argued by McEnery & Wilson (2001: 78), the criticism that frequency rates may be unrepresentative of the population as a whole, for example when they are particularly low, applies “not only to linguistic corpora but to any form of scientific investigation which is based on sampling rather than on the exhaustive analysis of an entire and finite population.” However, because the corpus is sampled to be maximally representative of the population, findings on that sample may be generalised to the larger population and furthermore, it means that direct comparisons may be made between different corpora. Conversely, when there are no occurrences, this is also an interesting and important comment on the frequency of that specific construct or word (*ibid.*). There will always be the possibility that some constructions may occur due to pure chance, but such limitations – which again apply to any sampling analysis - can at least, in corpus linguistics, be partially addressed by maximising representativeness. Such a limitation is therefore ascertained by the author. Tables 1 and 2 and figure 1 show the results in the written corpora while tables 3 and 4 and figure 2 report the results in the spoken corpora.

Table 1. DiaCORIS: Frequency rate of progressive constructions

DiaCORIS	STARE + GERUND	P.P.M.
1861-1900	292	11.68
1901-1922	357	14.28
1923-1945	560	22.4
1946-1967	1,568	62.72
1968-2001	2,083	83.32
TOT.	4,860	194.4

Table 2: CORIS: Frequency rate of progressive constructions

CORIS	STARE + GERUND	P.P.M.
1980-2011	57,324	440.95

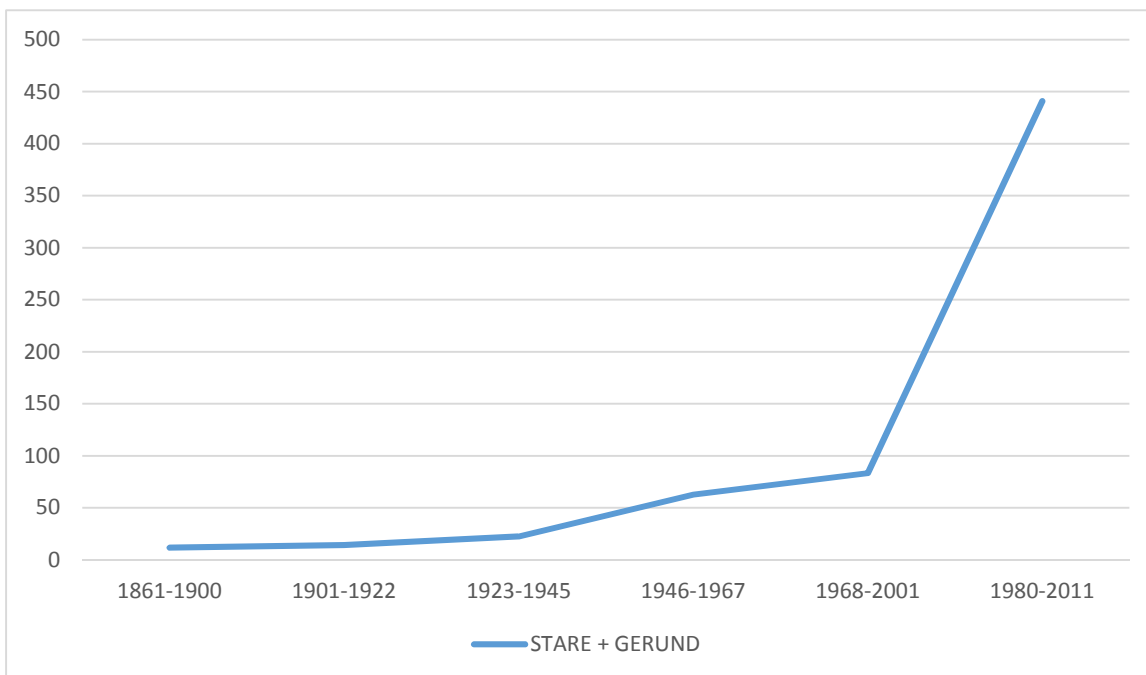


Figure 1: Trend of the frequency of use of progressive constructions in written Italian from 1861 to 2011 (p.p.m.)

Table 3: Frequency rate of progressive constructions in spoken corpora

STARE + GERUND	TOKENS	P.P.M.
STAMM. (1965)	33	329.56
LIP (1990-1992)	657	1343.07
C-ORAL-ROM (2000-2003)	252	808.77
CLIPS (1999-2004)	527	971.93

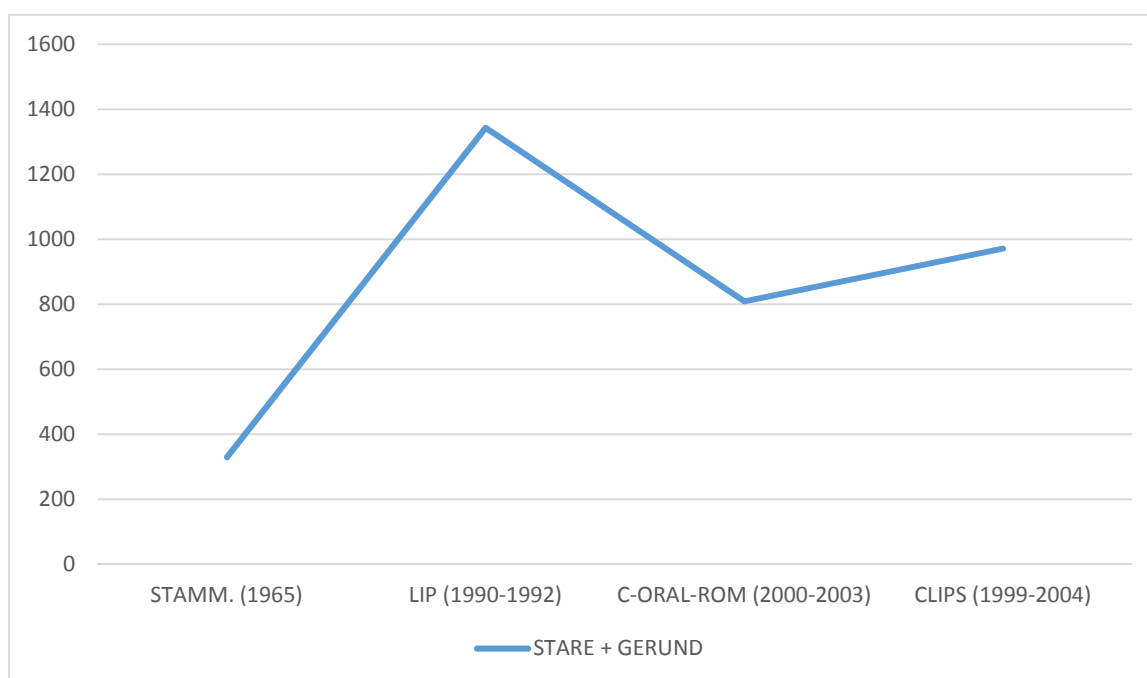


Figure 2: Trend of the frequency of use of progressive constructions in spoken Italian from 1965 to 2004 (p.p.m.)

The findings show that the use of the progressive form has increased considerably throughout the years; these results are valuable because, while this construction had already shown a discontinuous trend in the past, our data demonstrate a constant increase, especially in written Italian. Specifically, from 1865 to 2011 the use of the progressive form has more than quadrupled in writing and, from 1965 to 2004, it has more than tripled in speech. It is worthwhile to stress that only original Italian texts have been considered for the analysis, so that the results mirror a real use trend. It is also particularly relevant to draw attention to the fact that, although from 1861 to 1922 the data show an increase in

the progressive form of +2.6 p.p.m., after the introduction of dubbing the frequency rate increased of +10.72 p.p.m. These findings could reveal that the influence from dubbing may have considerably contributed to boost an increasing process which was already in progress.

I will now move on to analyse the second hypothesis of this paper; it is argued that the influence from English with respect to the use of the Progressive may have extended to affecting formulaic expressions that traditionally existed only at the simple form. The analysis, in particular, focusses on the Italian expressions *scherzi?/stai scherzando?*, counterparts of the English *are you joking?/are you kidding?*. These expressions are analysed only when pragmatically used as response/reaction markers, that is signals used to express a response or a reaction to what has been said previously or attitude towards the incoming discourse (Brinton, 1996: 37). Such a function is reported by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as it follows:

You are (or have got to be) joking, etc.: in phrases indicative of incredulity

(OED)

The Italian lexicographic search (TB 1861-1879, vol. IV: 636; GDLI, vol. VII: 973) reports the use of the verb *scherzare* as a response/reaction marker, but only in expressions such as *si scherza?*, *che scherziamo?* ‘do we kid/joke?’, that is at the simple present form. Contemporary dictionaries (Treccani; DM 2000; DISC 2008; Zing. 2008; Devoto-Oli 2009, 2014; Hoepli 2011; GDI 2013) as well report the use of *scherzare* as a reaction marker only in expressions at the simple form such as: *scherzi?*, *scherzate?*, *che scherziamo?*. These findings confirm that, historically, the pragmatic function expressed in English by *are you joking/kidding?* in Italian is conveyed by the formulaic expression *scherzi?/scherziamo?* and similar, that is only at the simple form. This is an important result as it supports the hypothesis that *stai scherzando?* did not use to belong to the system of phrases of the Italian language in stages prior to dubbing and it could reveal an influence from English.

The use of corpora at this stage is crucial to obtain a more accurate picture of the real use of such expressions in Italian and, more importantly, to observe their linguistic trend diachronically. Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7 and figure 3 show the results in the written corpora while tables 8, 9, 10, and 11 and figure 4 report the results in the spoken corpora.

Table 4. DiaCORIS: Frequency rate of *scherzi*?

SCHERZI?	TOKENS	P.P.M.
1861-1900	7	0.28
1901-1922	2	0.08
1923-1945	1	0.04
1946-1967	2	0.08
1968-2001	7	0.28
TOT.	19	0.76

Table 5. DiaCORIS: Frequency rate of *stai scherzando*?

STAI SCHERZANDO?	TOKENS	P.P.M.
1861-1900	0	0
1901-1922	0	0
1923-1945	0	0
1946-1967	0	0
1968-2001	2	0.08
TOT.	2	0.08

Table 6. CORIS: Frequency rate of *scherzi*?

SCHERZI?	TOKENS	P.P.M.
1980-2011	53	0.41

Table 7: CORIS: Frequency rate of *stai scherzando?*

STAI SCHERZANDO?	TOKENS	P.P.M.
1980-2011	39	0.3

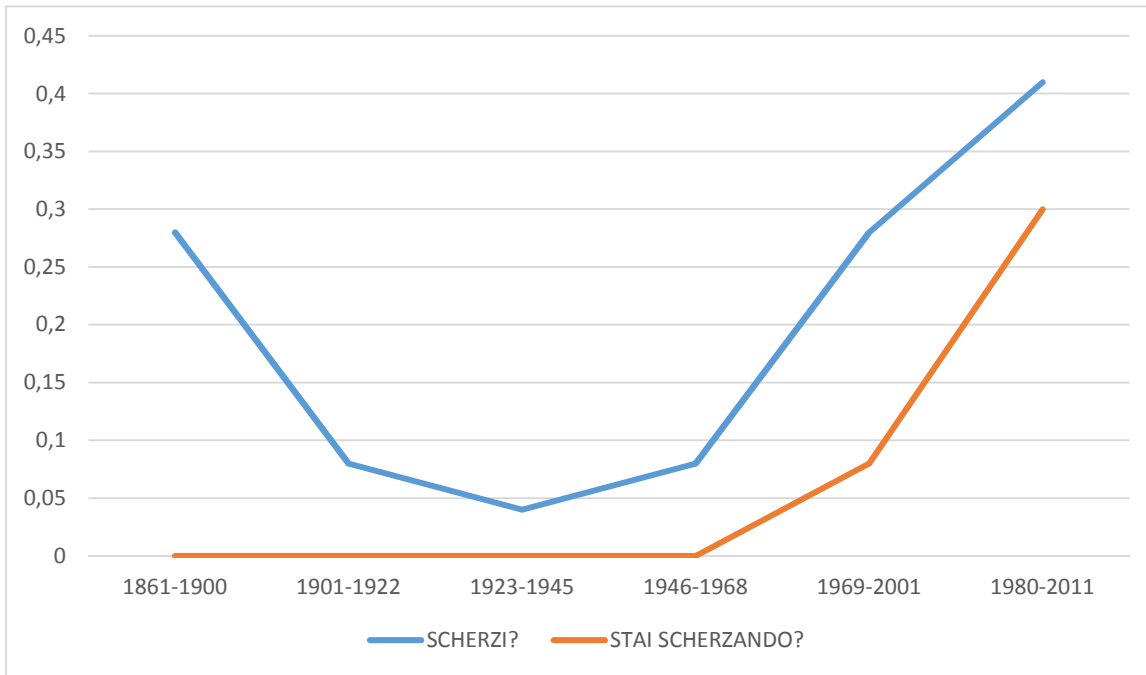


Figure 3: Trend of the frequency of use of *scherzi?* vs *stai scherzando?* in written Italian from 1861 to 2011 (p.p.m.)

Table 8. Frequency rate of *scherzi?* in spoken corpora

SCHERZI?	TOKENS	P.P.M.
STAMM. (1965)	2	19.97
LIP (1990-1992)	10	20.44
C-ORAL-ROM (2000-2003)	10	32.09
CLIPS (1999-2004) ⁵	0	0

Table 9. Frequency rate of *stai scherzando?* in spoken corpora

STAI SCHERZANDO?	TOKENS	P.P.M.
STAMM. (1965)	0	0
LIP (1990-1992)	4	8.18
C-ORAL-ROM (2000-2003)	3	9.63
CLIPS (1999-2004)	0	0

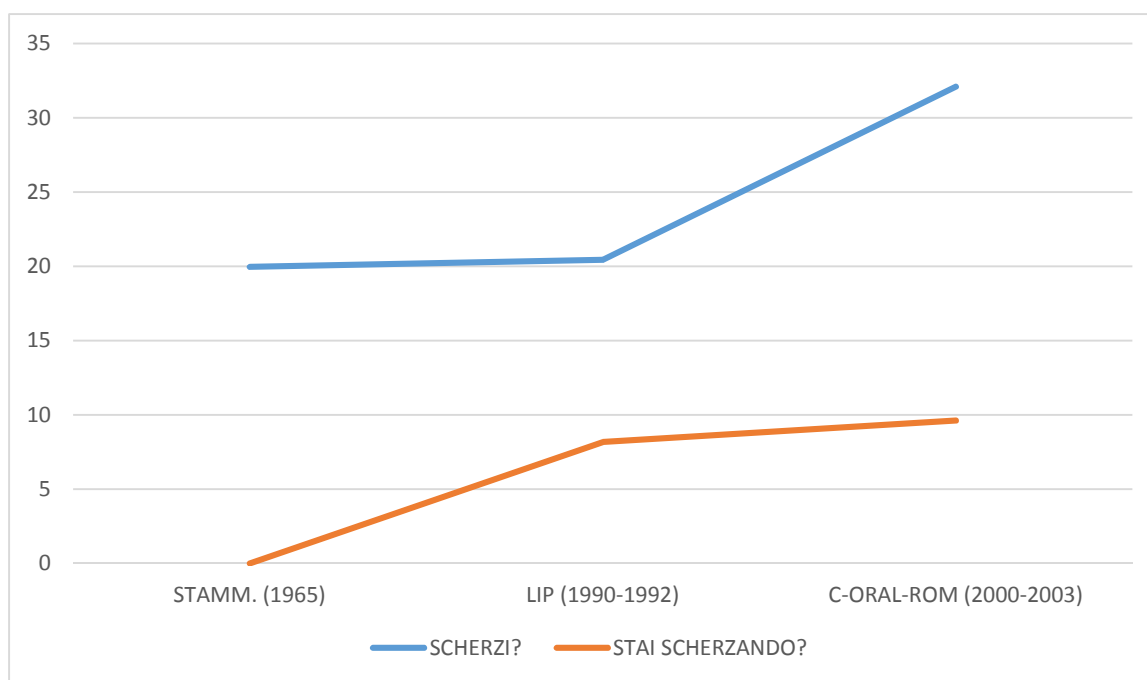


Figure 4. Frequency of use of *scherzi?* vs *stai scherzando?* in spoken Italian from 1965 to 2003 (p.p.m.)

The corpora results are consistent with the lexicographic analysis and show no records for the expression *stai scherzando?* before the introduction of dubbing; at the same time, the simple form variant *scherzi?* has been found in older stages of the language proving that the lack of occurrences for *stai scherzando?* is not due to a lack of representation of the communicative situation under analysis. This further strengthens the hypothesis that *stai scherzando?* is a case of language innovation, understood as the creation of a novel form in the language (Croft, 2000: 4) and of diffusion (ibid.) - as demonstrated in the above analysis - occurred perhaps as part of the wider general increase in the use of the progressive form in Italian for which an influence from local dialects cannot be excluded, but presumably

also boosted by its recurrent use in dubbed products, as demonstrated by the studies mentioned earlier.

Finally, the fact that the traditional *scherzi?* is still in use and in fact shows an increasing trend alongside the innovative variant may be explained as a case of ongoing language change which typically results in both variants competing. Normally, language change takes several generations to outnumber the frequency of occurrence of the competing variant so as to be considered completed, that is of at least 85% higher than the older form (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 55). It is possible that the discourse function expressed by *sherzi?/stai scherzando?* is more frequently used compared to the past, perhaps due to other sociolinguistics factors that go beyond the scope of this article. As a result, because both variants are still competing, they both show an increase. What remains relevant to the results of this study, however, is that a remarkable increase in the use of the Progressive variant is recorded in contemporary Italian, which is consistent with what has been observed in samples of dubbed Italian (Pavesi, 2005: 48). A future study could investigate more recent trends and analyse different language resources so as to compare findings and obtain a more recent picture of Italian in use.

3. Conclusions

The research hypothesis of the influence of dubbing on (Italian) language in use is traditionally based on the assumption that the AVT process generates interference in the dubbed text. The instances of interference so generated and repeatedly used over the years would then be expected to have crystallised in features which are typical of dubbing. As viewers have been regularly exposed to these features, it is also thought that their language may have been affected by such exposure and that these interference phenomena have now become entrenched in real use Italian. Although there exist other sources of interference (i.e., translated books), it appears that the AV product has been the main source of remote language contact between the Italian and the English language as dubbing remains the most widely used translation format for AV products in Italy.

This study aimed to give empirical substantiation to previous claims of an increase in the use of the Progressive and in the appearance of the expression *stai scherzando?* in real use Italian due to its frequent use in Italian dubbed products. To this purpose, diachronic quantitative investigations have been carried out across corpora of authentic written and spoken Italian so as to empirically assess the occurrence trend of the Progressive. The results confirmed that the use of progressive constructions has remarkably increased over time,

interestingly showing a peak of increase after dubbing was introduced in Italy. Similarly, the lexicographic analysis of the expression *stai scherzando?* used as a response marker has also shown that the phrase did not exist in stages of Italian prior to dubbing whereas *scherzi?* was historically used to convey this function. The results of the diachronic corpora investigations were consistent with such findings, proving that the progressive variant started to appear after the introduction of dubbing.

The analysis has then established that the changes *have* taken place, empirically substantiating previous claims made in descriptive studies. Crucially, the data also provide valuable information about the *when* the changes have started to happen. Starting from studies in which in Italian dubbed products a high frequency rate of present progressive forms in general (Alfieri et al 2003; Ferro & Sardo 2008) and of the expression *stai scherzando?* in particular (Pavesi 2005) were found, here it was proven that: 1) the use of the Progressive has substantially increased after the introduction of dubbing in Italy, and 2) *stai scherzando?* may be considered as innovation, i.e., it is not an original instance of Italian. It was also proven that such instance of language change is entrenched in real use Italian, thus confirming that there exist strong positive, though not exclusive correlations with dubbing which can be envisaged as playing a decisive role in introducing/contributing to spread new features in the language.

In an effort to investigate more fully the dynamics of these changes, a future study will focus on the *how* and the *why* questions in order to analyse the contextual factors that appear to drive these changes and what possible predictors mark the respective constructional choices. In this way, this study lays the foundations for future investigations to explore which pragmatically-motivated choices biased the speakers towards the changes and if an influence of dubbing from English can ultimately be claimed.

¹ In the CLIPS, the dialogues have been collected using the Map Task technique (Brown et al. 1984). The Map Task technique is a collaborative task used to encourage spontaneous dialogues among speakers. Participants are given a map which contains a route with landmarks. The maps are slightly different from each other in order to cause misunderstanding among the speakers so as to stimulate interaction and communication. On the one hand, the Map Task technique offers some advantages to the researcher, such as a moderate control on the type of communicative situation to test, and the possibility to ‘measure’ whether the communicative exchange is successful. At the same time, the number of speech act types distributed throughout spontaneous speech corpora has been found substantially higher than in the Map Task dialogues (Moneglia, 2005: 8). In other words, speech acts variation is less represented in corpora of semi-spontaneous speech collected with the Map Task technique. The limitation is acknowledged by the author.

² A formulaic sequence is defined by Wray & Perkins (2000: 1) as: “A sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar.”

³ For a full account of the relationship between Italian cinema and Fascism, please refer to Steven Ricci’s “Cinema and Fascism: Italian Film and Society, 1922–1943” (2008).

⁴ Voice-over is a production technique in which a voice is read from a script and may be spoken by someone who appears elsewhere in the production or by a specialist voice talent. It is usually pre-recorded and placed over the top of a film or video and commonly used in documentaries or news reports to explain information.

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