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GIUSEPPE DE BONIS

MULTILINGUAL FILMS

*A portrayal of language
contact on screen*

PAOLO 
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Kaleidoscope.*

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INTRODUCTION

The study herein presented aims to identify the ways in which different languages and cultural identities have been represented in film. In other words, it seeks to explore how the complex phenomenon of multilingualism has been portrayed on the big screen throughout the history of cinema. This exploration will take place on two levels: first, by examining how diverse languages and cultural identities are visually and verbally depicted on screen, considering the multiple semiotic codes that define cinema as a medium of communication (cf. Casetti & di Chio, 1990; Stam, Burgoyne & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992; Chaume, 2004a, 2004b, 2012, 2020; Chiaro, 2009); second, by analysing how multilingual films are translated and presented to Italian audiences via dubbing – the “mainstream audiovisual translation in Italy” (Pavesi, Formentelli & Ghia, 2014).

The study thus pursues a two-fold objective. On the one hand, it aims to investigate the portrayal of lingua-cultural diversity on the silver screen from the early 1930s – with the advent of sound cinema – to the late 2000s, in terms of presence *versus* absence of different languages in cinematic productions. Texts that do feature multiple languages inherently offer interesting material for translation analysis, as Reine Meylaerts (2010: 227) aptly points out, “[a]t the heart of multilingualism we find translation” (cf. also Cronin, 2009). On the other hand, the diachronic analysis will also assess how Italian dubbing has managed the presence of different languages in the source material. Specifically, it will consider whether the original multilingual dimension has been either preserved or neutralised, resulting in a target text that is linguistically more homogeneous than the source text.

The research proposes a multidisciplinary approach to studying the representation and translation of multilingualism in cinema. It proceeds within a theoretical framework that combines film analysis techniques (cf. Casetti & di Chio, 1990) developed in the fields of film semiotics and film studies (cf. Stam, Burgoyne & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992), with translation studies, particularly in audiovisual translation (cf. Gambier, 2004; Díaz Cintas, Orero & Ramael, 2006; Ramael & Neves, 2007; Chiaro, Heiss & Bucaria, 2008; Díaz Cintas & Anderman, 2009; Díaz Cintas, Matamala & Neves, 2010; Bruti & Di Giovanni, 2012; Ramael, Orero & Carroll, 2012; Pérez González, 2013, 2019; Abend-David, 2014, 2019; Bollettieri Bosinelli, Di Giovanni & Rossato, 2014; Baños Piñero & Díaz Cintas, 2015; Ranzato & Zanotti 2018, 2019;

Bogucki & Deckert, 2020; among others). Ideally, this study aims to heed the suggestion made by Frederic Chaume (2004b) to effectively integrate theoretical contributions from translation studies with those coming from film studies when analysing audiovisual texts: ‘Both disciplines are crucial in the exegesis of audiovisual texts and become necessary in order to understand the interlaced web of meaning in these texts’ (p. 13).

The prevalence of multilingualism in cinema has notably increased in the last decades, becoming a prominent feature of film production. This trend is corroborated by academic studies and research, indicating a consensus among scholars that the presence of multilingualism in cinema has assumed an increasingly pervasive role since the 1990s (cf. Heiss, 2004; Dwyer, 2005; Wahl, 2005, 2008; O’Sullivan, 2007, 2011; Bleichenbacher, 2007, 2008; Berger & Komori, 2010; Martinez-Sierra et al., 2010; de Higes-Andino et al., 2013; Şerban & Meylaerts, 2014; Beseghi, 2017; Pérez L. de Heredia & de Higes Andino, 2019). Consequently, contemporary audiences are frequently exposed to cinematic works that portray the diverse array of languages characteristic of our planet.

The term “multilingual” in relation to cinema describes films that portray intercultural encounters involving the use of at least two different languages. For the purposes of this study, multilingualism is understood as “the co-presence of two or more languages (in a society, text or individual)” (Grutman, 2009, p. 182). When discussing multilingual films (in the plural), a quite diverse set of films comes into play, whose unifying feature is the fact that multilingualism plays a significant role within both their story and their discourse. Following Chatman (1978), the concept of *story* refers to the narrative material of a film, i.e. the content of a narrative (the *what*), whereas *discourse* constitutes the way in which this content is expressed through the filmic text (the *how*), i.e. the expression of the story. Starting from this formal characteristic, film history has shown that various cinematic genres have often resorted to multilingualism. Both comedies and dramas frequently incorporate different languages, often exploring themes related to immigration or contemporary multicultural society (cf. Wahl, 2005, 2008; Berger & Komori, 2010). The list also includes genres like historical dramas, westerns, thrillers, action films, adventure films, and sci-fi (cf. Bleichenbacher, 2008; Cronin, 2009; O’Sullivan, 2011). This leads to the question of whether multilingual films could ever be considered a standalone cinematic genre.

Film studies have traditionally categorised films into genres such as comedy, drama, fantasy, crime, and horror (cf. Campari, 1983; Kaminsky, 1985; and Altman, 1999/2019). However, the presence of multilingualism in film

has consistently challenged these conventional classifications since the advent of sound cinema (cf. Dwyer, 2005; Cronin, 2009; O’Sullivan, 2011). Multilingual films can be considered as a “meta-genre” (De Bonis, 2014a, 2015a), a “genre within the genre” (or a second-level genre) that simultaneously encompasses and defines various cinematic genres. While there have been interesting attempts to classify European multilingual films (cf. Wahl, 2005, 2008), this study will adopt the notion of multilingual films as a “meta-genre” due to its greater flexibility. From this perspective, the defining characteristic of multilingual films becomes the function that multilingualism plays in the plot of each film, a function that may vary significantly across different films.

Broadly speaking, multilingualism on screen appears to have three main functions: realistic rendering, conflict, and confusion (cf. De Bonis, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a). In the case of realistic rendering, multilingualism serves to enhance the audience’s sense of the reality depicted on screen: linguistic diversity becomes a means for viewers to immerse themselves in the globalised world upon which the story of multilingual films is usually based. On the one hand, a film may portray various lingua-cultural identities in different scenes without necessarily having cross-language interactions, as happens in some segments of films such as *Pearl Harbor* (Michael Bay, 2001), *Walk on Water* (Eytan Fox, 2004), Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Babel* (2006) and *Biutiful* (2010), *The Burning Plain* (Guillermo Arriaga, 2008), *Gran Torino* (Clint Eastwood, 2008), *Hereafter* (Clint Eastwood, 2010), *Incendies* (Denis Villeneuve, 2010), *Hai paura del buio* (Massimo Coppola, 2011), and the anthology film *Tickets* (Ermanno Olmi, Abbas Kiarostami, Ken Loach, 2005).

On the other hand, a film may feature one or more “secondary languages” that consistently remain in the background, contrasting with the “primary language” – the main language of communication in the film (Heiss, 2004). These secondary languages typically remain untranslated and function as a semiotic device, adding to the auditory landscape that enhances viewers’ perception of what they see and hear on screen, alongside other visual elements such as set design, costumes, and props. Examples of such films include *Shanghai Express* (Joseph von Sternberg, 1932), *The Bitter Tea of Gen. Yen* (Frank Capra, 1933), *Arch of Triumph* (Lewis Milestone, 1948), *Beat the Devil* (John Huston, 1953), *The Barefoot Contessa* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1954), *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962), *The Wind And the Lion* (John Milius, 1975), *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *Empire of the Sun* (Steven Spielberg, 1987), *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, 1996), *Kingdom of Heaven* (Ridley Scott, 2005), *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009),

and the four films in the Indiana Jones series directed by Steven Spielberg: *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008).

Conversely, when depicting an intercultural encounter on screen, where two or more different languages interact within the same scene, multilingualism can convey either conflict or confusion. Conflict often arises in drama films where lingua-cultural identities are vividly depicted on screen and staunchly maintained in the film's discourse. In these instances, multilingualism serves as a vehicle for characters to emphasise their lingua-cultural diversity, leading to communication barriers that are often difficult to overcome. The stories typically revolve around themes of war and its aftermaths, or migration and the consequent social integration process. Examples include films such as Jean Renoir's *La grande illusion* (1937), Roberto Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (1945) and *Paisà* (1946), Gillo Pontecorvo's *La battaglia di Algeri* (1966), Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944) and *Torn Curtain* (1966), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Amistad* (1997) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), all directed by Steven Spielberg; *Land and Freedom* (1995), *Carla's Song* (1996), *Bread and Roses* (2000), and *It's a Free World...* (2007), all by Ken Loach; *The Pianist* (Roman Polanski, 2002), *Lebanon* (Samuel Maoz, 2009), *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009), *Gegen die Wand* (Fatih Akin, 2004), and *Welcome* (Philippe Lioret, 2009).

Confusion is a common element in comedies that portray the multicultural dynamics of contemporary society, such as travels abroad, migrations, and interconnections on a global scale. Multilingualism often leads to linguistic misunderstandings and cultural caricatures, creating and contributing to a humorous effect as lingua-cultural identities become intertwined on screen in a somewhat disorderly fashion. Examples of comic confusion can be seen in *Trouble in Paradise* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1932), *Shall We Dance?* (Mark Sandrich, 1937), *I Was a Male War Bride* (Howard Hawks, 1949), *Silk Stockings* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1957), *The Prince and the Showgirl* (Laurence Olivier, 1957), *The Great Race* (Blake Edwards, 1965), *La ragazza con la pistola* (Mario Monicelli, 1968). Notable mentions include *One, Two, Three* (1961) and *Avanti!* (1972), both directed by Billy Wilder (cf. De Bonis, 2015b; Chi-aro & De Bonis, 2019). Further instances are depicted in films such as *La vita è bella* (Roberto Benigni, 1997), *L'auberge espagnole* (Cédric Klapisch, 2002), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Joel Zwick, 2002), *Mambo italiano* (Émile Gaudreault, 2003), *Spanglish* (James L. Brooks, 2004), *Les poupées russes* (Cédric Klapisch, 2005), *Everything is Illuminated* (Liev Schreiber,

2005), *Borat* (Larry Charles, 2006), *Almanya - Willkommen in Deutschland* (Yasemin Samdereli, 2011), as well as Radu Mihaileanu's *Train de vie* (1998) and *Le concert* (2009) – on the latter see De Bonis (2015a).

Both conflict and confusion operate on two distinct levels: within the interaction between the film's characters (the diegetic level) and within viewers' perception of the reality depicted on screen (the extra-diegetic level). In other words, they function both horizontally and vertically within communication (cf. Vanoye, 1985; cf. Sanz Ortega, 2011; also see Kozloff, 2000; Bubel, 2008; O'Sullivan, 2011). Since multilingualism usually works as a means of characterisation (Wahl 2005, 2008; Bleichenbacher 2008; Sanz Ortega 2011), employing different languages on screen always aims to enhance the realistic rendering of the cross-cultural situations represented, even when multilingualism's most prominent function is either conflict or confusion. The function of realistic rendering is introduced in the theoretical framework to account for those instances in which different lingua-cultural identities are shown within different segments of the film without direct language contact between them.

Starting from this premise, a diachronic analysis will be carried out in which the perspective is enlarged to include also the Italian dubbed versions of the films under scrutiny. The aim is to identify the different solutions envisaged by dubbing professionals over time to handle the multilingual dimension of each film. With no pretence of exhaustiveness, the intent is to define past and current trends in the translation of multilingual films in Italy. Dubbing's main objective is "to make the target dialogues look as if they are being uttered by the original actors" (Chiaro, 2009, p. 144). This seems to raise issues of feasibility when it comes to achieving the same result with a cinematic product in which characters speak diverse languages and possibly do not understand each other. A broad semiotic approach will be adopted, which extends beyond a simple linguistic approach to dubbing. This involves considering the intricate interplay between verbal and other semiotic codes, especially acoustic and visual elements, that together contribute to the construction of the overall meaning of an audiovisual text, such as film. Special attention will be focused on the phonological dimension of speech, especially accents (either real or carefully recreated) and the voices of dubbing actors.

The volume is organised as follows. The first two chapters will explore multilingualism in drama films. While Chapter One deals with the negative pole of linguistic homogenisation, either within supposedly 'other' cultural contexts or within contexts of cross-cultural contact, Chapter Two delves

INTRODUCTION

into the opposite pole of vehicular marching, where a more accurate and realistic portrayal of different languages is presented on screen. Chapter Three then examines multilingualism as a vehicle for humour, exploring the various comedic devices employed in films to create a humorous effect: stereotypical accents, language contact as mockery of lingua-cultural otherness, diegetic interpreting as a mechanism of confusion and benevolent deception, vehicular promiscuity, and mock language(s). Finally, Chapter Four looks at multilingualism as a vehicle for suspense in thrillers, both in the context of linguistic homogenisation and in instances of a more realistic representation of cross-cultural interaction and language contact. The book concludes with some final remarks that offer a comprehensive understanding of the role played by multilingualism in contemporary cinema, as presented in the preceding chapters. Additionally, the conclusion section will discuss the three different macro-strategies employed in Italian dubbing when dealing with multilingual films, as drawn from the qualitative analysis conducted within this study.