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Between Homogenisation and Vehicular Matching: A Diachronic Analysis of Language Representation in Multilingual Cinema

Giuseppe De Bonis ✉
Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of foreign languages in cinema, focusing on their narrative and cultural function in dramas, particularly within the subgenres of romance and war. Since the advent of sound in the 1930s, cinema has strived to realistically portray linguistic and cultural diversity, especially in the context of intercultural encounters. In romance and travel films, languages beyond the primary language often serve to bridge cultural gaps, explore diversity, and convey the complexity of cross-border relationships. Conversely, in war films, foreign languages frequently function as markers of the "Other," representing opposing forces and intensifying conflict. This study analyses significant examples from both US and European cinema, spanning from the 1930s to the 2000s, and offers a diachronic exploration of how multilingualism contributes to narrative progression, emotional engagement, and the portrayal of cross-cultural dynamics. Framed by the representational mechanisms of vehicular matching and linguistic homogenisation (Sternberg, 1981; O'Sullivan, 2007, 2011), the analysis focuses on films that, while appearing to present a realistic use of more than one language, reveal a quantitatively reduced presence of secondary languages. The study also examines the approach followed in Italian dubbing, which mediates the multilingual dimension through strategies such as part-subtitling, contextual translation, and revoicing, ultimately underscoring the cultural and emotional significance of linguistic representation in cinema.

Key words: multilingual cinema, primary language, secondary languages, vehicular matching, linguistic homogenisation, Italian dubbing, dubbing strategies.

✉ giuseppe.debonis@unive.it, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8076-7153

Introduction

Cinema's effort to display a realistic representation of diverse languages and identities within the context of intercultural encounters emerged with the advent of sound in the 1930s. The cinematic portrayal of different languages plays a pivotal role in shaping the narrative and emotional landscape of films, particularly in genres that explore cultural divides and connections, such as romance, travel, and war films. In romance and travel films, languages other than the film's primary language are frequently employed as tools for creating connections, exploring cultural diversity, and conveying the complexities of human relationships across borders. By contrast, in war films, secondary languages often serve as markers of the "Other," representing opposing forces and adding layers of conflict and tension.

This paper provides a diachronic and descriptive analysis of how foreign languages are represented in multilingual cinema and how these representations are handled in Italian dubbed versions. Its aim is to trace the evolving relationship between multilingualism on screen and the corresponding translation strategies adopted in Italian dubbing from the 1930s to the early 2000s. By focusing on selected US and European films across the genre of drama – particularly within the subgenres of romance and war – this study explores the tension between the desire for linguistic authenticity and the need for audience comprehension. This exploration is especially relevant in the Italian context, where dubbing remains the mainstream audiovisual translation mode (Chiaro, 2009; Pavesi et al., 2014).

The cinematic material discussed lies at the intersection of two representational mechanisms outlined by Sternberg (1981) for fictional texts and later applied specifically to cinema by O'Sullivan (2007, 2011): vehicular matching and linguistic homogenisation. The former entails the authentic and accurate portrayal of diverse languages on screen (i.e., their presence), while the latter involves a process of substitution that reduces the multilingual richness of our planet to a monolingual fictional universe (i.e., the absence of different languages). This paper argues that most multilingual films analysed – though formally appearing to engage in vehicular matching – actually reveal a tendency toward linguistic homogenisation. This tension reflects broader industry practices and ideological considerations about language visibility, cultural identity, and audience comprehension.

This investigation focuses on films that, despite presenting a "naturalistic" (Wahl, 2005, 2008) representation of different languages throughout film history, still exhibit a quantitatively reduced presence of secondary languages. In other words, the cinematic productions examined herein may technically be classified as examples of vehicular matching, even though their narrative universe tends to appear predominantly monolingual in practice.

By also examining the approach adopted in Italian dubbing, this study explores how foreign languages are incorporated into the cinematic experience through various strategies, such as part-subtitling, contextual translation, and revoicing. It also considers how recent redubs and changing industry practices point to a gradual shift toward more nuanced forms of multilingual representation. This

exploration highlights how foreign language use in dramas shapes the viewer's understanding of cultural identity, human relationships, and global settings. Ultimately, this discussion underscores the crucial role of linguistic representation in cinema, showing how language informs both the narrative and the emotional and cultural dynamics portrayed on screen.

1. Travels and Intercultural Encounters: Romance Films

1.1. Travelling Long Distances Emotionally and Physically

A more realistic portrayal of different languages and identities within the context of intercultural encounters can already be observed in some cinematic productions of the 1930s, in films such as *Shanghai Express* (von Sternberg, 1932), *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (Capra, 1933), and *Love Affair* (McCarey, 1939). These films share an international setting, featuring characters from various parts of the world who, consequently, speak different languages. However, while they appear to embrace vehicular matching by incorporating multiple languages into their narratives, their multilingualism is often constrained by a homogenising tendency. Languages other than English are typically confined to specific scenes, where they function as narrative devices or simply fade into the background.

A recurring theme in these cinematic works is travel – whether by train or sea – and the confrontation with or clash against a geographic and cultural "other," often far removed from the protagonists' realities. *Shanghai Express* and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* exemplify this theme as both films are set against the backdrop of a China torn apart by civil war. The former follows the story of a rekindled romance between the high-class courtesan Shanghai Lily (played by Marlene Dietrich) and her former lover, English captain Donald Harvey (Clive Brook), who reunite by chance aboard a train travelling from Beijing to Shanghai, referenced in the film's title. The train passengers include individuals of English, American, French, German, and Chinese origins. English is the primary language of the film's dialogue, serving not only as the native tongue for some characters but also as a lingua franca for communication between characters of different nationalities. On occasion, the character Hui Fei (Anna May Wong), who travels with the female lead, acts as a diegetic interpreter, translating Chinese for the other companions.

Chinese becomes a vehicle for conflict during two pivotal moments in the storyline when the train is stopped: first by government soldiers and later by a group of rebels led by a fellow passenger, the villainous Henry Chang (Warner Oland), a mixed-race character of Chinese and European descent. In the Italian dubbed version (*Shanghai Express*), dialogues in the secondary languages are always retained and never subtitled into Italian. However, while French and German dialogues are revoiced by dubbing actors, those in Chinese are left in their original audio. This creates a noticeable inconsistency between the revoiced and original audio segments, particularly for bilingual characters like Hui Fei and Henry Chang. Their transitions from dubbed Italian to original Chinese generate a perceivable discrepancy in vocal tone and audio quality that disrupts the illusion of continuity,

highlighting a tension between linguistic authenticity and aural coherence. When speaking in Italian (replacing the original English), these characters exhibit a stereotypical Chinese accent (De Bonis, 2024), often accompanied by morphosyntactic errors typical of non-native Italian speakers. For instance, verbs are frequently left in their infinitive forms. These linguistically marked choices echo the solutions adopted in the Italian dubbing of *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) for the character of Sam and highlight their ideological implications (Zanotti, 2012; De Bonis, 2024). Much like African Americans, Chinese characters in the 1930s were likely intended to embody an "otherness" that was amplified for Italian audiences through linguistic differentiation.

The Bitter Tea of General Yen centres on an ambiguous international romance (Morandini, 2012) between Megan Davis (Barbara Stanwyck), an American missionary in Shanghai, and General Yen (played by Swedish actor Nils Asther), a Chinese warlord, set against the backdrop of the country's civil war. The film's dialogue is primarily in English, serving as the lingua franca between the two protagonists. However, the film employs multilingualism as a narrative device to heighten tension and suspense, adding complexity to the portrayal of the diverse linguistic scenario on screen.

The first notable instance occurs when General Yen writes a fake travel permit in Chinese for Reverend Robert Strife (Gavin Gordon), Megan's fiancé and a fellow missionary, who seeks Yen's help. Knowing that Strife cannot read Chinese, Yen includes mocking remarks in the permit, describing Strife as a foolish man who abandoned his fiancée that evening to save orphans. The camera captures the Chinese text, which is then replaced by its English equivalent through what O'Sullivan (2011, pp. 45–47) terms a "translating dissolve" ("This fool prefers civil war to the loving arms of his bride, General Nobody"). In the Italian dubbed version (*L'amaro tè del generale Yen*), instead of adding an on-screen Italian translation with a caption, a voiceover is inserted in which General Yen reads the message in Italian on the muted image. Another example of Chinese being used deceptively happens when Yen's concubine, Mah-Li (played by Japanese-born American actress Toshia Mori), persuades Megan to accompany her to a temple under the pretence of going to pray. Instead, Mah-Li takes the opportunity to betray Yen by divulging military secrets in Chinese, deceiving Megan, who trusted her. In the Italian version, the Chinese dialogue remains untranslated in its original form, raising issues of vocal consistency and harmonisation for bilingual characters such as Yen and Mah-Li.

In the Italian-dubbed version, all characters, including the Chinese ones, speak standard Italian without any foreign intonation. At first glance, this may appear quite surprising. However, it is important to note that the current version available on the home video market features a redub, which was produced at a later stage[1]. This approach of removing any trace of foreign accent aligns more closely with the translation choices made by the Italian dubbing industry for multilingual films

[1] No precise information is currently available regarding the exact date when the redub was carried out, nor does the DVD used for this study (A&R Productions, 2016) provide any details to this regard. The only available source is: http://www.ciakhollywood.com/doppiaggio/a/amarotedelgeneraleyen/.

of the 1950s, such as *An Affair to Remember* (1957), a remake of *Love Affair* (1939), both directed by Leo McCarey.

These two films, as their titles suggest, revolve around a romantic storyline. In both, a French playboy (portrayed in turn by French-American actor Charles Boyer and British-American actor Cary Grant) and an American singer (played by Irene Dunne and Deborah Kerr, respectively) meet and fall deeply in love during a sea voyage to New York. During a stopover – made in Madeira, Portugal, in the original, and in Villefranche-sur-Mer on the French Riviera in the remake – they visit the man's elderly grandmother, Janou (played by Russian actress Maria Ouspenskaya and British actress Cathleen Nesbitt), who lives a secluded life tending her garden and praying in her private chapel. The elderly woman's charm captivates the young woman, creating an instant connection between them that will eventually influence the relationship between the two leading characters.

In the scenes set in Janou's house, the French characters initially converse in French, with the male lead interpreting for the American woman until the group ultimately switches to English as a lingua franca. In both Italian dubbed versions, the French dialogue is generally revoiced by dubbing actors to ensure vocal consistency for bilingual characters. However, in the Italian dubbing of *An Affair to Remember* (entitled *Un amore splendido*), the exchange that originally takes place in French between the male protagonist, Nickie (Cary Grant), and the gardener, Marius (Louis Mercier), when Nickie learns of his grandmother's death, is neutralised and dubbed into Italian. This exchange enhances the emotional and realistic portrayal of someone learning about the passing of a loved one. While the original relies solely on contextual cues for understanding (Baldo 2009b; De Bonis 2014a, 2014b, 2024), the Italian version adopts a more explicit approach, catering to its audience by improving clarity.

When comparing the film pairs *Love Affair* (1939) and its Italian counterpart *Un grande amore*, versus *An Affair to Remember* (1957) and *Un amore splendido*, it becomes evident that *Un grande amore* quite surprisingly offers a more authentic portrayal of multilingual situations. This is primarily because *Un grande amore*, currently available on the home video market, features a more recent redub[2], benefiting from modern translation approaches that more effectively address the multilingual dimension of the film. In contrast, *Un amore splendido* retains the original 1950s dubbing, which reflects the translation practices of that time, often reducing or neutralising the multilingual elements for clarity or due to translation conventions. As a result, *Un grande amore* provides a more accurate representation of the multilingual dimension present in *Love Affair*, while *Un amore splendido* at times simplifies the linguistic complexity of *An Affair to Remember*.

Both the 1939 original film and the 1957 remake open with a sequence of radio and television broadcasts announcing the male lead's upcoming wedding. In *Love Affair*, the radio broadcasts are in American English, French, and British English. The Italian version, *Un grande amore*, dubs only the

[2] Source: https://www.antoniogenna.net/doppiaggio/film1/ungrandeamore.htm; http://www.ciakhollywood.com/doppiaggio/g/grandeamore/.

first broadcast in American English into Italian, leaving the others in their original languages. In contrast, *An Affair to Remember* features television broadcasts in American English, Italian, and British English. The Italian adaptation, *Un amore splendido*, dubs all three broadcasts, including the Italian one, to replace the actor's noticeable Italian-American accent and correct a linguistic error by substituting the mistaken "bilioni" (a clear calque from English) with the correct "miliardi."

1.2. Journeys to Italy

Italy has served as the backdrop for love stories throughout film history. Notable examples include dramas such as *Stazione Termini* (De Sica, 1953), *Viaggio in Italia* (Rossellini, 1954), *The Battle of the Villa Fiorita* (Daves, 1965), and *A Room with a View* (Ivory, 1986). Although these films strive for vehicular matching, allowing Italian and English to coexist "naturally," the presence of Italian remains quantitatively reduced. This results in a linguistically homogenised narrative universe designed to ensure audience comprehensibility.

In *Stazione Termini*, the fleeting affair between American Mary Forbes (Jennifer Jones) and Italian Giovanni Doria (Montgomery Clift) reaches its poignant conclusion at Rome's central station, while a lively ensemble of supporting characters adds moments of levity to the film's otherwise dramatic tone (Mereghetti, 2022). The dialogue between the two leading characters was originally filmed in English – the film's primary language – and subsequently dubbed into Italian. As a result, they speak standard Italian, without any regional accent, in contrast to the regionally marked Italian used by the other characters in the film, creating a sort of "alienating effect" for the audience.

The film faced considerable challenges both during its production and distribution. Initially released in the United States by producer David Selznick under the title *Indiscretion of an American Wife*, its runtime was shortened from the original 87 minutes to just 63. In the United Kingdom, the film was entitled *Indiscretion* and had a runtime of 75 minutes. After being restored in 1983, the film is now available in its original 87-minute version under the title *Terminal Station* (Morandini, 2022). Interestingly, the English-language version of the film is not available on the Italian home video market, with the monolingual dubbed version being the only option for Italian viewers.

Viaggio in Italia depicts the story of how a childless English married couple, Alex and Katherine Joyce (played by George Sanders and Ingrid Bergman, respectively), who have been experiencing a marital crisis for some time, find hope of understanding each other again during their stay in Italy. The couple arrives in Naples as strangers to each other, unable to communicate or connect. Initially, they follow separate paths: she visits the artistic beauties of the area while he spends time with other women, including a sex worker. Towards the end of the film, while watching a procession – one of the most emblematic symbols of Southern Catholic Italy, and by extension, Italian identity – the two are swept away and separated by the crowd. When they reunite, they embrace, and their reunion seems to open a new path toward reconciliation and mutual understanding.

Similar to *Stazione Termini*, *Viaggio in Italia* – internationally known by the alternative titles *Journey to Italy* and *Voyage to Italy*[3] – was originally shot in English as the primary language of its dialogue, alternating with Italian as the secondary language. However, the Italian dubbed version of the film leans towards homogenisation, neutralising its bilingual dimension by eliminating linguistic conflicts and reinforcing a monolingual narrative structure. In the case of *Journey to Italy*, a comparison between the original version and the Italian dubbed edition reveals that the latter even omits a humorous scene of linguistic misunderstanding and comic confusion between the male lead, Alex, and the Italian housemaid at the villa where he and his wife are staying. After realising that everyone in the house is taking a siesta, Alex wanders around with an empty carafe of wine until he stumbles upon the housemaid, who speaks no English. The conversation between the two unfolds as follows (Table 1)[4]:

[3] In the English-speaking market, the film has circulated under various titles: in addition to *Journey to Italy* and *Voyage to Italy*, also *Strangers* and *The Lonely Woman* (Morandini, 2022).

[4] The English-Italian bilingual version of *Viaggio in Italia* is currently available only on international home video markets. The transcription of this scene is derived from the French DVD of *Voyage en Italie*, released by Films sans Frontières in 2012. The same applies to the transcription of the English-Italian dialogue presented in Table 2.

Table 1

Comic Confusion between Alex and the Housemaid

Character	Dialogue line	My English gloss
Alex	Excuse me, I'm sorry to trouble you.	
Housemaid	Eh?	Huh?
Alex	Well… I'm terribly thirsty. It's this food, you know. I'm not used to all those sauces.	
Housemaid	Ma che volete?	So, what do you want?
Alex	Something to drink. [Points to his stomach]	
Housemaid	Ah, si v' vulite sentì megl', v'avite piglià 'nu poco 'e bicarbonato. Chell' v' fa bene!	Ah, if you want to feel better, you should take some baking soda. That'll help you!
Alex	Well, but I just want you to fill it up. [Points to the empty carafe]	
Housemaid	Capito. State 'mbriac'. E che è successo a 'o tapp'?	Got it. You're drunk. And what happened to the cork?
Alex	This wine is excellent, you know. But I just would like you to fill it up.	
Housemaid	Ah, non volete il bicarbonato? Ah, non vi posso servire. Non ho la chiave del cellare.	Oh, you don't want the baking soda? Well, I can't serve you. I don't have the key to the cellar.
Alex	But you misunderstand me. I want… I want you to fill it up with wine.	
Housemaid	Noi non ci capiamo. Vieni con me. Vieni, vieni… Vieni, vieni… [Invites him to follow her with a gesture of her hand]	We're not understanding each other. Come with me. Come, come... Come, come...
Alex	How dare you speak to me like that?	
Housemaid	Andiamo dal signorino Tony. Vieni… vieni. Ah! Vieni!... Vieni con me!	Let's go to Mister Tony. Come… come. Oh! Come on! Follow me!

Source: *Journey to Italy* (Rossellini, 1954).

The comic confusion arises from Alex's misleading hand gestures accompanying his words, which cause the housemaid to misunderstand his intention (i.e., his request for some more wine). She attempts to interpret the meaning of his request – "fill it up" [ˈfɪl ɪt ˈʌp] – by relying on its perceived

phonetic similarity to the Neapolitan word “tapp’” [ˈtapp], the regional form for the standard Italian “tappo” (”cork”), leading her to make incorrect assumptions and fail to realise that Alex is simply asking for more wine – not baking soda. This bilingual comic pastiche could not be effectively translated into a monolingual conversation, so the entire scene was removed from the Italian edition (see also O’Sullivan, 2011, p. 184).

Alex is also involved in another problematic intercultural sequence within the film which, unlike the previous scene, has been retained in the Italian dubbed version. When he meets the Italian sex worker (portrayed by Anna Proclemer), their conversation initially takes place in English, revoiced by the Italian dubbing actor Emilio Cigoli for voice consistency. Alex bluntly admits that he does not understand Italian, only to suddenly start speaking it flawlessly immediately afterwards. The dialogue between them proceeds as follows (Table 2):

Table 2

Conversation Between Alex and the Italian Sex Worker

Character	Original dialogue	Italian dubbed version (My English gloss)
Woman	Buonasera!	Buonasera! (Good evening!)
Alex	Buonasera! [Gets into the car and leaves. Then makes a U-turn to pick her up]	Buonasera! (Good evening!)
Woman	Mi vuoi? (Do you want me?)	Mi vuoi? (Do you want me?)
Alex	I am afraid I don’t understand Italian.	I am afraid I don’t understand Italian.
Woman	Ok. [Gets into his car]	Ok.
Alex	You shameless fussy hussy!	You shameless brazen hussy!
Woman	What did you say? If you speak fast, I don’t understand. Slowly. What did you say?	Che dici? Parla in italiano, se vuoi che ti capisca. Avanti, che hai detto? (What are you saying? Speak in Italian if you want me to understand. Go on, what did you say?)
Alex	Oh, nothing. Nothing important.	Niente. Niente di importante (Nothing. Nothing important.)

Source: *Journey to Italy / Viaggio in Italia* (Rossellini, 1954).

The scene, though almost impossible to dub like the previous one, was deemed essential for Alex's characterisation – highlighting his habit of cheating on his wife without remorse – and was therefore retained. However, this choice risks causing Italian viewers to experience what Chiaro (2008, 2009) describes as a "lingua-cultural drop in translation voltage." They may wonder why, in a film entirely dubbed into Italian, where it is conventionally accepted that an English character like Alex speaks Italian, this same character suddenly reverts to his mother tongue (English) to candidly declare that he cannot speak a language (Italian) he has been mastering flawlessly up to that point. Interestingly, Alex's direct insulting words in English ("You shameless brazen hussy!"), which the dubbing actor delivers quite clearly, ultimately become opaque for the average Italian viewer who may not have a strong command of English. Paradoxically, this choice made in the Italian dubbing unintentionally contributes to censoring the dialogue line – not by removing or altering it, but by rendering it inaccessible to the target audience, thereby softening it and diluting its offensive charge and narrative weight to the point where the intended effect fails to come across entirely.

The neutralisation of the original bilingual dimension also characterises the dubbed versions of *The Battle of the Villa Fiorita* and *A Room with a View*. The balance between vehicular matching and homogenisation shifts in favour of the latter, as the original Italian dialogue present in both films is inevitably merged into a monolingual format, reducing the bilingual interplay of the source material. *The Battle of the Villa Fiorita* is based on Rumer Godden's 1963 novel *Villa Fiorita*, published in Italy in 1965 – the same year its cinematic adaptation was released. The film follows Moira Clavering (Maureen O'Hara), a devoted wife and mother from England, who falls in love with the charming Italian pianist Lorenzo Tassara (Rossano Brazzi). She decides to leave her family and follow him to his splendid villa on Lake Garda. However, their children, disapproving of the union, successfully conspire to end the romance.

In *A Room with a View*, based on E. M. Forster's 1908 eponymous novel, the story unfolds in early 20th-century Florence, where a romance between Lucy Honeychurch (Helena Bonham Carter), a well-bred Englishwoman, and the eccentric, nonconformist George Emerson (Julian Sands) begins to take shape. Upon returning to England, where her dull fiancé, Cecil Vyse (Daniel Day-Lewis) – a pretentious gentleman with cloying sophistication – awaits her, Lucy eventually chooses true love over societal expectations.

In the first scene at Santa Croce, Lucy stands before a marble epitaph commemorating Dante Alighieri when a tour guide approaches her, speaking a mix of Italian and broken English. The guide tries to persuade her to visit other more attractive parts of the Church (Giotto's frescoes, the Cappella Peruzzi, and the Cappella Bardi, among others), while offering additional information. However, Lucy seems disengaged from the outset, showing little interest in his clumsy attempts. Annoyed by his behaviour, she pushes him away and quickly runs off. Her indifference, combined with the language barrier, highlights the disconnection between herself and the surrounding Italian culture, emphasising her alienation in this foreign environment. In the Italian dubbed version (*Camera con vista*), however, this sense of alienation and conflict is somewhat lost in translation, as both characters speak and understand Italian perfectly.

In the second scene, Lucy is travelling to the countryside in a carriage with a group of fellow English compatriots, including Reverend Eager. The driver of the carriage is seen continuously holding a blonde-haired woman close during the journey. A moment of miscommunication occurs, creating tension, especially as Reverend Eager becomes uncomfortable upon realising that the young woman with the driver is not his sister, as he had been led to believe, but his lover. The driver speaks in Italian, and Reverend Eager, attempting to be accommodating, responds in hesitant Italian. The use of Italian here underscores the conflict, as the Reverend's discomfort grows due to both the language barrier and his discovery. The dialogue unfolds as follows (Table 3):

Table 3

Original Conversation Between Reverend Eager and the Carriage Driver

Character	Original dialogue	My English gloss
Eager	[to the driver] Stop! Stop! Ferma la carrozza subito!	Stop the carriage immediately!
	[to the other passengers] I'm not allowing this!	Stop the carriage immediately!
	[to the driver] Ferma la carrozza subito!	Please get down! Get down, miss! Immediately!
	[to the blonde woman] Per favore scenda! Scenda, signorina! Subito!	You told me she was your sister. You lied to me! You're lovers. Shame on you!
	[to the driver] Mi hai detto che era tua sorella Mi ha mentito! Siete amanti. Che vergogna!	
Driver	E che importanza ha?	So what?
Eager	Niente mancia per te!	No tip for you!

Source: *A Room with a View* (Ivory, 1986).

In the Italian version, the dialogue has been partially rewritten to sound more plausible, with the focus shifted to Reverend Eager's exaggerated reaction and moralistic attitude. Two lines delivered by the Italian driver are added to ensure the credibility of the following dialogue. The excerpt reads as follows (Table 4):

Table 4

Italian Conversation Between Reverend Eager and the Carriage Driver

Character	Italian dubbed version	My English gloss
Eager	[to the driver] Ferma! Ferma subito!	Stop! Stop immediately!
Driver	[line added while the character is off screen] Che è successo?	What's going on?
Eager	Ferma la carrozza subito!	Stop the carriage at once!
Driver	[line added while the character is off screen] Oh, perché? Non siamo mica arrivati!	Oh, why? We haven't even arrived yet!
Eager	[to the other passengers] Non tollero questo!	I won't allow this!
	[to the driver] Ferma questa carrozza subito!	Stop this carriage now!
	[to the blonde woman] Per favore scenda! Scenda, signorina! Subito!	Please get down! Get down, miss! Now!
	[to the other passengers, looking towards the driver] Mi ha detto che era sua sorella, capite? Mi ha mentito. Altro che sorella! È qualcos'altro.	He told me she was his sister, see? He lied to me. She's not his sister at all! She's something else.
Driver	E facciamo cugina, allora? Via!	Let's call her my cousin, shall we? Let's go with that!
Eager	E continui a mentire!	Feel free to keep lying!

Source: *Camera con vista* (Ivory, 1986).

In the Italian dubbed version, the Italian characters speak with a more pronounced Florentine accent than in the original, a choice made to retain some degree of the identity contrast between the English and the Italians. In this regard, the portrayal of Cecil merits further attention. In his case, the Italian language becomes a significant means of characterisation in terms of "Anglicised Italian," as he proudly refers to himself, although he speaks Italian with a strong English accent. To partially preserve this aspect, in the Italian version, Cecil is given the Italianised name "Cecilio," in contrast to the solution adopted in the Italian translation of Forster's novel, where the character retains his English name. Moreover, to maintain Cecil's pretentious intellectual air, marked by frequent references to Italian words and cultural elements, the Italian version resorts to languages other than Italian to achieve this effect.

For instance, in the scene where Cecil announces his engagement to Lucy's mother, the original noun phrase "I promessi sposi" ("the betrothed") is replaced with the Latin phrase "Habemus sponsum atque sponsam" ("We have the groom and the bride") to convey the same sense of alienation that

the reference to Alessandro Manzoni's novel creates in the original[5], particularly with Lucy's mother and brother. Similarly, when Cecil recounts his meeting with the Emersons at the National Gallery in London, the Italian word "conversazione" [konversatˈtsjone] for "conversation" is substituted with the corresponding French "conversation" [kɔ̃vɛʀsasjɔ̃]. Furthermore, the more informal "Dante," as Italians tend to refer to the author of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri, is changed to the more formal "l'Alighieri" ("Mr Alighieri"). This shift adds an extra layer of pompousness to Cecil's character: while "Dante" reflects a familiar and commonly used reference, "l'Alighieri" sounds overly refined and intellectual to Italian ears, further reinforcing Cecil's tendency to perform cultural sophistication in a way that feels exaggerated and overplayed.

In a similar vein, in the scene where Lucy breaks off her engagement with Cecilio, she tells him that she does not want to be one of his "scatole d'avorio" ("ivory boxes"), instead of the original "a Leonardo," thus preserving her firm refusal to be treated as an antiquity to be displayed in a museum. Moreover, the change made in the Italian version creates an intertextual connection by echoing the dismissive words used by the male lead, George Emerson, in the previous scene to describe the eccentric collecting habits of Lucy's future husband: "Lui la vuole solo come una proprietà, qualcosa da guardare come un dipinto, una scatola d'avorio. Qualcosa da possedere e mettere in mostra," which translates the original lines: "He wants you for a possession, something to look at like a painting or an ivory box. Something to own and to display."

2. Vilifying the Other: The War Film and Beyond

Even in films set against the backdrop of war conflicts, the delicate balance between vehicular matching and homogenisation is observable. While the use of languages other than the film's primary language contributes to a realistic portrayal (from a qualitative perspective), their presence on screen remains limited in quantitative terms. This can be seen in films such as *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), *The Deer Hunter* (Cimino, 1978), *Empire of the Sun* (Spielberg, 1987), *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, 1998), *The English Patient* (Minghella, 1997), and *Au revoir les enfants* (Malle, 1987). With the sole exception of *Au revoir les enfants*, where French is the primary language, English serves as the main language of communication in all these films. This is largely due to the narrative perspective, as focalisation (Genette, 1980) is centred exclusively on one of the two conflicting sides – the perspective of the film's main characters.

As a result, the dialogue in one of the film's secondary languages is not subtitled. This occurs because these languages remain primarily in the background, as with Vietnamese and Khmer in *Apocalypse*

[5] Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*) was first translated into English in 1828 by the Reverend Charles Swan. A more complete and widely circulated translation appeared in 1845, based on Manzoni's definitive 1842 edition and published anonymously (Reynolds, 2000, p. 490). By the time Forster wrote and set *A Room with a View* – during the Edwardian era – the novel had become firmly established as a classic of Italian literature and was likely known among educated English readers such as Cecil.

Now, Vietnamese in much of *The Deer Hunter* (both set during the Vietnam War between the 1960s and the 1970s), or Chinese and Japanese in *Empire of the Sun*. Alternatively, the translation can be intratextual, provided directly on screen by a character who acts as a diegetic interpreter (cf. Baldo, 2009b; Bleichenbacher, 2008; De Bonis, 2015a, 2024; O'Sullivan, 2007, 2011; Şerban, 2012; Zabalbeascoa, 2012, 2014). This happens, for instance, in *Saving Private Ryan*, set in occupied France during World War II, where Corporal Timothy Upham (Jeremy Davies) translates from German and French for his comrades (Labate, 2013). Finally, a more contextual translation (Baldo, 2009a, 2009b; De Bonis, 2015a, 2024) helps guide the viewer's understanding when the secondary languages are more prominent. This happens with Japanese in the second part of *Empire of the Sun*, which takes place in a Japanese prison camp during World War II, with German in *Au revoir les enfants*, set in France in 1944 during the war, and with Arabic and German in *The English Patient*, set between North Africa and Italy during World War II. All these languages are prominent throughout their respective films.

In relation to contextual translation, it is worth discussing two interesting examples. The first concerns the notorious Russian roulette scene that the protagonists of *The Deer Hunter* are forced to "play" by a group of Viet Cong who have captured them. In this regard, Kozloff (2000, p. 81) notes: "The foreign dialogue serves primarily as *a marker of Otherness* [emphasis added], and the fact that we, like the American characters, don't understand anything that the Vietnamese characters are wildly 'jabbering' further vilifies them". Certainly, the foreign language is used here as a vehicle for intensifying the conflict between two identities, with the focalisation following the film's main characters. While the inability of understanding Vietnamese initially creates a sense of disorientation in the viewers, their identification with the perspective of the American soldiers – whose language they share – gradually helps them make sense of the communicative situation. The captors are mocking their prisoners, humiliating them, and ordering them to pull the trigger. The images, the non-verbal behaviour of the Vietnamese (gestures, facial expressions), and the reaction of their hostages are all elements whose integrated interpretation allows the audience to grasp the overall meaning of this sequence in the film.

The second example is less complex than the first: it occurs in a scene from *The English Patient*, where the leading character, Count Almásy (played by Ralph Fiennes), provides the audience with a concise summary in English of what he and an old sage have just said to each other in Arabic, through a voiceover that turns his thoughts into spoken words. The expression "A mountain of a woman's back" – translated as "Una montagna che ha la forma di un dorso di donna" in the Italian dubbed version *Il paziente inglese* – conveys the essential information needed for the audience to follow the subsequent developments in the film's plot. Following Baldo (2009a, 2009b), this is an example of "cushioning translation," a type of translation in which dialogue in a secondary language is accompanied by a contextual explanation, reformulation, or commentary in the film's primary language – and the viewer's – functioning as a sort of dictionary or glossary.

The Italian dubbing of these six films[6] follows a common pattern: secondary languages are generally retained in their original form, as they primarily remain in the background to enhance the realistic portrayal of the international situation. When secondary languages come to the foreground, a two-fold approach is adopted. On the one hand, when these languages are spoken by monolingual characters (i.e., those who do not speak the film's primary language, English or French), they are incorporated into the Italian soundtrack unaltered. On the other hand, when foreign languages are spoken by bilingual characters, they are revoiced by Italian voice talents to ensure consistency and harmonisation. This approach is applied even to Japanese in *L'impero del sole*, where it is revoiced when spoken by the main character, Jim Graham, played by Christian Bale. This represents an exception to the rule, as revoicing more "exotic" languages, such as East Asian languages, is not a common practice in the Italian dubbing of multilingual films (De Bonis, 2015b; Chiaro & De Bonis, 2020).

Unlike earlier war films, more recent cinematic works such as *Pearl Harbor* (Bay, 2001) and *The Good German* (Soderbergh, 2006), where the prevailing perspective remains American, feature parts of the dialogue in the languages of the enemy (Japanese in the former and German in the latter) that are constructed to carry significant narrative weight for the development of the story. Consequently, these segments of the film's dialogue require "part-subtitles" in English (O'Sullivan, 2007, 2011) to help the audience follow them. Similarly, *The Good Shepherd* (De Niro, 2006), despite its international setting – where the main characters face events and interact with people from various parts of the world – retains an exclusively American point of view throughout. The film offers a fictionalised account of the CIA's history, from its origins during World War II to the Kennedy administration. Regarding the translation of secondary languages, a middle-ground solution between translation and non-translation is adopted: only the parts of the dialogue that are narratively relevant (those in Spanish and German) are subtitled into English, while contextual or intratextual translation is used in other cases (for the Russian dialogue).

The Italian versions of these films – *Pearl Harbor*, *Intrigo a Berlino*, and *The Good Shepherd - L'ombra del potere*, respectively – closely mirror the original, dubbing only the English dialogue and preserving the contrast with the secondary languages. While *Pearl Harbor* always retains the Japanese dialogue in its original form, even for bilingual characters, both *The Good Shepherd* and *Intrigo a Berlino* make a more deliberate attempt to ensure voice harmonisation for bilingual characters. In *Intrigo a Berlino*, both German and Russian are revoiced by bilingual actors when spoken by bilingual characters – for example, General Sikorsky, portrayed by Russian actor Ravil Isyanov – while they are revoiced by Italian dubbing actors when the character is not a native speaker of the language – such as the American Captain Jake Geismer, played by George Clooney. As a result, German and Russian bilingual characters speak Italian with a slight, credible foreign intonation, while the male lead speaks German

[6] The Italian titles are: *Apocalypse Now*, *Il cacciatore*, *L'impero del sole*, *Salvate il soldato Ryan*, *Il paziente inglese*, and *Arrivederci, ragazzi*.

with a noticeable Italian accent, which is equally credible and aligns with Clooney's performance in the original.

A similar representational mechanism in terms of different languages is also at play in more recent German films such as *Die Stille nach dem Schuß* (Schlöndorff, 2000; international title: *The Legend of Rita*), *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* (Edel, 2008; international title: *The Baader Meinhof Complex*), and *Der Untergang* (Hirschbiegel, 2004; international title: *Downfall*). The first two films focus on German terrorism in the 1970s. The use of languages other than German in these films is realistic, although quantitatively limited, and is restricted to scenes set in locations outside Germany (in France, Sweden, and the Middle East). The secondary languages are never subtitled into German, either because the context guides viewers' understanding or because a character acts as a diegetic interpreter. *Der Untergang* is another World War II film: here, the German perspective is always maintained, while the language of the Russian adversaries, now at the gates of Berlin, remains mostly in the background, except in the final scene where the Nazi high command negotiates the German surrender with the Soviets. In this case, the Russian dialogue is subtitled into German. The Italian versions – *Il silenzio dopo lo sparo*, *La banda Baader Meinhof*, and *La caduta - Gli ultimi giorni di Hitler* – adapt only the German dialogue into Italian, while revoicing secondary languages exclusively for bilingual characters: French in *Il silenzio dopo lo sparo*, and English and French in *La banda Baader Meinhof* during scenes where bilingual characters act as lay interpreters (De Bonis, 2015b)[7].

3. Conclusions

The diachronic analysis presented in this study has highlighted the tension between the realistic portrayal of multiple languages and the practical need for narrative comprehensibility in multilingual cinema. While films that can be formally categorised under vehicular matching strive for an authentic representation of linguistic diversity, they often remain constrained by the dominance of a primary language – usually the target audience's language. This concretely leads to a quantitative reduction in the presence of secondary languages on screen, which eventually results in an overall homogenising effect. This result is particularly evident in romance and war film genres, where multilingual elements serve distinct narrative functions – either as a means to foster cultural connections and emotional depth or as markers of conflict and otherness.

This duality is also reflected in the Italian dubbing industry's approach to translating multilingual films. The strategies employed – which include part-subtitling, contextual translation, and, more recently, the selective revoicing of secondary languages to ensure voice consistency of bilingual characters – have sought to balance linguistic authenticity with audience comprehension, thus closely mirroring the use made of secondary languages in the original films. For instance, in war films such as *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter, Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*, and *Der Untergang,*

[7] In *La banda Baader Meinhof*, Arabic and Swedish are always retained in their original form, even when they come more to the foreground.

secondary languages are frequently left untranslated, thereby reinforcing the protagonists' narrative perspective and often contributing to the vilification of the "Other." The same strategy is adopted in their Italian-dubbed counterparts. Conversely, the Italian dubbing of films set partially or entirely in Italy has inevitably neutralised the multilingual dimension, stripping scenes of their original bilingual tensions and cross-cultural humour. This is particularly evident in *Viaggio in Italia* and A *Room with a View*, where the original balance between vehicular matching and linguistic homogenisation has shifted towards an even more homogenising tendency in their Italian adaptations.

Ultimately, this study has underscored the crucial role played by language in shaping the cinematic representation of the complex realities of our global world. The presence – or absence – of different languages on the silver screen not only influences the film's story but also shapes the audience's perception of linguistic and cultural identities, power dynamics, and historical realities as depicted within filmic discourse. As contemporary cinema continues to explore multilingual and intercultural encounters, a more nuanced and deliberate approach to language representation in both filmmaking and translation could further enhance the authenticity and impact of multilingual storytelling. Further research could examine how emerging dubbing strategies and streaming platforms influence evolving approaches to multilingual representation on both the big and small screen.

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