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**TRANSLATING FILM TITLES: LINGUISTIC SKILLS,  
CULTURAL AWARENESS OR MARKETING STRATEGIES?**

**В. ЛЕОНАРДИ (ФЕРРАРА, ИТАЛИЯ). ПЕРЕВОД НАЗВАНИЙ ФИЛЬМОВ: ЗНАНИЕ ЯЗЫКА И КУЛЬТУРЫ ИЛИ МАРКЕТИНГОВЫЕ СТРАТЕГИИ?** Названия фильмов играют важную роль в СМИ, поскольку они дают представление о жанре и, возможно, о сюжете фильма. С лингвистической точки зрения названия фильмов сопоставимы с литературными произведениями, в которых исходная интенция, функции и художественное своеобразие должны максимально точно сохраняться при переводе. С точки зрения культуры, названия фильмов связаны с теми культурными условиями, в которых они были созданы, и в этом смысле они могут рассматриваться как выражение культурной идентичности, что также может вызывать трудности при переводе. Наконец, с точки зрения рынка кинопроката, названия фильмов могут стать причиной как коммерческого успеха, так и провала. В статье даётся оценка стратегиям, использованным при переводе названий фильмов. Эти переводы выполнены итальянскими отделами маркетинга прокатных компаний.

**Ключевые слова:** название фильма, перевод, лингвистика, культура, маркетинговая стратегия, контрастивный анализ

Film titles play an important role in the media field because they give their audience various clues about the genre and possibly the plot of the film itself. From a linguistic point of view, film titles are just like literature, that is, art work whose original intention(s), functions and flavour should be preserved as much as possible in translation. From a cultural point of view, film titles are bound to the original author's cultural setting and, as such, they can be viewed as an expression of cultural identity which may pose problems in translation. From a marketing point of view, film titles are held responsible for the success or failure at the box office. This paper is aimed at assessing the impact and the quality of the strategies employed in translating film titles since in Italy these translations are carried out by the marketing department of the distribution houses.

**Keywords:** film titles, translation, linguistics, culture, marketing strategies, contrastive analysis

## 1. Introduction

The idea of writing this paper was conceived further to an informal conversation in a mixed group of people coming from different parts of the world. It was surprising to see how some films were not immediately recognisable from their title. It seems that strategies employed to translate film titles vary in accordance with the type of equivalence relation sought to achieve, namely: 1) linguistic, 2) semantic or 3) functional. This can explain why some titles are:

a) Literally translated into Italian:

- (1) THE APARTMENT (1960) – L'APPARTAMENTO
- (2) THE GODFATHER (1972) – IL PADRINO
- (3) BEHIND ENEMY LINES (2001) – DIETRO LE LINEE NEMICHE

b) Left entirely in English:

- (4) ANIMAL HOUSE (1978) – ANIMAL HOUSE
- (5) BLUE IN THE FACE (1995) – BLUE IN THE FACE
- (6) AMERICAN BEAUTY (1999) – AMERICAN BEAUTY

c) Left in English with the addition of an Italian tag:

- (7) BEETLEJUICE (1988) – BEETLEJUICE: SPIRITELLO PORCELLO
- (8) BRAVEHEART (1995) – BRAVEHEART: CUORE IMPAVIDO
- (9) BOUND (1996) – BOUND: TORBIDO INGANNO

d) Completely changed in Italian:

- (10) DR NO (1962) – AGENTE 007: LICENZA DI UCCIDERE
- (11) THE NEW GAME OF DEATH (1975) – BRUCE LEE: LA SUA VITA, LA SUA

LEGGENDA

- (12) CITY SLICKERS (1991) – SCAPPO DALLA CITTÀ (LA VITA, L'AMORE E LE VACCHE)

Titles, by their very nature, should provide readers and viewers with enough information about the text or the film they refer to. Although, it is clearly impossible to convey all the details of a film in a title, it seems that strategies employed to deal with it are largely justified by commercial needs rather than cultural differences or linguistic difficulties. Cultural differences between source text viewers and target text viewers inevitably affect the translation of film titles and “the extent to which a text is translatable varies with the degree to which it is embedded in its own specific culture, also with the distance that separates the cultural background of source text and target audience” (Snell-Hornby 1988: 41). The question is, therefore, whether and how

to translate film titles in order to be successful. Newmark (1988: 56), with regard to titles in general, claims that “if the SL text title adequately describes the content, and is brief, then leave it”. However, in the case of literary titles it is a different matter and in his opinion “the title should sound attractive, allusive, suggestive, even if it is a proper name, and should usually bear some relation to the original, if only for identification”. However, rules, observations and theories on literary titles could also be applied to film titles and, in line with Newmark’s statement, it is not surprising that in some cases it is extremely hard to recognize the film from its title.

## **2. Translate or not to translate: this is the dilemma!**

The translation of film titles undoubtedly raises a series of important questions, such as: what is a translation? What problems can be generally found in translating film titles? Who translates film titles? Is the culture component significant in the translation of film titles?

It is evident that culture does play an important role in the translation of film titles as it does the commercial component. A title is an expression of the source text cultural background but it has to attract, at the same time, the attention of many people if it is to result in a success at the box office. Language and culture are closely bound to each other. Language allows communication but culture plays a crucial role in the success of communication itself. Translation allows cross-cultural communication but, in doing so, it should take into account the cultural elements. Translated texts originate in the target audience community but bear a tie with the cultural background of the source text. Translation is, *ipso facto*, communication between two cultures and it should strive to transmit the cultural information and emotions carried by the original title but, at the same time, it should ensure that no misunderstanding or offense is carried over the target community. It is inevitable that the final product is, to a certain extent, conditioned by the target language cultural conventions and beliefs.

Film titles have a tremendous impact on the target culture both from a qualitative as well as from a quantitative point of view and, as also acknowledged by Viezzi (2004: 12) the translation of titles is a case of manipulation taken to the extreme. If we take a look at the movies listed in the table below, a series of observations can be made:

Original Title	Italian Version
(13) THE ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND (2004)	SE MI LASCI TI CANCELLO
(14) THE FRENCH CONNECTION (1971)	IL BRACCIO VIOLENTO DELLA LEGGE
(15) CHARIOTS OF FIRE (1981)	MOMENTI DI GLORIA

Can we talk about translation in these cases? What is meant by translation? The whole point of this paper is not to provide an ultimate definition of translation as, in some cases, many scholars have proved that this activity is perceived and thus defined in many different ways according to interpretation and context. Neubert (2000: 10) claims that a “translation is but source-text induced target-text production for a third party”. It seems inevitable that this “third party” exerts some sort of influence on the translation choices and strategies adopted in this respect. According to Vermeer (1996: 33), “a translation is not necessarily and *ipso facto* meant to be a ‘faithful’ rewording of source-text surface structure”. Translators can employ different strategies when dealing with the translation of film titles, although adaptation seems to be one of the best and most commonly used strategies in this respect and, in Nord’s opinion (1994: 65), this strategy is sometimes the only one to adopt if the text has to function properly in the target culture. The question is, however, are translations betraying or depriving the original texts of their beauty, message and, to a certain extent, ideology?

In the case of the first movie quoted in the table above, THE ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND, it is interesting to see how the literary reference is completely lost in the Italian translation turning a complex and demanding film into a light comedy that, of course, would have sold more from a marketing point of view. THE ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND is actually a quotation from a popular poem by Alexander Pope, ELOISA TO ABELARD, and the film is far from ‘light’ as it is *ipso facto* a complicated story that demands full attention. The Italian version, however, seems to spoil its refinement and its literary flavour. Can we consider the Italian version a translation of the original title? According to Viezzi (2004: 18) all target texts are ultimately and by definition a translation because they are produced after a series of selected and careful choices operated by the translator and

are, to a certain extent, bound to the ST in some sort of equivalence relation.

Whereas it is inevitable that any translation entails, to a greater or lesser degree, references to the notions of equivalence or faithfulness, providing an exact definition of “equivalence” can be extremely hard and challenging as also acknowledged by several theorists working within the field of Translation Studies. This “equivalence relation” between a target text (or translation) and the source text can prove to be problematic to some scholars for several reasons. For instance, Hervey, Higgins and Haywood (1995) claim that it is impossible for a text to have constant interpretations even for the same person on two occasions. Another objection is that a translation is perceived as an activity resulting from a subjective interpretation of the source language text on the behalf of the translators. This means that it is impossible to produce or reproduce objectively the exact effect of the ST on the target text readers. Finally, it is worth noting that translators cannot determine exactly their target audience’s response to the source text when it was first produced. Miao (2000:202) provides a clear example of it by claiming that:

“If an original was written centuries ago and the language of the original is difficult to comprehend for modern readers, then a simplified translation may well have greater impact on its readers than the original had on the readers in the source culture. No translator would hinder the reader's comprehension by using absolute expressions in order to achieve equivalent effect”.

This statement seems to justify the choice of adopting an easier and more eye-catching title for the Italian version of *THE ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND*. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that a translation cannot be exactly equivalent to the source text at all levels for several reasons and this is why scholars and theorists working in the field of Translation Studies have, throughout the years, focused on different levels thus distinguishing different types of equivalence. In her short essay on equivalence in translation, Leonardi (2000) identifies among the most influential contributors to the debate on equivalence six scholars: 1) Vinay and Darbelnet, 2) Jakobson, 3) Nida and Taber, 4) Catford, 5) House and 6) Baker. Leonardi divides their approaches into three main groups. The first group adopts a linguistic approach where a translation is purely defined as a linguistic activity aimed at transferring the message from one language to another; the

second group favours a more functional approach according to which a translation is defined as a transfer of the message from the source culture to the target culture; finally the third group attempts to unite the best features of the other two and thus results in a more comprehensive approach. As far as the translation of film titles is concerned, it seems that strategies used reflect all these approaches by opting, at times, for a linguistic equivalence, for a semantic equivalence in some cases as well as for a functional equivalence in others.

Many Italian translations of American film titles seem to provide a totally new text. In this respect, Vermeer (1996: 34) claims that:

“In an extreme case it may then be preferable not to translate the source text at all, but to ‘design’ a new text, partly or as a whole, under target culture conventions. *But then it will not be a translation!* So what? Of course it will not, if you define ‘translation’ otherwise”.

The problem, therefore, seems to lie in the very definition of “translation” and “equivalence”. In cases where titles are completely changed in Italian there is neither linguistic nor semantic equivalence but they are rather cases of functional equivalence because STs and TTs play the same function in their respective cultures. Viezzi (2004: 21) clearly exemplifies this tendency to use functional equivalence through the example of a very popular movie, DR NO which was translated in Italian as AGENTE 007: LICENZA DI UCCIDERE because both titles fulfil exactly the same function in their respective cultures. Linguistic and/or semantic equivalence are rarely pursued in the translation of film titles where preference is thus mostly given to functional equivalence. According to Nida and Taber (1969: 12) “translation consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalence of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style”. In other words, translation does not have to adhere necessarily to the language structure of the original text. Favouring a “functional” equivalence in the translation of movie titles means to prioritize the target audience’s preference and expectations and to suit their cultural background and world knowledge. This means that film titles will have to employ language and cultural references closer to the target audience in order to function properly and be successful. In other words, the translation of film titles should ensure that the target language audience can appreciate the film and get a similar sense of enjoyment as in the case of the source language audience.

### 3. The Advent of 'Titrologie'

In the last few decades there has been a growing interest in the study of titles. This interest has turned into a proper discipline which is nowadays known as titrologie or titology. Although several scholars recognise Leo H. Hoek, a Dutch theorist, as one of the founders of this modern discipline, Genette (1997: 55) claims that it could have been "Claude Duchet who gave the name titology <...> to this little discipline". In the past, titology was not considered as a legitimate object of linguistic studies but rather as a part of literature. This was partly due to the fact that only literary titles were taken into account whereas the scientific ones did not deserve any attention on the behalf of scholars. Nevertheless, thanks to the advent of text linguistics, titles began to be valued as texts in their own right. The importance of titles began to be carefully studied by several scholars especially in the literary field, although their theories and definitions seem to suit also the case of film titles. Weinreich, for instance, viewed titles as a guide to the text, Maurer considered them an access to the text and Eco defined titles as interpretative clues. One could also mention one of the most significant Derridean aphorisms which stated that "a title is always a promise" implying that a title provides its audience with some useful hints to grasp the content of the text. This is why filmmakers carefully select their titles to attract the viewers' attention and set up a series of expectations. The problem is, however, that some concepts or notions or facts or people may not necessarily produce the same effect in other countries. Is this the reason why some titles are deliberately and completely changed from one country to another? And is it legitimate to suppose that with a different title a different promise is made?

Most of the movies produced in the world are American and it is undoubtedly true that Anglo-American movies have always managed to be very popular in many different countries. It is interesting to note that films inevitably play a crucial role in the construction and representation of culture. There seems to be, *ipso facto*, some sort of mutual relationship between them because movies shape culture and are, in turn, shaped by culture. Films are therefore bound to the source text culture but they manage, or should manage, to be successful in other cultures as well. This is where the role of marketing strategies becomes vital. Since the first contact people have with films is through titles, their translation is left to the marketing department of the distribution

house whose strategy is to make titles short and concise but appealing and effective. They have to attract the audience just like in the case of advertising. Brief, eye-catching and impressive, in one word “memorable”. Their translation should be carried out bearing in mind ‘faithfulness’ and target audience’s expectations. Film titles, just like other titles, should briefly summarise the content of the movie whilst stimulating the audience’s interest in them.

#### **4. Function(s) of Film Titles**

Titles are undoubtedly texts in their own right and, as such, they are characterised by three important elements: 1) sender(s), 2) function(s) and 3) addressees as also acknowledged by Leonardi (2007: 132) who claims that:

“The title of a book always has a sender, a function, and addressees. The function of the title is the message itself which is carried with it so that it can be classified in terms of a particular genre and be bought by those readers who show an interest in that subject. The sender is not always the author or translator of a book since there might be some occasions in which the publisher decides upon the title and somehow s/he can be considered as the first person responsible for the title since s/he has adopted it in the first place. The addressees, in other words the readers, could be further classified into two different categories, those who are interested in that subject and anybody else who does not necessarily have to be interested in that book and wants to read it for the sake of pure curiosity” (Ibid.).

In the case of film titles, the sender is the distribution house, and more precisely, the marketing department of the distribution house who are in charge of dealing with the translation of the title. As far as the addressees are concerned, the cultural background of the target audience seems to deeply influence particular translation choices over others because the movie has to sell and has to be successful. Although it is true that virtually anybody can go the cinema, in reality according to the title of the film people gain an idea of its content. Finally, in terms of functions, film titles seem to serve many different purposes. Fisher (1984: 289), for instance, claims that “a title is not only a name, it is a name for a purpose” and it “may or may not be descriptive”. Genette (1988), following the work of Leo Hoek, distinguishes three main functions of titles, namely 1) designation, 2) indication of the content and 3) seduction of the public. Nord (1995) provides a much more in-

depth analysis of the functions of titles and claims that from a translation point of view it is vital to understand that the function of the ST is distinct from that of the TT. She identifies six significant functions which are divided into two main groups: 1) essential functions (distinctive, metatextual and phatic functions) and 2) optional functions (referential, expressive and appellative functions) and provides an explanation for each:

“Each title has to be distinct with regard to the culture-specific title corpus it forms part of (=distinctive function). Each title has to conform to the genre conventions of the culture it belongs to (= metatextual function). Each title must be appropriate to attract the attention of its culture-specific audience and, if necessary, to be remembered over a certain period of time (= phatic function). If any piece of information is intended to be transmitted by the title, it has to be comprehensible to the respective addressees with their culture-specific world-knowledge (= referential function). Any evaluations or emotions expressed in the title have to be judged in relation to the value system of the culture in question (= expressive function). Any appellative intention has to take account of the culture-specific susceptibility and expectations of the prospective readers (= appellative function)” (Ibid.: 265).

In a functional perspective, therefore, Nord claims that the source text is no longer the first and foremost criterion for the translator’s decisions; it is just one of the various sources of information used by the translator” (1997: 25).

Looking through a list of film titles from English into Italian it is striking to see how the “eduction” function seems to be predominant over the others and this can be easily explained in terms of commercial needs and marketing strategies. From a marketing point of view, titles are chosen to suit the demand of their respective domestic market. The role of marketing in the translation of film titles is vital to strengthen promotion and distribution of movies. Smart strategies allow better profits and, to a certain extent, add credibility to the distribution house itself. Titles are often modified and manipulated in order to suit local tastes. This is why titles travelling from one country to another are sometimes “transformed” or “performed”. Movies are undoubtedly commercial products whose main task is to be sold and ensure box office success. The marketing strategies employed in the translation of movie titles are aimed at ensuring that their choice can attract people into the cinema and that should become a great box-

office hit. Priority is given to financial matters at the expenses, at times, of cultural references which will be revealed in the film itself. Movies are art forms and, at the same time, they belong to the mass culture and they combine together both culture and commercialization. Unfortunately, though, sometimes the financial matter seems to be of utmost importance to some distributors who care for nothing but profit. The challenge is how to find a balance between art and commercialization without risking of damaging or betraying the target audience's expectations. A case in point is *THE ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND*.

From a linguistic point of view, the translation of film titles seems to pose significant questions in terms of accuracy and faithfulness. The problem of translating film titles does not lie in the linguistic skills adopted since they could be easily translated from one language into another in most of the cases. From a functional perspective, however, translation does not have to be necessarily literal to be correct, but it should attempt to convey an accurate description of the content as closely as possible in such a way that will be accepted and welcome by the target audience. Translation strategies used in the case of film titles seem to entail a certain degree subjectivity which could, at times, lead either to confusion or to unintended expectations. For instance, one of the most recent acclaimed films produced by Sofia Coppola, *LOST IN TRANSLATION* in Portugal was released as *MEETINGS AND FAILURE IN MEETINGS*. Another interesting example is one of the greatest American classics *HOME ALONE* which in Italy was translated as *MAMMA HO PERSO L'AEREO* "Mom, I missed the plane".

An interesting example of linguistic and cultural manipulation with a marketing purpose is the American film *VAN WILDER* (2002) which was translated as *MAIAL COLLEGE* in Italy. In this movie a young journalist is assigned the job of interviewing the most popular guy on campus, Van Wilder who has been at his college for seven years spending most of his time in parties. When his father decides to put a stop to his cash flow, Van and his best friends devise a way to make money from partying. When the journalist finally gets to know Van she makes him realize that he might be afraid to graduate. The Italian version, *MAIAL COLLEGE*, immediately suggests a "light comedy" appealing mostly to the culture of young people and therefore aimed at targeting a very specific social group. The word "maiale" in Italian means "pig" and it is spelled with a final "e". The choice of using this term and

dropping the final “e” was probably a way to give a sort of “Englishness” to the word. Viewers can easily relate the title to a story about an American college where possibly “dirty” things happen. In other words, the title does stress from the very beginning that the movie is not a serious movie.

## 5. Film Titles Translation: Case Studies and Observations

In the following sections, several examples of translation of film titles from English into Italian are provided. These sections are not aimed at criticizing the quality of the translation but rather they serve the purpose of assessing the impact that such choices have on the target audience. These examples can help us judge whether the Italian translation is a case of linguistic, semantic or functional equivalence aimed at favouring a linguistic, a cultural or a marketing strategy. The corpus is limited due to space restrictions and emphasis was therefore laid upon certain categories which include a few significant examples.

### 5.1. Literal Translation and Cultural Failure

Some Italian versions bear exactly the same title as the original version. If they are carefully analyzed, some interesting patterns seem to emerge. In some cases, the literal translation does not match the implied meaning or cultural function of the original for several reasons:

(16) ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO’S NEST (1975) – QUALCUNO VOLÒ SUL NIDO DEL CUCULO

(17) ALL THE PRESIDENT’S MEN (1976) – TUTTI GLI UOMINI DEL PRESIDENTE

(18) ALL THE KING’S MEN (1949 and 2006) – TUTTI GLI UOMINI DEL RE

ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO’S NEST is an American film released in 1975 whose title is derived from a popular nursery rhyme, that is VINTERY, MINTERY, CUTERY, CORN<sup>1</sup>. The word “cuckoo” in English may refer to a person who is regarded as strange, eccentric, or crazy. The title is perfectly in line with its plot because the film is about a man who seeks institutionalization as a means of escaping the rigors of a prison work farm. In Italian this reference is completely lost and viewers are

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<sup>1</sup> *Vintery, mintery, cutery, corn, Apple seed and apple thorn, Wire, briar, limber lock. Three geese in a flock. One flew East. One flew West. And one flew over the cuckoo’s nest.*

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totally unaware of this reference. It would have been better to translate it with either the addition of an explanatory line or simply by another different title aimed at making an allusion to the main theme of the movie.

Another interesting example is *ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN* released in 1976 whose title alludes to a popular nursery rhyme about Humpty Dumpty<sup>1</sup>. The film relates to the Watergate scandal and its title refers to the failure of the President's staff to repair the damage once the scandal had leaked out. Once again, Italians are completely deprived of this allusion and they are left with a completely free interpretation of the events.

It is worth noting that back in 1949 there was a film entitled *ALL THE KING'S MEN* which was based on Robert Penn Warren's novel published in 1946. The same novel was adapted for a film released in 2006 bearing the same title. The title perfectly matches the nursery rhyme whose line "all the king's horses and all the king's men" spawned a number of cultural references, with numerous books, songs, and films including the line. The story is about the truth of the rise and fall of a political king, who like Humpty Dumpty in the rhyme, falls from grace and can't be put back together again. In Italian this reference is lost but the point is that the cultural reference would have not worked for everybody but only for a restricted elite.

Translating these films into Italian has been very easy from a linguistic point of view, nevertheless, from a functional perspective, the translation fails to reproduce the same effect on the target text audience. The question is not whether people who translated these two titles were aware of these cultural references, but rather what kind of strategy did they apply to ensure that these films would have sold in Italy? In the second case, however, there might have been a careful marketing strategy behind the choice of adopting a literal translation. Viewers, indeed, can relate the word "president" to a sort of political plot or some kind of story involving power, corruption and / or conspiracy. In the final instance, *ALL THE KING'S MEN* the same assumption cannot be made in that there does not seem to be a direct correlation between "king" and "corruption", although it can possibly include a reference to "power".

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<sup>1</sup> *Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again.*

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## 5.2. Recurring patterns

It is interesting to note how some recurring patterns could be found in analysing film titles from English into Italian translation. First of all, it was noted that most of the titles which start with the word American are deliberately maintained in English in the Italian versions. This tendency does not seem to be bound to a specific time period or to the increasing use of the English language. Although these titles employ simple English words, it should be mentioned that not all Italians, especially the older generations, can be all acquainted with the meaning of them:

- (19) AMERICAN GRAFFITI (1973) – AMERICAN GRAFFITI
- (20) AMERICAN GIGOLO (1980) – AMERICAN GIGOLÒ
- (21) AMERICAN PIE (1999) – AMERICAN PIE
- (22) AMERICAN BEAUTY (1999) – AMERICAN BEAUTY
- (23) AMERICAN PSYCHO (2000) – AMERICAN PSYCHO
- (24) AMERICAN DREAMZ (2006) – AMERICAN DREAMZ

Another interesting observation is the recurrence of the word “escape” which can be found as early as 1947 up until current times. It is used even in cases where the original titles do not make a direct reference to it:

- (25) DARK PASSAGE (1947) – LA FUGA
- (26) THE GREAT ESCAPE (1963) – LA GRANDE FUGA
- (27) ESCAPE TO VICTORY (1981) – FUGA PER LA VITTORIA
- (28) RUNNING SCARED (1982) FUGA SENZA RESPIRO – FUGA PER LA VITA
- (29) HANKY PANKY (1982) – FUGA PER DUE
- (30) THREE FUGITIVES (1989) – IN FUGA PER TRE
- (31) CHICKEN RUN (2000) – GALLINE IN FUGA
- (32) THE WILD (2006) – UNO ZOO IN FUGA

In the following examples the word “escape” is directly translated from the original in order to maintain coherence both with the original titles as well as with the Italian translations:

- (33) ESCAPE FROM ALCATRAZ (1979) – FUGA DA ALCATRAZ
- (34) ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK (1981) – FUGA DA NEW YORK
- (35) ESCAPE FROM ABSOLOM (1994) – FUGA DA ABSOLOM
- (36) ESCAPE FROM L. A. (1996) – FUGA DA LOS ANGELES

In this respect all the examples provided seem to suggest a certain degree of both coherence and faithfulness to the original title. They all provide the viewers with the idea of escaping from somewhere, either a city or a prison and even in cases where the designation is not known or purely fictional, it is always possible to get the main idea of the film. In the case of (35), *Absolom* is a fictional name for a prison island but it immediately recalls the idea of a prison through a reference to (33), that is, *Alcatraz*. It is legitimate, nevertheless, to wonder why this strategy was not applied in the translation of *THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION* released in America in 1994 and translated in Italian as *SULLE ALI DELLA LIBERTÀ* “On the wings of freedom”. Shawshank is a fictional name given to the Mansfield Reformatory located in Ohio and by translating this title as *FUGA DA SHAWSHANK* “Escape from Shawshank” the viewers would have immediately grasped the idea of escaping from a prison. It is likely that the marketing strategy lying behind this choice was motivated by two main reasons. Firstly, *ESCAPE FROM SHAWSHANK* would not match the original as in the above-mentioned examples. Secondly, this choice would have probably restricted the number of viewers who would watch the movie because it is possibly related to a “prison story”. The point is that not everyone likes prison stories and so the use of the word “freedom” in Italian seems to provide a much more general idea whose content cannot be immediately grasped from its title. It could entail a prison story, a war story, a love story and etc. The result, from a purely commercial angle, is that more viewers are targeted as compared to the previous option.

Although feelings always play an important role in seducing viewers, the word “love” seems to be one of the most commonly used trigger words in Italian film titles, especially from the 1990s onwards. The use of *amore* “love” is not always a direct translation from the original and in the translated versions it seems to be motivated by marketing strategies aimed at selling the film to a larger audience:

- (37) *INNOCENT BLOOD* (1992) – *AMORE ALL’ULTIMO MORSO*
- (38) *SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE* (1993) – *INSONNIA D’AMORE*
- (39) *FOR LOVE OF THE GAME* (1999) – *GIOCO D’AMORE*
- (40) *KEEPING THE FAITH* (2000) – *TENTAZIONI D’AMORE*
- (41) *SHALLOW HAL* (2001) – *AMORE A PRIMA VISTA*
- (42) *SERENDIPITY* (2001) – *QUANDO L’AMORE È MAGIA*
- (43) *MAID IN MANHATTAN* (2002) – *UN AMORE A 5 STELLE*

- (44) BEYOND BORDERS (2003) – AMORE SENZA CONFINI
- (45) LOST IN TRANSLATION (2003) – L'AMORE TRADOTTO
- (46) NOWHERE TO GO BUT UP (2003) – TU MI AMI
- (47) LEATHERHEADS (2008) – IN AMORE NIENTE REGOLE
- (48) THE TIME TRAVELER'S WIFE (2008) – UN AMORE ALL'IMPROVISO

The use of “love” as a trigger word in these Italian movies seems to be justified by marketing strategies aimed at targeting a larger number of viewers. For instance, at first sight, example (40) might imply a religious reference so that in Italian a different title is provided in order to target more people. In example (42) it is interesting to see how the Italian translation of the word *serendipity* opts for an intriguing title despite having the possibility to use the Italian equivalent. *Serendipity* is the act of making a discovery by accident while looking for something entirely unrelated. It originated from the word *Swarnadip* which is the Sanskrit language name for Sri Lanka and was coined by Horace Walpole on 28 January 1754. This word seems to be one of the most difficult terms to translate and it has been imported and adapted into many other languages, such as in Italian as *serendipità*. Since both *serendipity* and *serendipità* are not common words accessible to everybody in their respective cultures, two strategies are employed. Whereas in English viewers have to make sense of this unknown word, in Italian viewers are tricked into a sense of magic or unknown issues through the title itself. Example (48) seems to imply a slow story whereas its Italian version is more intriguing and possibly interesting. Example (44) could imply a story about immigration and, once again, it could involve a limited number of viewers. By adding the word “love” to the Italian title the story becomes more appealing.

In the 1960s a series of movies were released in America whose Italian translation employed *per favore non* “please don’t” at the beginning of the sentence as in the following cases:

- (49) THE HONEYMOON MACHINE (1961) – PER FAVORE NON TOCCARE LE PALLINE
- (50) THE FEARLESS VAMPIRE KILLERS – (1967) – PER FAVORE NON MORDERMI SUL COLLO
- (51) THE PRODUCERS (1968) – PER FAVORE NON TOCCATE LE VECCHIETTE

It is interesting to note, on the other hand, that back in 1965 there was an American film entitled PLEASE DON'T EAT THE DAISIES which was

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literally translated as *PER FAVORE NON MANGIATE LE MARGHERITE*. This film might have been thought of as being the “starter” of this tendency to make use of the expression “Please don’t” but this is not the case. The first movie to be translated as such in Italian dates back 1961. Example (49) implies a reference to some games where “palline” (small balls) can be used and maintains, as such, a certain degree of ambiguity whether it refers to gambling or sports activities. In example (50) there is a shift of emphasis from a story about people killing vampires to a more sensual reference to “bite someone’s neck”. Finally, example (51) opts for a sort of explicitation in the Italian version. The film tells the story of a failed and aging Broadway producer who earns a living by flirting with rich old women in exchange for money for his plays. These “old ladies” are therefore dear and untouchable, from here the Italian title “Please don’t touch my old ladies”.

### 5.3. Proper Names and Designations

It is quite common to find proper names and geographic designations used as film titles to identify the protagonist or the main location: *ERIN BROCKOVICH*, *CLEOPATRA*, *CASABLANCA* and so forth. This section only focuses on proper names and strategies to deal with this phenomenon in translation are varied. In the first case, a distinction should be made between well-known people and those that are less popular. A further distinction is made between real versus fictional names. Most of the times, proper names tend to be left in English or to be literally translated only in cases where the actual names are known by people. When proper names of ordinary people are used, such as the movie *Frankie and Johnny* released in 1991, these are not translated in Italian but a new title is provided in order to explain the plot. The Italian version of this movie is *PAURA D’AMARE* “Fear to love”. Another example is *ANNIE HALL* (1977) which is an American romantic comedy and one of Woody Allen’s most popular films. The original title does not imply any romantic issue but the Italian version *IO E ANNIE* seems to suggest a possible love story or a story about friendship. In any case, viewers can relate this title to an emotional, potentially real-life based, story.

As mentioned above, a major distinction lies between fictional and real-life characters where translation strategies are not always coherent:

- (52) SYBIL (1976 / 2007) – SYBIL
- (53) NORMA RAE (1979) – NORMA RAE
- (54) JFK (1991) – JFK: UN CASO ANCORA APERTO
- (55) MICHAEL COLLINS (1996) – MICHAEL COLLINS
- (56) ERIN BROCKOVICH (2000) – ERIN BROCKOVICH: FORTE COME LA VERITÀ

These films are all based on real-life stories and all the names are real names except in the case of (52) and (53) where the real names were changed for legal reasons. Whereas in the 1970s there was a tendency to leave the original name (possibly because they were fictional names based on real-life stories), from the 1990s onwards a further tag was added to the name as a way to provide viewers with an explanation. The only exception is (55) where no tag is added probably because of the historical reference which is likely to be known by people. Michael Collins is, indeed, a historical biopic about General Michael Collins, the Irish patriot and revolutionary who died in the Irish Civil War. Example (54) is an interesting case in which, despite the initials JFK can easily recall the American President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the Italian version opts for an intriguing sentence added to the title as if this cultural reference cannot be recognised by the target viewers.

Different strategies apply in the case of fictional names:

- (57) SABRINA (1954 / 1995) – SABRINA
- (58) THELMA & LOUISE (1991) – THELMA & LOUISE
- (59) FORREST GUMP (1994) – FORREST GUMP
- (60) BULWORTH (1998) – BULWORTH: IL SENATORE
- (61) VAL WILDER (2002) – MAIAL COLLEGE

It seems that most of the times the fictional name is left the way it is in the original. Cases in point are (60) where there is a need to stress the fact that Bulworth is a proper name or rather a surname, probably because not easily recognised as such, and (61) where the marketing strategy lying behind the Italian version is clearly evident, that is, sell the movie.

#### 5.4. Untranslatable References?

Some film titles may pose problems in the target language because the cultural references, puns and wordplays used in the source language and source culture cannot be translated concisely as a title would require. These concepts may not function the same way as in

the source culture and therefore there is a need to change them either partially or completely as in the following cases:

- (62) SO PROUDLY WE HAIL (1943) – SORELLE IN ARMI
- (63) THE SEVEN-UPS (1973) – SQUADRA SPECIALE (THE SEVEN-UPS)
- (64) GREEN CARD (1990) – GREEN CARD: MATRIMONIO DI CONVENIENZA
- (65) ENCINO MAN (1992) – IL MIO AMICO SCONGELATO
- (66) STAGGERED (1994) – STAGGERED

In the original film titles, all the references to the American culture are well-known by the source language viewers but they are not, nevertheless, straightforward references for the Italian audience. For example, SO PROUDLY WE HAIL (62) is a reference to the American national anthem and it is a story about a group of military nurses sent to the Philippines during the early days of World War II. The choice of opting for SORELLE IN ARMI “Sisters in the army” immediately makes viewers understand that the story is possibly a war story involving nurses who, at wartimes, were indeed referred to as *sorelle* “sisters or nuns” rather than *infermiere* “nurses”.

Example (63) is a film about a renegade policeman who is the leader of the “Seven-Ups”, a police team that makes use of unorthodox manners and tactics to take down guilty criminals. The title, and thus the name of this team, comes from the fact that most convictions done by the team heralds jail sentences to criminals from seven years and up. From a cultural perspective, seven-up is a card game which requires seven points to win and is usually played by either two players or two partnerships with a 52-card pack. This game procedure is adapted and adopted in the film. In Italian, however, since the cultural reference cannot be literally translated but it requires a longer explanation not in line with the concise nature suitable for a film title, the option is to provide viewers with a clear sentence summarising the main theme or protagonists of the story and leave, at the same time, the cultural reference in English within brackets.

In example (64) there was the possibility to literally translate the title as LA CARTA VERDE which is the equivalent of the *Green Card*. However, two possible reasons might have motivated the choice of leaving the title in English with the addition of a catchy phrase. First of all, it is likely that not everyone in Italy is aware of the fact that a Green Card is a permanent visa providing the status of permanent resident and legal rights to work in America. Secondly, by adding a catchy

phrase, the viewers are able to grasp, to a greater or lesser degree, the content of the movie. The main theme in this movie is, indeed, a marriage of convenience for both protagonists.

ENCINO MAN (65) was released in Europe as CALIFORNIA MAN in an attempt to allow viewers from different cultures to recognise this geographical reference. Encino is a hilly district of the city of Los Angeles whose name is derived from the Rancho Los Encinos (Ranch of the Evergreens), a land given to three mission Indians by the Mexican government following the secularization of the California missions beginning in 1834. In the Italian version it is difficult to understand what the film is about from its title. Encino is probably a challenging cultural reference for the Italian audience; however by opting for a direct translation of CALIFORNIA MAN the viewers could have the chance to guess its theme(s) whereas this is not the case with IL MIO AMICO SCONGELATO "My unfrozen friend". This title makes sense only after watching the film itself.

Finally, (66) is an example of wordplay which can be hard to translate because of this association between its literal meaning and *stag party*. The film tells a story of Neil who, at his bachelor party, passes out after having a spiked drink. When he awakens, he is naked on a Scottish island beach and he has only three days to go back to London in time for his wedding. Broadly speaking, puns can be very challenging in translation, however, whereas the strategy not to translate this title can be justified in terms of cultural and linguistic difficulties, it is hard to guess what was the real marketing strategy adopted in this respect. It is likely that a completely different title would have been more effective.

### 5.5. Literary Titles

Some people believe that cinema opts for literary works in order to be recognised as a form of "high" rather than "low" or "class" culture (Peña Ardid 1992). It is quite common to find films based on popular or less popular literary works and two main options are available in this respect: 1) maintain the original literary title especially if it is a well-known and prestigious work or 2) change it if it does not have the same effect on viewers as it does on readers. The same tendencies can be found in translation.

Famous writers' works, such E. M. Forster or Fowles, tend to be literally translated and so, to maintain the same title of the novel:

(67) THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN (1981) – LA DONNA DEL TENENTE FRANCESE

(68) A PASSAGE TO INDIA (1984) – PASSAGGIO IN INDIA

(69) A ROOM WITH VIEW (1985) – CAMERA CON VISTA

The same tendency applies when the title includes both the name of the author and his or her work:

(70) BRAM STOKER'S DRACULA (1992) – DRACULA DI BRAM STOKER

(71) MARY SHELLY'S FRANKENSTEIN (1994) – FRANKENSTEIN DI MARY SHELLY

(72) WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S ROMEO + JULIET (1996) – ROMEO + GIULIETTA DI WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

There are, nevertheless, cases where the translation of famous literary works is changed in Italian film title translation, such as THE CRUCIBLE (1996) translated as LA SEDUZIONE DEL MALE “Seduction of the evil” as a film title but its novel maintains the same title in Italian (*il crogiuolo*). Opting for a literal translation of this title, and therefore translating the film title just like the novel, could have the drawback of targeting an elite of people who could either know this literary work or, at least, be aware of the meaning of the word *crogiuolo* in Italian. Therefore, it is likely that the decision to opt for a more simplified title could have been motivated by the necessity to reach a larger number of people.

Finally, there are also other interesting examples where some literary works have increased their popularity through film productions based on them, such as in the case of SCHINDLER'S LIST (1993). SCHINDLER'S LIST is based on a real-life story of Oskar Schindler, a Czech-born southern German industrialist who risked his life to save over 1,100 of his Jewish factory workers from the death camps in Nazi-occupied Poland. This movie was adapted from a Thomas Keneally's documentary novel which first appeared in Britain as SCHINDLER'S ARK in 1982 and the word *ark* was chosen to refer to the ark built by the biblical Noah, on God's instruction, to rescue people and animals from the Great Flood. Therefore, Schindler is seen as a rescuer of men. It was released as SCHINDLER'S LIST in the United States the same year.

Other examples include:

(73) TWILIGHT (2008) – TWILIGHT

(74) THE LORD OF THE RINGS (trilogy):

(1) THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING (2001) – LA COMPAGNIA DELL'ANELLO

(2) THE TWO TOWERS (2002) – LE DUE TORRI

(3) THE RETURN OF THE KING (2003) – IL RITORNO DEL RE

(75) HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE (1998/2001) – HARRY POTTER E LA PIETRA FILOSOFALE

## 6. Concluding remarks

Titles play a vital role in the success or failure of films as they are the “first contact” or “first impression” for the public. This paper focused on the translation of film titles from a descriptive and functional perspective and it was not aimed at criticizing translations but rather it attempted to highlight differences in the choices and strategies adopted and to assess their impact on the target audience.

The corpus analyzed shows that most of the strategies adopted are merely bound to marketing strategies and the commercial angle seems to be of utmost importance compared to the linguistic or cultural perspectives.

In the translation of movie titles, it is vital to take four main aspects into account in order to be successful and try to combine them together. These aspects are 1) informative function, 2) aesthetic function, 3) cultural references and backgrounds, and, finally, 4) commercial angle.

Unfortunately, the study of titles is an under-researched field which deserves more attention. It is felt that a larger corpus of films to analyze in different languages may allow for more general conclusions and can reveal more interesting patterns.

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