

The Dynamics of Cultural Change: a Theoretical Frame with Reference to Italy-USA Relations

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ABSTRACT

This essay proposes a theoretical frame capable of addressing questions of cultural change across disciplines. The cultural relations between Italy and the USA provide the empirical context to our theoretical work. These relations are considered as a two-way process based both on the migration of Italians to the USA, and on the influence of U.S. culture on Italy.

Our model has been developed around the idea of tracing the "journey" of a cultural object from one community to another. In order to avoid over-simplification, we have developed the flexible concept of culture zone which allows us to transcend rigid definitions imposed by national borders. A culture zone is an area, however big or small, defined by a relatively cohesive presence of shared practices and values. The theoretical framework we have developed derives from different fields such as cultural anthropology, linguistics, human geography, migration studies and semiotics.

In the essay we produce three particular case studies addressing three different fields - food culture, film history and language - in order to test and exemplify our model. We offer a visualization of the components and processes of cultural change and aim to provide a stimulating multi-disciplinary platform for the discussion of cultural change concerning Italy-USA relations.

KEYWORDS

Cultural Change, Theory, Italy, USA, Food Culture, Film, Language

The cultural impact of mass migration in a transnational context has recently occupied the minds of scholars in different fields, in both the social sciences and the humanities. Amongst historians, the development of a new field, “Global History”, is similarly fuelled by the intention to adopt a supra-national perspective. This essay aims to contribute to the debate by tackling a specific issue: the creation of a theoretical frame capable of addressing questions of cultural change across disciplines.

The reasoning behind it is twofold. On the one hand, despite a number of recent studies on questions of cultural change, there has been no attempt at a theoretical categorization of the steps through which this takes place. In migration studies, both Hoerder (2002) and Manning (2005) address cultural change but they do it with brush strokes presenting its actual impact as a secondary effect never brought into focus. A similar conclusion is reached following a reading of the collection of essays edited by Brettel and Hollifield (2000), in which the multidisciplinary spectrum of their approach to migration theory seems to suggest implicitly that the theorization of cultural change is not at the centre of any of the disciplines which traditionally pay attention to it, from anthropology to sociology and history. On the other hand, our recent experience of involvement in multi-disciplinary collaborative projects has emphasised the need for a common platform through which data coming from different areas of study can be constructively compared and analysed.

The inverse trend towards specialist compartmentalization is a risk, particularly evident in relation to linguistics, a discipline which took such a leading role in the development of the social and human sciences during the twentieth century, at the high point of structuralist linguistics. Looking back on his career, Pier Marco Bertinetto, Professor of Linguistics at one of Italy’s leading universities, Pisa’s Scuola Normale Superiore, describes the epistemological relocation of his discipline from the role of a “guiding discipline” to one of “splendid marginality” (Bertinetto 2009, our translation). This increasing isolation of most branches of contemporary linguistics has had various infelicitous consequences for anyone interested in the historical study of culture, including difficulties in mutual comprehension even between previously interrelated disciplines such as linguistics and philology. Our proposal goes against this trend, and the decision to involve linguistic studies should also be seen as a call for a methodical approach, based on detailed empirical data and capable of benefitting from contemporary theories, and at the same time solid enough to provide a frame which can be shared, and data which can be fruitfully compared and contrasted¹.

In the following pages, the essay will advance through five different stages. After two introductory sections outlining respectively the theoretical background to our approach and the choice of the Italian and U.S. case, we will develop a theoretical frame for the study of cultural change. This will be initially tested on three different case studies, pertaining to different areas of study (food culture, film history, language). The following section will address a number of problems related to our approach, after which the final section

¹ In other words, we wish to locate our work within that manifold tradition which has long emphasised the constitutive factors that human language shares with other cultural fields, and has therefore highlighted the indispensable contribution of linguistic history to the general understanding of cultural history (see Deumert 2006). In Italy, this tradition can count scholars such as Bruno Migliorini, Giacomo Devoto and Tullio De Mauro among its most influential proponents. In recent decades, a significant amount of relevant scholarship has been assembled in variationist sociolinguistics and historical linguistics (see especially Labov 1994-2010) and in the specific discipline of contact linguistics. This has led to important advances at both theoretical and empirical level.

will present a visualisation of the fully-fledged working model, followed by a short conclusion. It is our hope to provide a useful, working tool that can facilitate dialogue across disciplines.

1. Cultures as Evolving Systems.

In a number of different disciplines, the definition of complex structures has produced models based on the seminal concept of “system”, understood as a set of dynamic relationships which, together, give shape to a functioning whole. In the study of the natural world, for example, the notion of “ecosystem” defines the interaction of organisms and their physical environment. Within the human sciences, systemic models have been developed, for instance, in sociology, anthropology and human geography. The last two share the concept of “culture area” through which ethnographers, in particular, attempted a classification of human communities. Finally, stemming from the structuralist “turn” in linguistics, semiotics is by definition a discipline which attempts to reveal the inner mechanisms of different types of human communication through their theorisation as systems.

In recent years, post-structuralist and post-colonial studies have moved theorists of culture away from systemic approaches, perceived as too prescriptive and relying on unacceptable simplifications. The notion of national identity has also been unpacked revealing both its lack of coherence and its artificial, political nature. The emphasis has shifted towards acknowledging the hybridity of cultural identity, its transnational dimension and the need for a constructive recognition of cultural diversity and of the contribution of cultures at the margins or with a politically-unprivileged status. More specifically, theorization on cultural exchange has moved from Marie Louise Pratt’s notion of “contact zone” (1992), mainly understood spatially, to Bhabha’s suggestion of a conceptual “third space” (1994) where the meeting between two cultures takes place. Particularly stimulating in this respect is Doreen Massey’s essay on space (2005), in which, as a human geographer, she proposes an emancipation of the notion of space from its traditional understanding as a static, univocal entity opposed to the fluidity and indeterminacy of time. Massey conceives space as the site of a continuously developing intersection of different trajectories, human and non-human, which is “open, multiple and relational, unfinished and always becoming” (59). This approach explodes any attempt to define local culture as much as national traditions in relation to geographical places which we identify as immobile and uncontaminated.

For a contemporary approach to cultural change, the key question is therefore whether it is still conceivable to develop a theoretical platform capable of addressing large-scale phenomena whilst respecting and reflecting the fluid heterogeneity of social exchanges. As a way forward we suggest the development of a theoretical frame starting from a simple model. It is also important to build a frame which is flexible enough to be able to adjust to micro- as much as macro-phenomena, and cope with a contemporary notion of the artificiality and ultimate hybridity of concepts such as national or local culture. There is no such thing as a homogeneous nation or homogeneous space, however “local”.

Finally, it is our aim to try to formulate a frame which is capable of addressing cultural change “in absentia”, that is, not necessarily caused by human mobility, whether it is intellectual or labour migration. As it will be made clear in the following section, that is a strong reason behind our decision to concentrate on cultural exchanges between Italy and the USA. As cultural objects can travel without a community transporting them, this includes forms of narrative too: as recently reminded by cultural anthropologist Tim Ingold, “people grow in knowledge not only through direct encounters with others, but also through hearing their

stories told. To tell a story is to relate, in narrative, the occurrences of the past, bringing them to life in the vivid present of listeners as if they were going on here and now.” (161) Language too does not necessarily need to be accompanied by human mobility, as for example when the prestige of a new technology projects its lexis onto the languages of distant communities.

2. Why Italy and the USA?

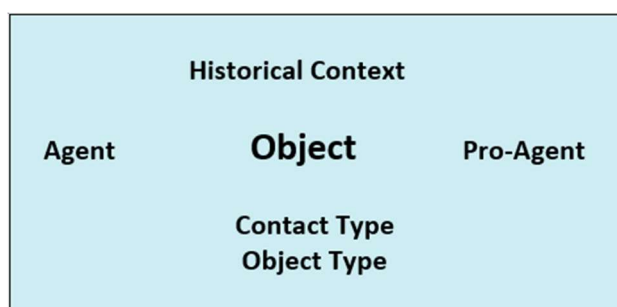
The relationship between Italy and the USA during the twentieth century provides an exemplary case study with which to test our model. The peculiarity of this relationship lies in two main characteristics. First, it is a two-way process: on the one hand, we have the mass migration of Italians towards the USA, lasting almost a century, which had a substantial impact on the making of what we perceive as U.S. culture (the Italian contribution to U.S. food culture is an easy example, but one can also think of the influence of Italian American directors and actors on the recent history of U.S. cinema); on the other, Italy fell under the influence of U.S. culture since the very end of the nineteenth century, when the USA began to emerge as model of modernity, and particularly so in the post-WWII years (the so-called “Americanization” of Italian society in the years following the enactment of the Marshall plan). Beyond this two-way process lies the second characteristic which concerns the nature of the two different types of contact we have just outlined: the first was caused by human mobility, that is, the actual movement of vast numbers of people (Italian citizens in this case) to the USA; the second took place in the absence of any kind of human mobility on a comparable scale. When U.S. culture began to spread its influence in many fields, at the start of the twentieth century (one only has to think of its iconic, “skyscraping” urban architecture or of jazz music), the presence of U.S. citizens on the Italian soil was less than negligible. One could argue that the arrival of the U.S. army following the invasion of Sicily in July 1943 and progressively of the entire peninsula should be considered as a form of military-led migration; but it should be remembered that the British army had an equal, contemporaneous presence which left hardly any trace at all. In other words, the influence of U.S. social and cultural models came to Italy mainly through virtual representations brought by the media, cinema, literature and other forms of narrative such as comics and cartoons.

To our knowledge, no study has considered the reciprocal influence of Italian and U.S. culture across the Atlantic as a two-way process. Donna Gabaccia’s study of the Italian diasporas dwells on it in her discussion of the influence of the meeting of Italian economic migrants and political exiles in the making of a common notion of Italian nationalism which then informed the political debate in Italy. However, her focus is almost entirely on the movement of Italians towards other parts of the world (Gabaccia, 2000). Beyond that, in other works these two phenomena are treated as entirely separate. This, in itself, is not a criticism but rather a statement of facts. This essay too, as we will see, is not focussed on a comparative analysis attempting to reveal the differences between cultural change with, or without, human mobility. Rather, it will offer a theoretical model which the choice of the Italy/USA case will allow us to test it in both circumstances.

The essay will initially examine three different case studies. The one related to language will concentrate on the influence of U.S. English on Italian. The second one, related to food culture, will look at a process in the opposite direction, that is, the arrival of an Italian dish in U.S. society as a consequence of the presence of Italian migrants on U.S. soil. A third one will look at a process, related to film history, the Western genre, which uniquely bounced back between the two cultures, and to the wider world.

3. Cultural Influence as Exchange and Invention

Whether it is the experience of an individual or a change which is adopted by a certain community at large, cultural influence implies the arrival of an object (material or intangible, an idea, a word, an abstract pattern or a practice) which until a certain moment is either unknown or considered “foreign”. Similarly to the study of communication (in which messages are the object which is passed on), in order to understand the phenomenon there is a number of factors we need to take into account. With Roman Jakobson’s classical model in mind, one could develop an *ad hoc* frame as follows:



Borrowed from anthropology, the term “Agent” reflects our intention to propose a model which can account for micro-phenomena, when change may (at least in theory) be set into motion by the action of a single person who has access to another culture. At the other end of the exchange, the term “Pro-Agent” – with the Latin prefix understood as “on behalf of” – gives particular emphasis to the role of the receiving individual/group as an active figure, capable of elaborating the received object². The other three factors help to clarify the spatial and temporal configuration surrounding the event (Historical Context) and to categorize the type of object and the medium of contact.

It must be added that the identity of the Agent is not always easily discernible. In the case of linguistic borrowings, for example, it is often possible to reconstruct, with a good degree of plausibility, the situation in which contact took place, and to point towards specific usages which triggered the absorption of lexical items or structural patterns from another language. Yet, this absorption can very rarely be traced back to a particular utterance by an individual speaker, at a particular moment in time and space. Despite these empirical limitations, however, it is an important theoretical requisite that we strive to locate contact within a historically defined situation and that we posit the existence of an Agent of change, as much as that of a definable receiver of cultural change, the Pro-Agent (more on this point at the end of section 5).

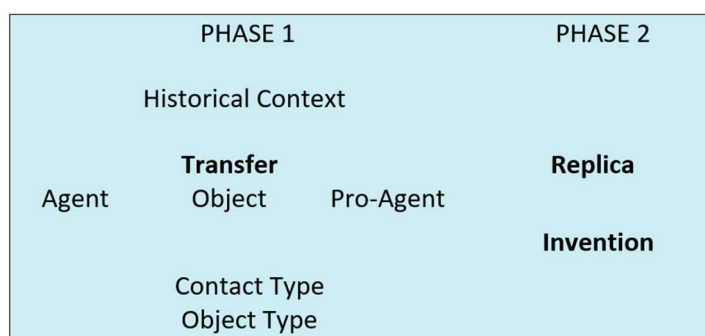
With regard to the latter part of the process, a central question is how the Pro-Agent acts once the cultural object reaches its new “home”. This is, in many respects, the core of the process of cultural change. Developing a tool, this time coming from the field of semiotics and elaborated with notions from contact linguistics, we have identified three main stages which we propose to call: **Transfer**, **Replica**, and **Invention**³. These labels convincingly sum up the stages through which a cultural item comes to be used

² On Agency see for example Ahearn (2000).

³ The source of inspiration is Umberto Eco’s typology of the modes of sign production in his *Theory of Semiotics* (1979). When addressing the physical labour involved in the process, Eco identifies a sequence of four phases. We have fused the first two –

by a new individual/community. During the phase of **Transfer**, the item in question enters the new community for whatever reason – be it pragmatic, aesthetic, commercial, or purely accidental. During the second stage, the item is increasingly adopted and replicated by members of the community. This second stage – which we propose to call **Replica** – marks the beginning of the assimilation of the new item. Again, for whatever reason, somebody will reproduce the object, creating a replica, which is an attempt to copy a cultural object using it as a model. In most cases, this process of imitation is a fully conscious one, but in other cases it may not reach the level of conscious awareness – not all contact-induced linguistic innovations, for instance, are immediately noticed or overtly discussed by ordinary speakers. Whatever the role of conscious intentionality, any development that distances the new object from its model marks the beginning of what Umberto Eco calls **Invention**. At this stage, the roots of the object can still be traced back to its model, but the new object is independent from its original model and from its creator(s).

If we now include this dimension in our model, it is perhaps advisable to think of two distinct phases. The first one concerns the process of Transfer, whereas the second one follows on from the Pro-agent’s reaction to the process of cultural influence. The model would then look as follows:



At this stage, we will apply the model to three case studies related to Italian and U.S. culture. In order to test the trans-disciplinary nature of the model, we have chosen three very different areas of knowledge, as already anticipated. We have intentionally selected examples which go from an iconic case which had an easily perceivable impact (the circulation of pizza as a traditional dish) to progressively more distinct cases such as the development of the Western film genre and the niche borrowing of the word *egghead*.

4.1 The Journey of Pizza

The challenge, in this case, is to verify whether our model will suffice in presenting a potted history of the move of this popular dish from Italy to the USA. Food historians agree that the introduction of pizza to U.S. society dates back to the early twentieth century when some foodsellers of Neapolitan origin decided to add pizza to their range of goods. The first specific licence for the sale of pizza was requested in 1905 by

Recognition and Ostentation – into one single function since, in the process of cultural change, the two most often coincide and we could not think of a single case in which distinguishing them would have been essential. The term Transfer we have borrowed from the theory of linguistic contact and change: see Andersen (2001), Thomason (2004 and 2010), and Sankoff (2013).

Gennaro Lombardi who at the time was running a grocery store in New York’s Little Italy (Spring Street)⁴. We can therefore argue that the process of Transfer of pizza beyond the domestic sphere of Italian Americans took place through Lombardi’s and other Italian-American groceries which followed in the early twentieth century.

Once we move to the second Phase, the question is whether the phases of Replica and Invention can provide a useful conceptualization of the process. As one can imagine, the first *pizze* were a reproduction of the Neapolitan dish. They were therefore a Replica, but it is interesting to note that in later years they came to be called New York-style pizza in order to distinguish it from further developments⁵. This indicates a process of local development which found its milestone in the creation of what is referred to as deep-dish pizza. Homemade pizzas with a thicker base already existed and one should moreover not discount the potential influence of other “distant relatives” of Neapolitan pizza - such as the Sicilian *sfincione* – but all pizza histories agree that the opening of Pizzeria Uno by a non-Italian-American, former athlete and businessman Issac Sewell, in 1943, marked the beginning of a different kind of pizza, so recognizably different as to deserve a definition which is still very much in use today: Chicago’s deep-dish pizza. Within our model, this development, particularly so since it was put forward by somebody outside the Italian American community, can be categorized as Invention.

It is also interesting to note that if one considers subsequent processes of industrial-scale distribution of pizzas, through franchise restaurants, its history was very much written by non-Italian and non-Italian-American entrepreneurs: Pizza Hut, the world’s biggest franchise operation, taken over by PepsyCo since 1977, was founded in 1958 by two brothers of Irish origin, Dan and Frank Carney. Its closest rival, Domino’s, was founded in 1960 as Dominick’s Pizza in Ypsilanti (Michigan) by Tom and James Monaghan, once again U.S. citizens of Irish origin.

Our model would therefore condense and visualise the history of the “Americanization” of pizza as follows:

PHASE 1		PHASE 2	
Historical context: C20th USA			
Transfer: Italian-American venues (NYC: 1905)		Replica: New York-style pizza (1905)	
Agent: Neapolitan Immigrants	Object: Pizza	Pro-Agent: U.S. pizza producers	
	Contact type: Trade	Invention: Deep-dish pizza (1943) Franchise restaurants (1958)	
	Object Type: Food		

⁴ On the history of Pizza, there are several non-academic books. More reliable is *Pizza: A Global History* by Denver University historian Carol Helstosky (2008).

⁵ Indeed, Helstosky in her study uses “authentic” Italian pizza and New York-style as synonyms (52).

The two levels of Phase 2 prove rather useful in signposting the process. From a sociological viewpoint it is also notable how the process of invention seems to have been taken over by non-Italian American entrepreneurs. This in itself is not an isolated process: as Donna Gabaccia has shown in her study of food culture in the USA (1998), ethnic foods, once they reach the corporate-run mass-production level, have often lost their links to the local brand and community.

Later on in this essay, we will return to the history of pizza, but for the time being, it seems that our model is capable of representing adequately the arrival and elaboration of an Italian object into mainstream U.S. society. The next example moves us from material to intellectual culture, and this time the cultural change works in the opposite direction, from the USA to Italy.

4.2 The “Italianisation” of Western film

This is another relatively straightforward case since there is no doubt that, as a film genre, the Western was born in the USA, very much as part of the construction of a national identity which was autochthonous, not derived from European models. Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* of 1903 is considered by film historians as the progenitor of the Western genre. Once established, the genre proved extremely popular in the USA as much as in Europe. Furthermore, in a case similar to that of Italian pizza, the non-U.S. consumers of Western films did not limit themselves to the enjoyment of this cultural object. The U.S. market, with its most developed network of cinemas across the nation, was a huge magnet for national film industries such as the Italian one, which relied on export for survival. This gave the impetus to the creation of a first a process of Replica whereby already by the early 1910s, Italian film companies started to produce their own Westerns which could then be sold to U.S. distributors. The same happened in other European countries, in France most notably⁶. Some decades later, in the 1960s, a new development of the genre took place. This was the result of a small group of Italian filmmakers, led by the inspiring work of Sergio Leone. In this case, film scholars disagree as to the exact progenitor of this sub-genre, but there is no doubt about Sergio Leone’s *A Fistful of Dollars* (1963) being the one which put the Spaghetti Western on the world map, already dressed with the distinctive traits which were to be its trademark in following years⁷. Again, it seems that our model can easily accommodate the journey of the Western genre from the USA to Italy:

PHASE 1		PHASE 2
Historical context: C20th USA-Italy		
Transfer: Distribution in Italian cinemas (1903-)		Replica: Italian Westerns (1910s-)
Agent: Italian distributors	Object: Western	Pro-Agent: Italian film industry
	Contact type: Entertainment Object type: Narrative	Invention: Spaghetti Western (1960s)

⁶ See Martinelli (1997) and Alovio (2006).

⁷ On the Western genre and its Spaghetti sub-genre see *inter alia* Frayling (1998).

Once again, at this early stage it can be provisionally concluded that our model has proven sufficiently detailed and explicative in order to outline the cultural change brought by the arrival in Italy of the Western film *genre*.

4.3 From *egghead* to *testa d'uovo*

In the field of language, the application of our model is likely to prove particularly challenging. We shall expand on this point in the next section of this essay, but for the moment let us focus on a relatively unproblematic case. The historical context concerned is essentially the twentieth century, a period of time when the impact of the English language on Italian society became much stronger than in earlier centuries especially as a result of the so-called “Americanization” of Italy after the Second World War and the later emergence of English as a global language (Cartago 1994). The Agents of linguistic influence were speakers of Italian with various degrees of familiarity with the English language. The Pro-agents were the other members of the Italian speech community, who accepted certain aspects of Anglo-American influence and permanently incorporated them into their own linguistic competence. The type of influence can be defined according to the existing scholarship in contact linguistics, where a crucial distinction is made between contact situations involving large-scale speaker interaction, and situations in which frequent interaction between speakers of the source and recipient language is not a mass phenomenon but much of the contact takes place through translation, interpreting, dubbing and other similar practices. While the Anglicized Italian of advertising, journalism, business, economics and politics has proved sufficiently prestigious to influence the Italian language, the Americanisms carried to Italy by returning migrants have usually remained confined to their own linguistic variety, or have at best spread to the local dialect of their province. Therefore, the linguistic dynamics that concern us here should mainly be ascribed to what has been termed “virtual contact” which does not predominantly rely on “physical contact between speakers” (McLaughlin 2011, 14) and whose importance in modern societies has increased due to changes in information and communication technology.

A good example is the expression *testa d'uovo* – which, according to most works of reference, appeared in Italian under the influence of U.S. English⁸. The Oxford English Dictionary indicates the U.S. origin of *egghead*, a colloquial noun meaning “highbrow intellectual”, and attests it from the early twentieth century. The journey from the U.S. to Italy probably began with the 1952 presidential election, when *egghead* was widely used with reference to the Democratic candidate, Adlai Stevenson. Authors familiar with U.S. culture and politics transferred *egghead* into their writings, adding *testa d'uovo* as a tentative Italian equivalent, together with paraphrases and explanatory comments, as in this passage from the magazine *Il Mondo* of 25 March 1958: “fino a pochi mesi fa una riflessione del genere poteva essere colta soltanto sulle labbra di qualche *egghead* (“testa d'uovo” ossia il cosiddetto intellettuale puro)” (quoted in Bombi 2011, 138). As a result, the Italian speech community – or at least those familiar with political journalism – adopted both *egghead* and *testa d'uovo*, but the former would seem to have subsequently fallen out of use. Unlike other cases of lexical influence, in which the meaning of an English word is eventually widened or restricted as part of its adoption

⁸ See the relevant entries in Rando 1987 and De Mauro and Mancini 2003.

by the Italian speech community, *testa d'uovo* does not seem to differ semantically from *egghead* (except, perhaps, for a slightly more ironic, disparaging connotation in Italian). In contrast, the form of the English model is clearly not replicated in *testa d'uovo*: the modifier + noun structure of *egghead* has been changed according to the general preference of Italian for the opposite order (with the modifier following, instead of preceding, the modified element) and for more analytic structures (in this case, noun + prepositional phrase)⁹. Here is how our model would present this case:

PHASE 1		PHASE 2
Historical context: mid C20th USA and Italy		
Transfer: Articles on U.S. politics		
Agent: Italian journalists	Object: <i>egghead</i>	Pro-Agent: Italian readers
	Contact type: 'Virtual' linguistic contact	Replica: <i>egghead</i> (1958)
	Object Type: Linguistic expression	Invention: <i>testa d'uovo</i>

5. Problematising the Model

However useful, our two-phase model remains a limited tool. It implies a simple, straightforward passage mainly built on the backbone of a spatially and temporally linear axis. As suggested earlier, a contemporary model of cultural change should be capable of absorbing and displaying a sense of the “simultaneous heterogeneity” – to use Massey’s expression – of both space and time. At second glance, there are also a number of issues, some general, some related to the three specific areas, which we need to tackle in order to produce a more flexible and useful model.

A first general issue, which we already flagged up in our introductory considerations, concerns the definition of national cultures, “Italian” as much as “U.S.”. Such a definition presupposes the existence of a clearly identified, homogenous entity which most contemporary scholars consider a contradiction in terms. So far, we have developed a simple model which somehow takes it for granted, and does not allow the representation of the internal variety of any culture related to a community. A more flexible tool is needed.

A promising stimulus in this direction comes from the work of Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman. In *The Universe of the Mind* (1990), a seminal text in cultural semiotics, Lotman suggests the envisioning of what he calls a *Semiosphere* as a system capable of addressing the complexity of cultural exchange. The key concept in his proposal relates to how different semiospheres interact with each other along their boundaries:

One of the primary mechanisms of semiotic individuation is the boundary, and the boundary can be defined as the outer limit of a first-person form. This space is ‘ours’, ‘my own’, it is ‘cultured’, ‘safe’, ‘harmoniously organized’, and so on. By contrast ‘their space’ is ‘other’, ‘hostile’, ‘dangerous’,

⁹ On the role of these preferences see Bruni (1984, 111) and Bombi (2011, 92) respectively.

'chaotic'. Every culture begins by dividing the world into 'its own' internal space and 'their' eternal space. How this binary division is interpreted depends on the typology of the culture. But the actual division is one of the human cultural universals. The boundary may separate the living from the dead, settled peoples from nomadic ones, the town from the plains; it may be a frontier. There is an amazing similarity even between civilizations which have no contact with each other, in the expressions they use to describe the world beyond the boundary. (131)

A first critique to such a view is that a boundary implies a homogeneous state on the inside, clearly distinguished from the external "other". In our case, to be more specific, it begs a key question: can we talk of a "national semiosphere" concerning a community associated with a geographical dimension? Take the Italian peninsula: with all its internal, regional differentiations, how can one think of a semiotic space which is shared without denying the huge differences which characterise different parts of it? Or take the Italian language – spoken in different countries and with the internal variation which characterises all natural languages. Or perhaps the Italian nation itself – often defined as a migrant, transnational community. The answer, as Lotman indicates, is to move away from the concept of semiospheres as mutually exclusive entities. First of all, a semiosphere is not a given object: it relates to the area of culture we want to concentrate upon. A semiosphere is a theoretical elaboration through which it is possible to give shape to a particular cultural ambit. There is an infinite scale of possible spheres in between the extremes of a micro-case – say, the semiosphere which relates to a single human being at a specific stage in her/his life – and a macro-case which could be the relation between the inhabitants of planet Earth and the rest of the universe. What is important is to define the ambit on which a specific study will concentrate, and accept the co-existence of other spheres which transcend, interact, contain and are contained in it.

If, as Lotman suggests, borders define a semiosphere, then one should think of the cultural borders which define an "Italian" identity, as against what is foreign to it. It could be argued that this would lead to massive generalizations, but this is already taken into account by the assumption that inside the sphere of Italian culture, there is a highly complex coexistence of several semiospheres, each contributing more or less in different times in history to the definition of the Italian character. This is described by Lotman as "semiotic dynamism", a field of tension where semiospheres compete and battle to survive and influence other spheres. One could relate this activity to one of Gramsci's key concept, that of "hegemony". If one semiosphere is able to expand and be accepted by others (say, the semiosphere of bourgeois values becoming a shared set of assumptions and behaviours for an entire society), the resulting cultural change will appear as a spontaneous, almost unnoticed process. This is what Gramsci refers to as fully functioning hegemony, based on the cultural prestige of the dominant groups and on partial compromise between their core interests and some of the interests of the subaltern groups, rather than on mere imposition of the former on the latter¹⁰.

Lotman's theorization is thought-provoking, but perhaps the geometric concept of "sphere" is not the most adequate. It does not sufficiently convey the idea of a constantly interacting and evolving entity. Perhaps the error consists in expecting to be able to capture and display something which we, ourselves, have defined as shapeless and ultimately at the mercy of an artificial categorization. What if the emphasis is shifted towards

¹⁰ On *hegemony* see Williams (1977, 108-114) and Vacca (2017). See also Carlucci (2013, especially 138-144 and 161-176).

the one thing through which we gauge change, that is, the cultural object whose journey is made possible by cultural difference?

Along this line, geneticist Luca Cavalli-Sforza offered the notion of “cultural epidemic” to describe the horizontal spreading of a cultural trait from a small group to an entire community (Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman 1981, and Cavalli-Sforza 2004). It is an expression which gives a better sense of non-linear dissemination, but its clear derivation from the medical language of illnesses and viruses makes it hardly a welcome candidate. It also implies the existence of “healthy bodies” which potentially leaves the door open to a pro-supremacist interpretation of how “good” cultures should defend themselves from the noxious influence of other, “bad” cultures. And, finally, it implies a one-way movement instead of allowing for the possibility of a more complex set of motions (which, as we will see, happens even within two of the case studies we previously considered).

A better definition could be **culture dynamics**. The word “dynamics” gives a sense of the combination of energy and movement which we want to associate with cultural change. Still, a culture dynamic does not need to take place across different cultures. It is also the stuff of the constant negotiation resulting from our presence in time and space, as individuals as much as communities, whether or not we encounter something “new”. This takes us back to the need for a definition of sorts so that the processes of exchange can be identified and studied. Perhaps we can talk in terms of culture dynamics taking place between **culture zones**. The choice of “zone” is particularly attractive on two main grounds. Its etymology from the Greek for “belt, girdle” gives a sense of something which delimits a body, without defining its content. Also, if the word “zone” denotes in English a spatial concept whether it is used in Geography, Astronomy or Geology, what makes it more attractive is its very recent usage through the idiomatic expression of U.S. origin “in the zone” which refers to a mental state¹¹. A zone therefore should be thought of as a dimension which can be spatial but at the same time can simply be the description of a state of mind, a sense of connectedness, which does not necessarily need to be formed in space, nor continue in time.

Defining a glossary, however, does not ensure the reliability of a theoretical assumption. Similarly to what has been already indicated, the first question we should address is this: is there such a thing as, say, an Italian culture zone? Or a U.S. culture zone? Our suggestion is that, yes, there is one the moment we try and make sense of the culture dynamics amongst large groups of the world’s population. This does not mean that culture zones are entirely cohesive systems opposed to other, separate but equally cohesive systems. If one thinks of languages, for example, nobody would oppose the notion of the existence of such thing as the Italian language and, attached to that, the notion of groups of people learning and using that language as their primary tool for communication. At the same time, this is far from saying that Italian is the one and only language in areas – such as Italy or the Canton Ticino – where it is spoken by the majority of the local population. Equally, along the chronological axis, any parallel between speech community and national community needs to be used with extreme caution, if only because a small minority of what we call the Italian population could confidently use Italian at the time of Italy’s political unification in 1861. A culture

¹¹ The Oxford English Dictionary records it as a 2002 addition defined as: “*colloq.* (orig. *U.S. Sport*). A state of perfect concentration leading to optimum mental or physical performance. Chiefly with *the*, esp. in ***in the zone***.” Its recorded usage moves from sport (1976) to addressing generically a state of mind (1990).

zone, in other words, is a working assumption which allows us to describe and compare different cultural phenomena. The size of the group forming a specific culture zone is entirely open to our choice, from an individual to, as we said before, the entire human population on planet Earth. As to how we define a culture zone, the simplest answer is that its content is defined by sets of cultural traits which are shared (accepting a certain degree of variation), and its borders are detected when different traits alert us to the presence of a different culture zone.

Going back to our case studies, our interest in cultural relations between Italy and the USA has brought us to assume the existence of an Italian and a U.S. culture zone. Our decision to remain at the level of “national” zones is related to the objective of our analysis; it is not the product of an outdated attempt to impose a nineteenth century quasi-imperialistic notion of nationhood. Indeed, the elasticity of the concept of culture zone would easily allow us to adjust to any other level of analysis we might want to adopt. In other words we can zoom in or out of a national level.

The possibility of envisaging the interaction of different culture zones within the same model should allow us to address the complexity and heterogeneity of each given situation. In the case of the journey of pizza, one can easily argue that we should be able to scale back to a regional level since pizza is a product which saw its initial establishment in a particular area of Southern Italy: Naples. Indeed, the journey from Italy to the USA which we outlined could easily be opened up to a parallel journey of pizza along the Italian peninsula: from Naples to the rest of Italy, registering the existence of related local dishes such as the Sicilian *sfinzione*, Romagna’s *piadina*, or the Genoese *focaccia*. And also our target country, the USA, could easily be unpacked to allow a study of the regional/local journeys of pizza, intersecting the area of dense Italian-immigrant population and then moving out of any Italian-related dimension. At the same time, our model should also be able to leave the space to indicate at least the existence of other, parallel journeys embarked upon by our chosen cultural object.

More complex but equally instructive would be an adjustment in our history of the western film genre. Apart from the local vs national level (which would put Turin at the centre of our study, in the early years of cinema, and then Rome in the post-WWII years), a fruitful adjustment would involve the presence of a European culture zone in relation to the creation of narratives of the Wild West. For instance, existing research suggests that the Italian reproduction of western films in the early years of the twentieth century was very close to that of other European nations, especially France, and lacked the historical and epic dimension of early U.S. western. With regard to the Spaghetti Western, there is also the equally important story of the return-influence which this sub-genre had on U.S. cinema and the way it entered other national cultures.

In linguistics, there are other specificities which need to be taken into consideration. The first concerns the question of how we cope with different varieties of the same language. Structural approaches to language have identified different levels of regularity: some regularities constitute the structural core of a language, as defined by the fundamental and often quite abstract features of its functioning; other regularities are instead more peripheral and vary according to the social or geographic origin of the speakers, or to the different

style of expression, level of formality, particular topic and communicative situation.¹² What makes these linguistic premises particularly compelling is that they are also shared outside the structuralist tradition, for instance by an original and influential Marxist thinker such as Antonio Gramsci. Acutely aware of the irreducible role of diversity and heterogeneity, Gramsci recognised that:

At the limit it could be said that every speaking being has a personal language of his (or her) own, that is his own particular way of thinking and feeling. Culture, at its various levels, unifies in a series of strata, to the extent that they come into contact with each other, a greater or lesser number of individuals who understand each other's mode of expression in differing degrees, etc. It is these historico-social distinctions and differences which are reflected in common language [...] (Notebook 10II, §44).¹³

This warns us once again against the risk of excessive simplification. With regard to our linguistic case study, for example, one could raise the objection that *testa d'uovo* is an expression which belongs to a special variety of Italian: given its journalistic use and the fairly sophisticated subject-matter it refers to, one could envisage its belonging to a smaller community of speakers with relatively high levels of education.

Another issue concerns the potential difficulty in distinguishing between Replica and Invention. Establishing a clear chronological separation between the adoption of “foreign” features or items and their adaptation to properties of the receiving language is often impossible. Linguistic contact, moreover, very rarely leads to the exact reproduction, in the borrowing language, of a model from the source language (an outcome that some scholars even deny in principle). For instance, even loanwords which are often mentioned as non-adapted Anglicisms, and which certainly look like non-adapted Anglicisms in writing, have in fact been adapted to Italian phonology to a lesser or greater degree. Witness the substitution of the alien sound [ʌ], in the word *pub*, by a sound which is part of the Italian phonological inventory (normally *p[a]b* in Italian). Even in the case of *egghead* there is arguably an element of invention in what would appear to be mere replication, as we can see if we compare the original pronunciation [ˈɛɡ, hɛd] with the most likely Italian pronunciations, [ˈɛɡɡed] [ɛɡˈɡɛd]. In other words, the adoption and adaptation of items or patterns from a source language are often interwoven, simultaneous processes.¹⁴ Therefore, our model will have to be flexible enough to allow for the ad-hoc conflation of some of its components, namely by neutralizing the distinction between replica and invention in certain cases.

Some case-specific adjustments are also required. Most etymological dictionaries and other specialist sources agree that certain words and expressions have appeared in Italian under the influence of U.S. models. Examples, amongst many others, include *proibizionismo*, *boss*, *gangster*, *cowboy*, *pellerossa*, *station wagon*, *supermercato* and *caccia alle streghe*.¹⁵ Although their remote origin may lie in other languages, it is fair to say that those

¹² See the groundbreaking notions of “patterns of variation” and “ordered heterogeneity” developed in variationist sociolinguistics, mainly in the wake of Weinrich, Labov and Herzog 1968.

¹³ Gramsci was also well aware of the need to consider the interaction of linguistic systems: for instance a “national language cannot be imagined outside the frame of other languages that exert an influence on it through innumerable channels which are often difficult to control. (Who can control the linguistic innovations introduced by returning emigrants, travellers, readers of foreign newspapers and languages, translators, etc.?)” (Notebook 29, §2).

¹⁴ See Vanelli and Renzi 2002 for an illuminating example of adoption/adaptation at the level of syntax.

¹⁵ See Klajn (1972), Rando (1987) and Zancani (1995).

words and expressions entered Italian from U.S. English, and in some cases it is possible to distinguish between the first instances of transfer and the subsequent adoption by the Italian-speaking community at large. However, in many other cases we do not have sufficient linguistic or historical clues allowing us to indicate U.S. English as the source of borrowing. Given that it is not always possible to distinguish between the linguistic influence of the USA, and that of Britain and other English-speaking countries, the modelling of our linguistic case study should therefore place the U.S. zone within a larger “Anglophone culture zone” (similarly to what happens in concentric models of “World Englishes”, initially proposed by Kachru 1992 and subsequently refined by several authors).

If we then move from the “bricks” of language to the architectural patterns used in combining those bricks – according to a metaphor that linguists commonly use in order to foreground the grammatical structure of a language, as opposed to its vocabulary – we encounter the need for further adjustments to our model. See for example the acceptance of consonants in word-final position, which has often been attributed to the influence of English. Traditionally, Italian imposed particular constraints: only single post-vocalic /r/, /l/, /m/ or /n/ could occur in this position,¹⁶ and only in poetry was the deletion of final vowels (as in *amor* for *amore*) possible at the end of a sentence or before a pause.¹⁷ In studying the factors that have been favouring the abandonment of these constraints, however, it is virtually impossible to separate the twentieth-century influence of English from other linguistic and cultural dynamics which have been operating over longer periods of time. For instance, some scholars have focused on the long-standing presence of Latinisms such as *gratis* or *curriculum* in the Italian lexicon, and on the phonological impact of northern Italian dialects in which word-final consonants are subject to less restrictive constraints.¹⁸ Others have also looked at the role of lexical borrowing from French and other languages, at least since the late eighteenth-century: previously the only European language of great cultural prestige that did not easily tolerate word-final consonants, Italian has therefore internationalized itself, not only by absorbing foreign words but also transforming its own phonological structure.¹⁹ Hence, in trying to visualise this case of contact-induced phonological change, our model should be able to indicate the convergent action of different sources in the process of cultural change.

Finally, and going back to more general issues, adopting the notion of culture zone gives us the possibility of specifying the ambit within which our analysis of cultural change is taking place. We can also simplify our model, give more emphasis to the cultural object being transferred, and adapt it to the multi-level dimension implicit in culture dynamics. In particular, we might be tempted to enhance the flexibility of our model by prioritizing the Cultural Object as the tangible sign of cultural contact, to the point of allowing for the identification of the Cultural Agent and Cultural Pro-Agent to remain implicit or be dropped altogether. This move, however, would probably be hazardous. If it is to explain how culture zones enter into contact and influence each other, our theory needs to refer to the acts of historically located human beings who transferred, replicated and innovated items across different culture zones (even if the identity of these

¹⁶ As already noticed by Leon Battista Alberti in the fifteenth century, with only minimal discrepancies between his account and modern phonological descriptions.

¹⁷ As Arrigo Castellani vigorously pointed out in his purist attacks on English (see esp. “Morbus anglicus”).

¹⁸ See esp. Lepschy and Lepschy (1999).

¹⁹ See Muljačić (1972, 100-103) and Klajn (1972, 156-158).

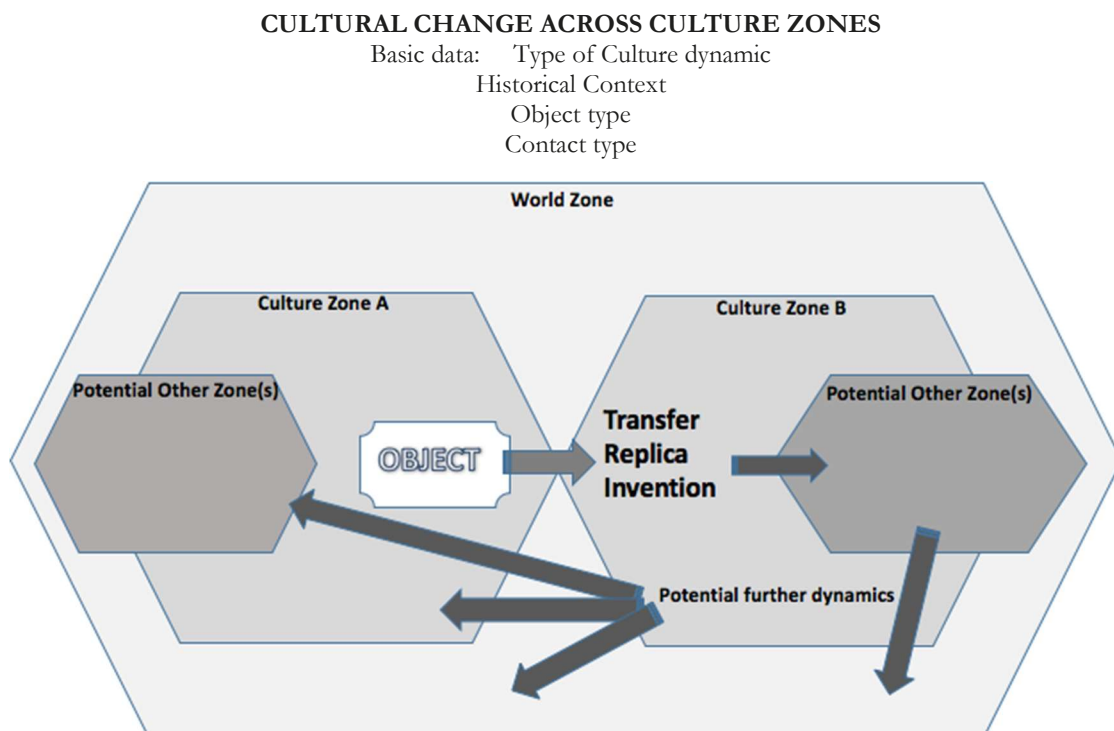
individuals may not always be recoverable). This is a point where the critique of structural approaches has been accurate: through inheriting some aspects of nineteenth-century organicism, much of twentieth-century structuralism tended to turn languages and cultures into abstract entities capable of functioning (synchronically) and developing (diachronically) according to purely immanent rules, independent of the needs, goals and constraints of human agency. This reification and hypostatization has been persuasively rejected; indeed, both historical and contact linguists are nowadays keen to emphasise that languages do not change, but people change them through their actions²⁰.

6. Towards a Dynamic Model

Following our set of critical considerations, let us now go back to our three case studies. Using the concept of “culture zone”, the challenge is now to see if it is possible to inscribe in this dimension the various exceptions to our first, linear model. Our choice of a two-dimensional graphic representation allows for an easier visualisation of the process (which would appear even clearer in colour).

The actual sequence of the process is suggested by the different grades of grey, moving from the white of the Object box towards darker shades suggesting various developments of the process. The presence of a “World Zone” and “Potential Other Zone(s)” has been introduced to allow the possibility of scaling the model to bigger or smaller entities which might or might not be part of an already defined zone.

A generic model would therefore look as follows:



²⁰ See for instance Croft (2000, 4).

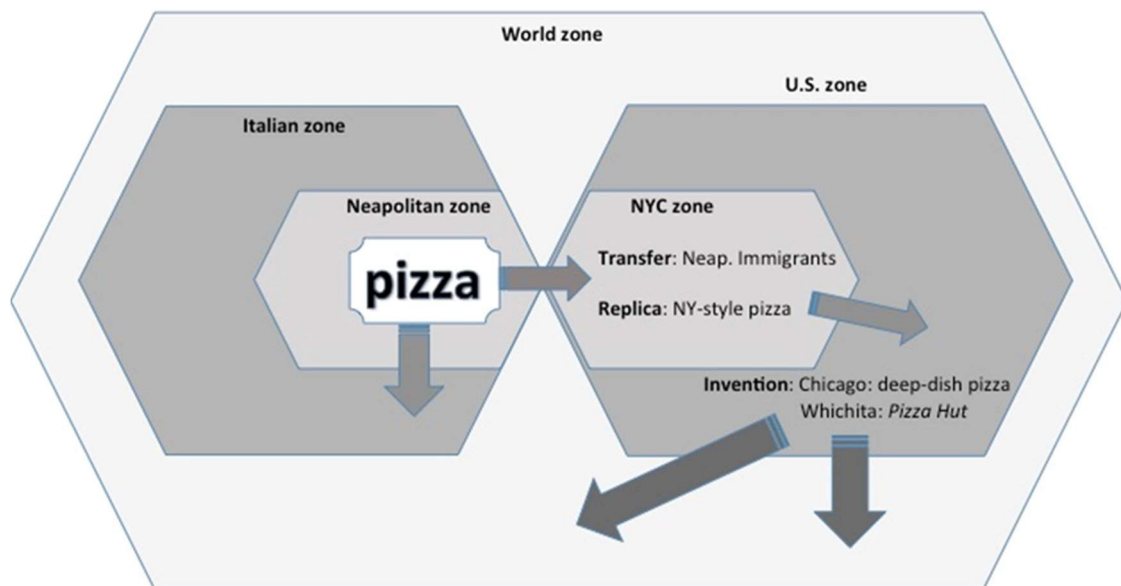
If we now return to the first of our case studies, this is how the journey of pizza could be displayed:

Culture dynamic 1: *Pizza from Italy to the USA and the World*

Historical Context: C20th Italy and USA

Object type: Food

Contact type: Trade



The visualization based on culture zones allows a very clear display of the “journey of pizza” from its origin in Naples all the way to its industrial-scale spread all over the world which took place after, and as a consequence of, the food dish being adopted and developed in the USA: “global pizza”, in other words, came to the world after it became an industry in the USA.

Regarding our second case study, what the new model should be able to account for is not just the development of the Western genre once it reached Europe, and Italy in particular, but also give a sense of further step of the journey. As we anticipated, the Spaghetti Western had a great influence on further developments of the genre in the USA. In this respect, our visualisation allows us once again to point at the following steps of this process. This can take different directions but for the sake of simplicity we have concentrated on two. The first one concerns the way in which a U.S. director, possibly the most influential of his generation, Quentin Tarantino, has responded to the impact of Italian westerns on his imagination. In the last decade, Tarantino has written and shot two films which can easily be defined as post-Spaghetti western movies: *Django Unchained* (2012), a clear homage to Corbucci’s own *Django* of 1966, and *The Hateful Eight* (2015), whose music score was composed by Spaghetti Western’s composer *par excellence*, Ennio Morricone. Once should add to this a third movie, *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) which Tarantino repeatedly described as a Spaghetti Western set in WWII: not surprisingly a number of Morricone’s pieces feature in

the music score, plus the official trailer began with a clear homage to Sergio Leone with the words “Once Upon a Time in Nazi-Occupied France”.²¹

On a different front, our model will also signal one of the various other forms of influence of Spaghetti Westerns in other parts of the world. The Italian sub-genre interwove with the local culture of countries as different as Japan and Jamaica. In the case of the latter, Jamaican popular culture absorbed Spaghetti Western to the point that its most popular form of local culture, reggae music, is closely entangled with it. Not only it is reflected in the names of band members and song titles of reggae music makers, it also features prominently in the film which launched reggae music on the world stage, Perry Henzel’s *The Harder They Come* (1972), featuring reggae music’s then leading star, Jimmy Cliff (see Campbell, 2015).

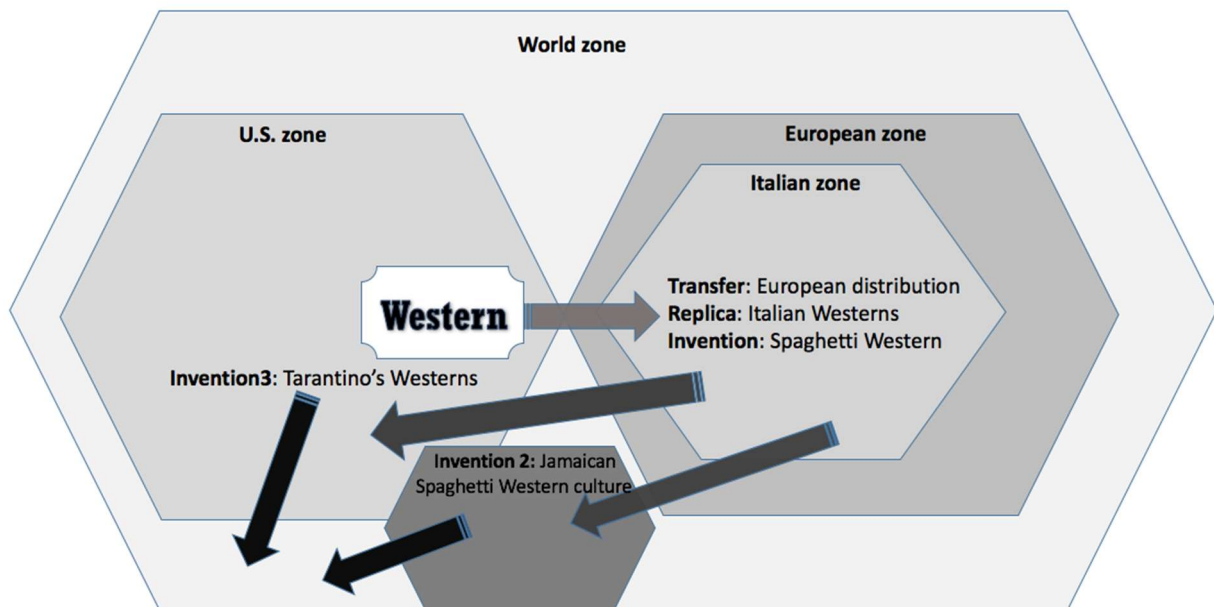
In this case our modelling allows to visualise various stages of cultural change:

Culture dynamic 2: *The Western film genre between the USA and Italy, and beyond*

Historical Context: C20th Italy and USA

Object type: Narrative genre

Contact type: Entertainment



If we now turn to our third example, this is how we can represent the emergence of Italian *testa d'uovo*:

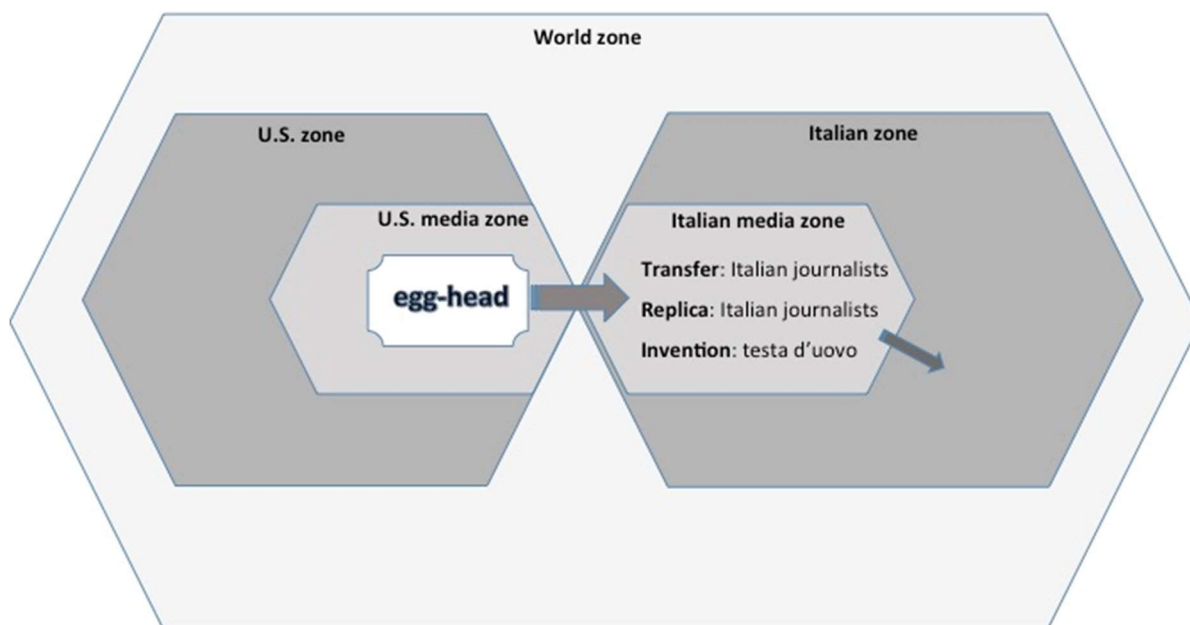
²¹ See for example Mary Ann McDonald Carolan (2014). One could dwell on Tarantino’s Italian origin but it would be a debatable move, given that he had almost no relationship with his father, who was already a third-generation immigrant. For an interview in which Tarantino dwells on his debt to Italian Spaghetti Westerns see: Charles McGrath, ‘Quentin’s World’, *The New York Times*, 19 December 2012; available online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/23/movies/how-quentin-tarantino-concocted-a-genre-of-his-own.html> (last accessed 28 October 2017).

Culture dynamic 3: From *egghead* to *testa d'uovo*

Historical background: The 20th century

Object type: Linguistic expression (lexical borrowing)

Contact type: 'Virtual' linguistic contact



The expression *testa d'uovo* can be traced back to the model of U.S. English *egghead* thanks to detailed philological and historical evidence. While in this respect *testa d'uovo* is an exceptionally simple and straightforward example, one could argue that this expression has not become a permanent component of the Italian language as used and recognised by the Italian-speaking community at large. This is because *testa d'uovo* has not extended very far outside of the language of Italian media and perhaps politics, as suggested by the small size of the arrow going from the "Italian media zone" into the "Italian zone".

Conclusion

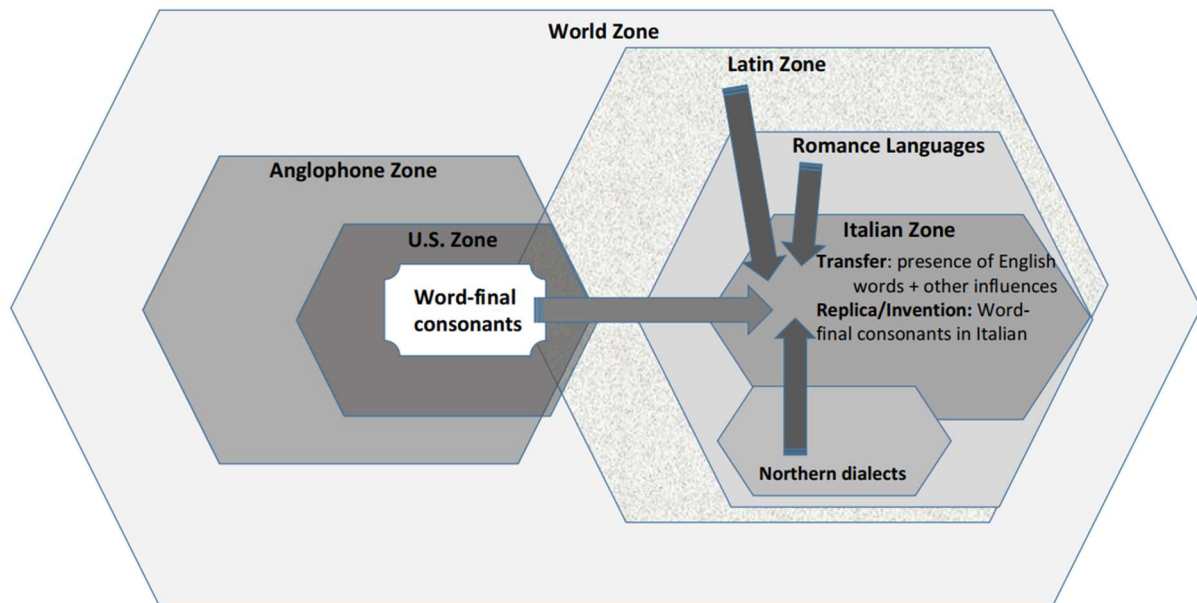
The Culture Dynamic model seem to offer a fairly flexible and visually useful tool in order to give shape to the process of cultural change in very different fields of knowledge. However, when problematizing our initial model, we mentioned the linguistic case of the word-final consonants as requiring a specific modification in order to reflect the convergence of more than one influence. In order to bring this into our model we need to conceive of the Potential Other Zone(s) as taking the role not just of Pro-Agent, as we envisaged, but also that of Agent, that is, of being an additional cause for a particular cultural change. In the case of the word-final consonants, this is how our modified model could visual the process:

Culture dynamic 4: Word-final consonants

Historical background: The 20th century

Object type: Phonological feature

Contact type: 'Virtual' linguistic contact



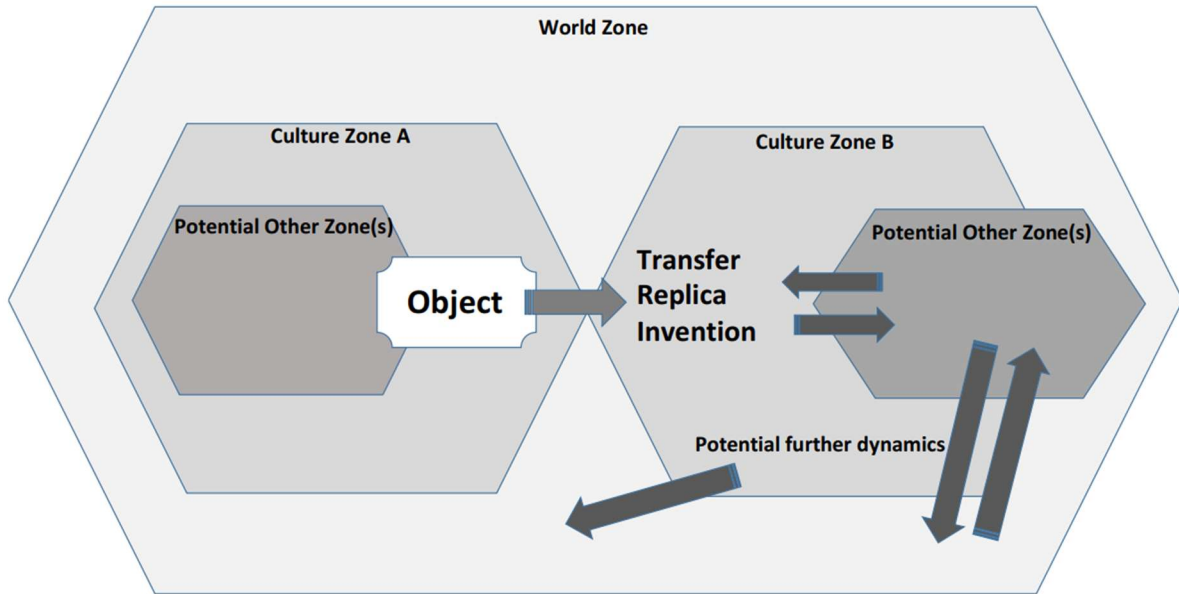
This visualisation has the benefit of clearly showing the convergence of different agents on the Italian language zone. It also shows how the borrowed feature has been innovated. Word-final consonants are currently combined with marked lexical items, appearing for instance in acronyms pronounced as single words (such as FIAT ['fiat]), and especially in words of foreign origin, but in the core stratum of the lexicon word-final consonants are prohibited (Krämer 2009, 138).²² Italian speakers have adopted the feature but restricting it to marked items – and in this sense they have innovated it in comparison with English (and other languages) where word-final consonants are not subject to this restriction.

This brings us to final definition of our model as follows:

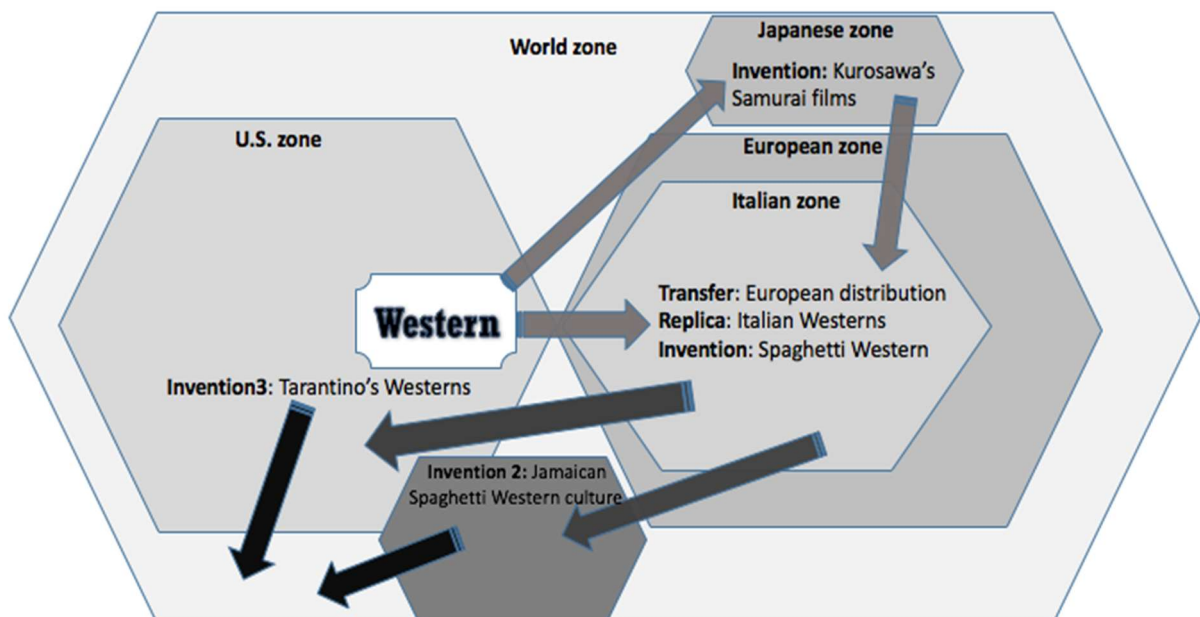
²² The identification of “restrictions” or “prohibitions” is based on linguists’ observation of what speakers do, and should not be confused with prescriptive statements about what they *should* do.

CULTURE DYNAMIC MODEL

Basic data: Type of Culture dynamic
 Historical Context
 Object type
 Contact type



Questions of space do not allow us to bring in other examples but this final fine-tuning of the model seems useful in the three case studies already expanded upon. In the case of the Western film genre, for instance, we would now be in the position of showing other influences on Sergio Leone’s rewriting of the U.S. Western. Critics have long debated Leone’s use of Akira Kurosawa’s films – *Yojimbo* (1961) in primis – as a clear source of influence (Martinez, 2009). Moreover, the Japanese director was himself greatly influenced by the early Western film. Hence our model could present this as follows:



Our Culture Dynamic model seems now flexible enough to be able to adapt to different processes and reflect the heterogeneity of their possible sources.

Like all models, it is economical hence open to the critique of being reductive or mechanistic. However, its flexibility allows for further fine-tuning. For example, in section 2 we warned that the model was not going to try to distinguish – even less so explain – the difference between cultural change accompanied – or unaccompanied – by human mobility. This does not mean that we do not think this possible, or that the model cannot prove a useful tool for the discussion of such an important aspect. The easiest way forward could be to colour-code these two processes differently (or use different symbols) and then, once a substantial number of case studies have been modelled, study whether the “journey” of those two types of cultural change differ and reveal constants within each field. For example, one might guess that processes of cultural change associated with human mobility are more likely to show a journey which is geographically easier to map since it follows the movements of migrants. The role of the pro-agent is also different in the fact that his/her/their prestige within the destination community can greatly affect the speed with which a cultural object is absorbed, leading to differential speeds in cultural change. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century Italian migrants in the USA, for instance, were not perceived as carriers of a prestigious culture. At the other end of the spectrum, U.S. culture, when arriving in Italy in the second half of the 20th century, benefitted from an enthusiastic embrace by a large part of the population. Through the use of our model, and through its development, we might be able to determine any patterns and constants in these processes.

Another issue which we plan to tackle in a future development of our model is that of the degree of “foreignness” with which a new cultural object is (consciously or unconsciously) perceived at different chronological stages. This could be addressed through the notion of “markedness” as developed in linguistics. When does a foreign cultural object stop being treated as such? In the case of pizza, for example, one would have to ask when this Italian food dish began to be perceived by non-Italy-related U.S. citizens as belonging to their traditional diet. How foreign was Chicago’s deep-dish pizza?

For the time being, the immediate challenge is to verify whether the model can cope with a whole range of cases of cultural change taken from other fields, different from the three we have explored here. If it does, it will fulfil our aim of providing a theoretical platform capable of being shared in multi-disciplinary research and dialogue. We hope that its publication in this form will also prompt a constructive, multi-disciplinary criticism which will enrich and spur the creation of a better working model.

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