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An Italian Crime Series in English. The Dubbing and Subtitling of *Suburra*

Abstract

In recent years, the European AVT landscape has changed dramatically, as a result of technological innovations that have made it possible for viewers to select the language version they prefer (dubbed or subtitled) when watching audiovisual products on TV or on web-based streaming services. This has led to greater demand for subtitles in dubbing countries and increasing curiosity for dubbing in subtitling countries. The present paper presents a small-scale experiment on the reception of the Italian crime TV series *Suburra* in an English dubbed and a subtitled version. A questionnaire was developed in order to elicit information from 19 subjects on both their comprehension and enjoyment of 4 clips taken from the series. Although a preference for the subtitled version has emerged in our results, the English dubbed version was appreciated for its quality, for allowing viewers more time to watch the images and for providing an ‘easier’, more relaxed viewing mode. This small-scale case study seems to indicate that there might be a niche in the English-speaking audiovisual market for dubbed foreign language TV series.

1. Introduction

The traditional distinction between subtitling and dubbing countries in Europe, often taken for granted in the audiovisual translation (AVT) literature, has always been relatively inaccurate. Firstly, this clear-cut separation does not take into account the voice-over tradition of eastern European countries (Matamala et al. 2017); secondly, the two modes have always co-existed, even in the countries that can be placed squarely in the ‘subtitling’ or ‘dubbing’ box.¹

¹ For example, cartoons for children have always been dubbed or voiced-over in Scandinavian countries. Similarly, a dubbing country like Italy has always used voice-

Preference for one mode of audiovisual translation is primarily a matter of habit (Antonini and Chiaro 2009), but habits can change over time. In the 2006 Eurobarometer *Special survey on languages in Europe*, 37% of EU citizens declared a preference for subtitled films and TV programmes over dubbed ones, but in the 2012 edition the percentage for subtitling had gone up to 44% (with higher percentages in specific groups, i.e. 55% among 15-24-year-olds and 56% among better-educated people). Moreover, there is considerable variation from one country to another: in 2006 27% of Italian viewers claimed they preferred subtitles vs. 48% of UK viewers; in 2012 the percentages were 36% in Italy and 56% in the UK.² In other words, although in 2012 dubbing was still preferred by the majority of EU citizens, subtitling had gained ground: it will be interesting to see what happens when the survey is repeated.

It is fair to say that in recent years subtitling has become more popular largely as a result of technological innovations that have revolutionised the audiovisual landscape. It all began with DVDs and satellite TV channels, which made it possible to choose from among multiple audio-tracks and subtitled versions. The trend has now become even more marked with the development of web-based subscription services such as Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime and so on, which have changed the way viewers consume audiovisual products. On-demand viewing is gradually supplanting appointment viewing and often results in 'binge watching' (i.e. watching several episodes one after the other). In addition, the multiplication of technological devices means that viewers are afforded more freedom in terms of how they decide to watch films and TV series: from TV sets to desk-top PCs, laptops, tablets and even mobile phones.

Netflix, HBO Go, other streaming services and even traditional channels have also started to rely more and more on subtitling to ensure that the international distribution of their content is not delayed by the time required to produce the translations [for

over for TV interviews and documentaries, and a few cinema theatres in big cities screen subtitled films.

² The Eurobarometer survey is based on viewers' self-reported preferences, but does not include data on actual viewing choices.

dubbing]. Even in traditional dubbing countries, the industry has tried subtitling as an option to release audiovisual content at the same time or shortly after its original broadcast (Orrego-Carmona 2018: 329)

Netflix, in particular, seems to be willing to experiment with different language versions in the countries where it is present. An interesting example is the Italian crime TV series *Suburra*, produced by Netflix in 2017 and recently launched on the platform in several language versions, including with English subtitles and, interestingly, English dubbed dialogues.³ As dubbing into English is by no means common in the AVT landscape of English-speaking countries, the availability of *Suburra* in a double version is the main reason for carrying out the present study. This paper describes a small-scale experiment on the reception of the dubbed and subtitled versions of the series, in an attempt to determine not only which one is better understood by viewers, but also which one is enjoyed the most. It begins with a brief overview of the audiovisual translation landscape in the UK and the US and of the main reception studies in AVT (Section 2); then, our methodology is described, including subjects, experimental materials and procedures (Section 3). The main results obtained in the experiment are discussed in Section 4 and, finally, some conclusions are presented in Section 5.

2. AVT and reception studies: an overview

Before presenting our study, it is useful to provide some background context on the audiovisual market in English-speaking countries and on the main reception studies which have informed our approach.

2.1 AVT in English-speaking countries

³ This also applies to the German series *Dark* (Baran bo Odar and Jantje Friese) and the Spanish series *Las chicas del cable* (Teresa Fernández-Valdés) and *La casa de papel* (Álex Pina), all released in 2017.

In the US and the UK a large proportion of the market is taken up by English-language productions, which do not require any kind of translation: “[...] while the UK is the chief importer of American programmes, unlike non-English speaking countries, these products require no linguistic negotiation and are thus cheaper by default as they are purchased ‘ready-for-use’” (Antonini and Chiaro 2009: 98). Foreign language imports have always been a niche market: according to the *Film at the cinema* report published by the British Film Institute (BFI, 2018), 46% of 2017 film releases in the UK were English-language films that claimed 58% of box office takings, whereas the remaining 54% only claimed 5% of the box office. However, over the last 10 years there has been a steady increase in the number of foreign language films made available in UK cinemas, with 349 being distributed in 2017:

Foreign language films in particular have seen increases and whilst they continue to deliver a very small share of total box office revenues, there is evidence that there is a greater appetite amongst a more ethnically diverse UK population for a wider range of films not made in the English language. (BFI 2018: 23)

Today almost all foreign language films are released with English subtitles, but historically this has not always been the norm. In a study on the retranslations of Federico Fellini’s films, Raffi (2017, 204) has shown that Neorealist art-house films were generally distributed in UK cinemas with English subtitles “to preserve the authentic realism of these films”, but this was not necessarily the case for all Italian films: “[...] when an Italian art films had a more commercial vein, it was exclusively distributed with English dubbing” (Ibid.). When films could potentially appeal to both film buffs and mass audiences, they were distributed in both versions in different outlets.

By contrast, during the same period (1950s-1970s), in the US quite a few Italian films (e.g. spaghetti western movies) were dubbed: “American distributors preferred to have an increasing number of Italian films dubbed into English in order to satisfy the internal demand and be suitable for

American audiences in big cinema halls” (Raffi 2017, 205). Alongside this practice, there was also the niche market of ‘art cinema’, i.e. highbrow films with English subtitles (Zanotti, 2018). After the 1970s, the number of foreign language films arriving in the US declined sharply, as a result of protectionist measures: “With foreign-language films being squeezed out of the US market, American audiences were less and less exposed to translated films and therefore less ready to accept them” (Zanotti 2018, 143). Thus, until the beginning of the new millennium, the market for foreign films remained very small in the US, with the notable exception of Spanish-language productions aimed at the many Spanish-speaking residents. In recent years there has been growing interest in films from other cultures, such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 2000) and *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998), distributed with subtitles (Zanotti, 2018). A notable exception to the trend was Roberto Benigni’s *Pinocchio* (2002), distributed in the US in a dubbed version with the voices of famous American and British actors, including Glenn Close, John Cleese, David Suchet and others (Caracciolo, 2008). Therefore, it is fair to conclude that today in English-speaking countries foreign language productions are mostly released with English subtitles, and dubbing is not a very common practice in cinemas.

Over the last few years, however, there have been interesting developments on television and on the Web, where the availability of foreign language productions has increased. In the UK, interest for subtitled foreign language products may be said to have been sparked by the Scandinavian noir series broadcast by the BBC, such as *Wallander* (Henning Mankell, 2005-2013), *Forbrydelsen* (Søren Sveistrup, 2007-2012) and *Borgen* (Adam Price, 2010-2013). The trend became more and more marked with the arrival of productions from other countries, including Italy: examples include *Il commissario Montalbano* (Alberto Sironi, 1999-), *Il giovane Montalbano* (Gianluca Maria Tavarelli, 2012-), and *Il commissario De Luca* (Antonio Frazzi, 2008-), to name but a few (Wyatt, 2013). Given the popularity of these products, *Walter Presents*, a free on-demand video service specialising in world drama and comedy (with subtitles), was launched at the beginning of 2016 in the UK, in 2017 in the US and in September 2018 in Italy. Netflix and other web-based subscription services are also

contributing to making foreign language productions more popular among English-speaking audiences. Interestingly, Netflix appears to be pushing dubbing in countries where traditionally this mode of transfer has not been a popular option. For example, when the German series *Dark* (Baran bo Odar, Jantje Friese, 2017) was released, 9 viewers out of 10 actually saw the dubbed English version rather than the subtitled version:

When *Dark* was first released, some subscribers were frustrated that the series defaulted to the dubbed English language version rather than the German original. This, it turns out, was a deliberate strategy. Netflix test viewings confirmed that more people would continue watching the show if it was dubbed in their own language, even if that was not how it was originally conceived, written and filmed. (Gill, 2018)

According to Netflix sources, by May 2018 52% of viewers from English-speaking countries had chosen to watch *Suburra* in the dubbed version (Gill, 2018). Therefore, it seemed interesting to compare the reception of the two versions of *Suburra*, with English dubbed dialogues and English subtitles. The relevant literature on reception studies in AVT was consulted in order to devise a small-scale empirical study on the series.

2.2 Reception studies in AVT

In recent years there has been growing interest in reception studies in AVT, with several papers appearing in leading translation journals and the publication of the first edited collection entirely devoted to this topic (Di Giovanni and Gambier, 2018). For reasons of space it is impossible to do justice to the interesting discussion of the various methodological approaches that can be adopted to study reception in relation to specific translation modes (dubbing, subtitling, subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing, audiodescription, etc.). This section merely presents the main sources on which the empirical study described in Sections 3 and 4 is based and begins by highlighting the specific meaning of the word ‘reception’ as it is used in this paper: “[...] reception can be defined as the way/s in which

individuals and groups interact with media content, how a text is interpreted, appreciated, remembered [...]” (Di Giovanni 2018: 161).

Research has highlighted that viewers watching a dubbed or subtitled film do not watch, effectively, the same film as those of the original language version (Romero-Fresco, 2018). Romero-Fresco has been strongly promoting the idea of *accessible film-making*: by collaborating with film translators, film-makers can be made aware of the respective constraints of subtitling and dubbing and retain some degree of control over the reception of the translated versions of their films. As Matamala et al. (2017: 426) also point out, subtitling and dubbing differ greatly in terms of the audience’s viewing experiences: “[...] while dubbing audiences can concentrate their attention on the image and understand the dialogues even if they are not watching the film, subtitles split the audience’s attention, and reading the subtitles is necessary to understand the original dialogues”. This is probably the reason why most of the available studies comparing the reception of dubbed and subtitled content are focused on comprehension.

Although it is now a bit dated, it is worth mentioning Fuentes Luque’s study on translated humour (2003), in which 2 groups of Spanish-speaking and one group of English-speaking viewers watched a Marx Brothers’ film in its dubbed, subtitled and original language version. Reactions to humour in the three groups were assessed by means of a questionnaire, whose results showed that in the specific case of this film dubbing was more suitable for understanding humour.

In the first decade of the new millennium, a group of scholars based in Forlì carried out a number of studies on the perception of cultural references, humour and specific language features in dubbed and subtitled materials. Over 300 hours of dubbed television programmes were recorded in 2002, to include a wide range of genres (series, serials, sitcoms, soap operas, *telenovelas* and cartoons). Questionnaires were developed to gauge comprehension and enjoyment of the clips and were administered to different groups of viewers in the various studies. Bucaria (2005) carried out an experiment on the reception of dark humour using dubbed and subtitled excerpts from *Six Feet under* (Alan Ball, 2001-2005). Similarly, Antonini (2005) carried out a study on the reception of subtitled humour,

in which a group of 32 Italian people were shown clips from an episode of the Irish sit-com *Father Ted* (Graham Linehan and Arthur Mathews, 1995-1998). Viewers were asked to rate their appreciation of each clip in terms of its funniness and their own comprehension of the joke, pun or allusion; then they were asked to explain the humour in each scene. The study found low levels of appreciation of the comedy in question; in addition, participants' explanations of the jokes showed that comprehension levels were actually quite low, and that sometimes they had completely re-interpreted the meaning. Bucaria and Chiaro (2007) focused on the comprehension of references to American culture and on a number of features that have been found to characterise Italian *dubbese*; participants included members of the general public, screen translators and film critics and scholars. Similarly, Antonini and Chiaro (2009) focused on the 'naturalness' of dubbed dialogues in comparison with real, spontaneous spoken Italian: their subjects were Internet users who had visited a dedicated web page and therefore were self-selected. Their results showed that viewers were not always aware that certain linguistic features do not occur in spoken Italian and are merely the by-product of the dubbing process. Finally, Chiaro (2014) described a number of small-scale studies (MA theses) comparing the reception of subtitled and dubbed materials, including Roberto Benigni's stand-up sketches, Totò's comedies and visual humour involving Italian, American, British and Russian comedians: these studies showed that subtitling and dubbing can be equally effective in conveying humour, but audiences' reactions are different when watching subtitled or dubbed content.

Differences in processing have also been studied by Perego et al. (2015), who compared the effects of viewing the dubbed and subtitled version of the same film in young and older adults, by means of a dedicated questionnaire. They found no real difference between the two translation modes in terms of both comprehension and enjoyment, but subtitling seemed to have an advantage in relation to some lexical aspects (namely, the participants' ability to recognise specific words or phrases from the film). In addition, although older adults obtained lower enjoyment scores than young ones, this applied to both the dubbed and the subtitled

condition. Matamala et al. (2017) replicated the experiment on a sample of 51 BA and MA students at a university in Spain, divided into two groups: one group was shown a dubbed excerpt of a Lebanese film and the other group the subtitled version. Participants had no knowledge of Arabic, so all viewers were completely reliant on the translated version assigned to their group. Once again, the values obtained for general comprehension, visual recognition, self-reported effort and memory were similar in the two conditions, but a slight advantage in terms of enjoyment was found in the group who watched the subtitled version.

It is difficult to draw general conclusions from this brief overview, as the above studies were conducted on different audiovisual genres and in different language combinations: however, taken together, they seem to show that, despite the differences between subtitling and dubbing in terms of cognitive processing, the two modes can ensure similar levels of comprehension and enjoyment. Moreover, they are all qualitative studies in which subjects are shown dubbed and subtitled clips and are then asked to fill in a questionnaire aimed at eliciting information on their comprehension and enjoyment of the materials in question. Thus, the same approach was taken in the present empirical study.

3. The experiment: methodology and data set

This section describes the materials used, the subjects and the questionnaire that was developed. It must be stressed that the materials could not be pre-tested before the empirical study proper. This was because, although some preparatory work had been done in advance, the opportunity to carry out this study presented itself rather unexpectedly just before an Erasmus teaching mobility in a British university in February 2018. Another limit of the study presented below is that it was carried out on a very specific sample of participants, i.e. audiovisual translation students who can hardly be considered representative of general viewers. Moreover, the group was not linguistically homogeneous, in that not all the subjects were native speakers of English. These factors have been taken into account in the

analysis of results: they certainly make it difficult to generalise our findings, but it is hoped that the latter can contribute to the discussion on reception in AVT and provide ideas for future, more in-depth research.

3.1 *The series*

As was mentioned in Section 1, the material chosen for the experiment comes from *Suburra- La serie* (Giuseppe Capotondi, Andrea Molaioli and Michele Placido, 2017; English title: *Suburra – Blood on Rome*). It is a crime series based on a successful feature film with the same title (Stefano Sollima, 2015), itself an adaptation of a best-selling book (Giancarlo De Cataldo and Carlo Bonini, 2013). The series is a prequel to the film, starring many of the same actors. Its main themes are the corruption slowly consuming the Roman political world and the Vatican, and the power clashes among criminal gangs to gain control of the city. Some scenes are fairly graphic in depicting violence, drug-trafficking, prostitution and other crimes and there are quite a few references to Italian institutions, politics, culture and religion that may be difficult to understand for non-Italian audiences. In terms of language, the dialogues are an interesting mixture of standard Italian (spoken by high-ranking politicians and journalists), Roman dialect (spoken by members of criminal gangs), colloquialisms and drugs-related slang, and other languages such as Latin (during rituals in the Vatican) and Sinte Romani, the language spoken by the Romani family that makes up one of the criminal gangs competing for power.

All of the above aspects make the series quite interesting from a translational point of view. In addition, the closing credits of the two versions reveal that they were produced by different companies: the subtitles were translated by Susan Adler for Ombre Elettriche, while the dubbed English version was directed by Connie Bismuto for Laser Digital Film. A quick comparison between the two versions made it immediately obvious that there are many differences in terms of lexis, syntax and so on: this was to be expected, on account of the different constraints that guide the choices of subtitlers and dubbing translators. Moreover, dubbing

translators' copyright is protected under Italian law, which means that it is cheaper to produce brand new subtitles than to adapt an existing translation.⁴

In order to create the questionnaire, 4 short clips (ranging from 1 minute to 90 seconds) were chosen to test comprehension and enjoyment. The clips were edited from the first episode of the series and they all introduce various characters for the first time: thus, viewers of the dubbed and subtitled versions are placed in the same situation as the original viewers, who have not met these characters before. Although the clips are short, there is sufficient context in each to ensure comprehension on first viewing. Clip 1 introduces Aureliano Adami, the son of a gang boss. This clip was chosen because all the characters speak Roman dialect, not standard Italian; moreover, from a cultural point of view, it is interesting because of the presence of a typically Italian gesture. Clip 2 features the character of Gabriele, a university student who is also involved in petty drug-dealing in Roman night clubs and gyms: in the dialogue between him and a criminal there are several slang expressions and foul language. In Clip 3 the protagonist is Mr Cinaglia, a long-serving city councillor, who has a conversation with a shadowy character, Mr Finucci: here the main difficulties are the references to Italian institutions and the subtle hints at political corruption. Finally, Clip 4 introduces Samurai, a powerful criminal boss, and Manfredi, another criminal boss from a large Romani family: here the main interest lies in the ethnic and cultural differences between the two characters.

3.2 The subjects

The sample of participants was small but fairly homogeneous: 19 students divided into two groups, 9 of them attending a BA in Modern Languages and 10 attending an MA in Interpreting, Translation or Translation and

⁴ See AIDAC's notes on the audiovisual translator national contract: https://aidac.it/images/pdf/08_1.pdf.

Interpreting. At the beginning of their weekly audiovisual translation class, students filled in a pre-experiment questionnaire on their language backgrounds and film viewing habits. They then proceeded to the questionnaire proper, in which they were required to watch the *Suburra* clips and answer some questions. Both questionnaires were created in *GoogleForms* and administered in a computer lab: each student had a computer and headsets and worked independently. No explanation was given to subjects about the specific aims of the project, to avoid influencing their answers.

The sample included 6 males and 13 females; the majority of them (13) were in the 18-24 age bracket, while 4 of them were 24-30 and 2 were mature students over 30. When preparing the experimental materials, the target population was English native speakers, but the sample actually turned out to be varied in terms of nationality and language background, as is often the case in UK academic settings: 7 British citizens, 1 citizen with dual Brazilian/British nationality, 2 Chinese, 2 Norwegians, 2 Spaniards, 2 Brazilians, 1 Greek, 1 German and 1 Italian. It is worth noticing that 4 students (from Spain, Italy and Germany) had familiarity with dubbing, while the others had been less exposed to this translation mode. All the students declared knowledge of another two or three foreign languages, at varying levels of proficiency. In addition, almost 80% of them (15 out of 19) had spent some time living abroad. To sum up, less than half of our sample were native speakers of English (the target language of the chosen audiovisual material), and two knew Italian (the source language), i.e. an Italian native speaker who had lived in the UK for over 5 years, and a Spanish native speaker who declared an A1 level of proficiency (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages - CEFR). The analysis tries to take into account these aspects, by looking at emerging patterns in the whole group and in the sub-group of native speakers of English considered separately (see Section 4).

The second section of the pre-experiment questionnaire was focused on the subjects' film viewing habits: as they were attending an AVT module, a high level of interest in films could be expected. 84% of our participants declared going to the cinema less than once a month, while the remaining 3

subjects reported going even less often, namely twice a year, once a year, and once every couple of years, respectively. As regards their film choices, the majority reported watching a bit of everything (68%), while 32% preferred blockbusters over art-house films; moreover, 53% declared a preference for US films, 32% for films from English-speaking countries in general, and the remaining 3 subjects answered European films, US and Spanish films and an idiosyncratic mixture of films from the US, France, Germany and Bollywood, respectively.

As regards the subjects' TV viewing habits, 89.5% of them stated they watched TV, while 2 subjects answered very little TV and no TV at all, respectively. The majority of TV viewers (56%) reported watching it for up to a couple of hours every day, 22% for 2-4 hours a day, while the rest (4 subjects) watched it much less frequently. In relation to their choice of programmes, half of the sample chose series available through on-demand subscription services like Netflix, 22% online via streaming (not necessarily via authorised platforms), 17% on both digital TV and Netflix, and 2 subjects reported using a mixture of traditional TV and Netflix or satellite TV channels and Netflix. 37% of the participants expressed a preference for US series, 26% for English-language series in general, and the rest reported a mixture of audiovisual products related to the foreign languages they study (e.g. from Canada, France and Spain, etc.).

The final questions were focused specifically on TV series in languages other than English and subjects' preferences of translation modes. 32% of subjects claimed to watch foreign language series frequently, 42% sometimes, 16% not very often and 10% never. When watching foreign language series, 44% of subjects chose the original version with English subtitles, while 16% opted for intralingual subtitles (i.e. in the same language as the dialogues), and 30% the original language version with no subtitles. No one selected English dubbing among the available answers.⁵

Given the average age of our sample, these results are hardly surprising, since among the younger generations there is a marked tendency to watch

⁵ It could be hypothesised that this is because the English dubbed version is not often available, or perhaps because our subjects were not used to it. No further explanation was given by the subjects.

audiovisual products on the web, as was noted by Matamala et al. (2017: 434-435):

Accessing online series with subtitles, often produced by fans (fansubbing) may be a more frequent action than going to the cinema to watch a dubbed film or turning on the television to watch a dubbed movie being broadcast. Both digital television and DVDs allow viewers to select between professional dubbing and professional subtitling. Even in areas where dubbing is still predominant, as in the cinema, new technological possibilities such as apps on portable devices (for instance, MovieReading) may open the door to wider choices.

To sum up, the pre-experiment questionnaire has shown that our subjects are primarily exposed to AVT products via TV and streaming services, whereas cinema-going is not so popular; in addition, there is a clear preference for English-speaking products and, when watching products in foreign languages, the preferred translation mode is interlingual subtitling.

3.3 The questionnaire

The questionnaire had a twofold objective: to identify which version (dubbed or subtitled) was better understood and which one was considered the most enjoyable. In each of the 4 sections, subjects watched a clip shown in both versions, subtitled and dubbed. In order to counteract the comprehension advantage deriving from second viewing, care was taken to alternate between showing the subtitled clip first and then the dubbed clip and vice versa (in other words, Clip 1 was shown with English subtitles first and then in English dubbing, while for Clip 2 the order was reversed, and so on).⁶ Each clip included a specific translational difficulty (see Section 4). After watching the first version of each clip, subjects were required to self-rate their comprehension on a 1- to 5-point Lickert scale (insufficient,

⁶ A possible variation consists in dividing the group into two sub-groups and alternating the order of the clips, so that sub-group A watches the subtitled version of Clip 1 first, and group B watches the dubbed version; the order is swapped with Clip 2, and so on. It is worth considering this option if the experiment is replicated in the future.

limited, adequate, good, very good) and to answer an open question that actually tested their comprehension. This was followed by a second question focused on a linguistic or cultural aspect. Then, subjects were presented with the other version of the same clip, asked to rate their comprehension and to answer a comprehension question and a linguistically-oriented question, as above. Finally, they were asked to indicate which of the two versions of the clip (subtitled or dubbed) they understood better and why, and which version they enjoyed the most and why. They were given about an hour to fill in all the sections.

Although the researcher was present during the experiment, no subject needed technical help or asked for clarifications. As the questionnaire had stimulated the students' curiosity, at the end of the class there was a short discussion on subtitling and dubbing: most of the questions focused on dubbing and its technical constraints, a topic that was less well-known to them.

4. Results: analysis

This section provides an in-depth analysis of the data collected via the questionnaire and tries to interpret trends and patterns emerging from the results.

4.1 Section 1: Aureliano

In Clip 1 Aureliano Adami is quarrelling with his father, a restaurant owner and boss of a criminal gang in Ostia, on the Roman coast. Aureliano is trying to convince his father to let him push cocaine among restaurant customers, but his father disagrees. When Aureliano is informed that a

‘gypsy’ is outside his club and is causing trouble,⁷ he immediately goes there to give him a lesson: a short fight ensues.

Participants viewed Clip 1 with English subtitles first and assessed their comprehension on a 5-point scale (see Subsection 3.3). In this case no participant chose ‘very good’, 26% (4 participants) chose good, 37% (7) adequate, 32% (6) limited and 5% (1) insufficient. The group average was 2.4 (i.e. comprehension level between ‘limited’ and ‘adequate’), but if the answers given by the 7 English native speakers are looked at separately, their average is markedly higher, standing at 3.6 (between adequate and good). Subjects were then asked to explain why Aureliano was arguing with his father: 14 participants only understood that it was a business-related issue, 3 mentioned drugs, and 2 understood there were references to his mother and family matters. Only one subject explicitly mentioned that Aureliano was suggesting drug-dealing in the family restaurant. Thus, although the scene was loosely understood, most of the details were lost on the majority of subjects.

The second question presented participants with this frame and asked students to explain the gesture:



Picture 1: what does this gesture mean?

⁷ The original word in the dialogue is ‘*zingaro*’, a derogatory term for an ethnic Romani person: this is appropriately conveyed by the English word ‘gypsy’.

6 subjects interpreted the gesture as meaning ‘stop right there’, i.e. Aureliano’s father warning his son to stop before saying something he might regret; 6 subjects explained that it expresses anger; 3 thought the father was surprised and bewildered; 2 indicated that the father felt insulted; one translated it as ‘what the f*ck’ and explained that the gesture expressed angry body language in Italian; finally, one subject could not explain it at all. Here the question was not meant to check whether subjects understood the gesture ‘correctly’, but rather to verify that the subjects were able to relate its meaning to the context and arrive at an interpretation of the subtitled scene.

Subjects were also asked the reason for the fight between Aureliano and the ‘gypsy’ character. The majority of participants inferred that Aureliano discriminates Romani people and does not want them in his club; 2 subjects answered that they were not sure. Only 3 out of 19 participants understood that the two characters belong to rival criminal gangs and that the reason for the fight was the ‘gypsy’ character’s trespassing on Aureliano’s area.

At this point in the questionnaire participants were shown the dubbed version of the same clip and assessed their comprehension as follows: 37% (7 subjects) very good, 21% (4) good, 37% (7) adequate and 5% (1) insufficient. The average comprehension level was 3.8, but it was even higher (4) among the English native speakers. Subjects were asked to explain what Aureliano does in life and this time 11 subjects understood that he is a criminal, as well as working for the family business. Some subjects specifically mentioned drug-dealing and cocaine, some mentioned the mafia and criminal gangs. However, 8 subjects still thought he simply owns a club or works for a family business of some kind and did not mention any criminal activities.

At the end of the first section, participants were asked to indicate which version of the clip they understood better and why. 63% (12 subjects) chose the English dub, 16% (3) claimed to have understood both versions equally well, 10.5% (2) preferred the Italian version with English subtitles, and 10.5% (2) stated they understood neither version very well. 12 subjects remarked that the subtitles provided for this clip were too fast and there was not enough time to read everything and take in the information.

However, when they were asked which version they enjoyed the most, only 42% (8 subjects) chose the English dubbed version, with the English subtitled version being appreciated by 37% (7); 16% (3) enjoyed them both, and 5% (1) declared they did not really enjoy either version very much. Those who preferred the English subtitled version explained that they liked to hear the original Italian voices and the acting was more ‘natural’; however, positive comments were expressed about the quality of the dubbing, which surprised a lot of participants. In the sub-group of English native speakers, the percentages obtained in relation to comprehension and enjoyment were exactly the same, with 4 subjects (57%) choosing the dubbed version, 2 subjects (29%) the subtitled version, and one subject (14%) who had no preference and liked them both.

4.2 Section 2: Gabriele

In Clip 2 viewers meet Gabriele, a university student. One night, a violent criminal brings a message from a well-known criminal boss: Gabriele has been dealing drugs in his gym without his permission and he needs to compensate him by paying 20,000 euros promptly... or else. Participants viewed the dubbed version first and assessed their comprehension as follows: 32% (6 subjects) very good, 47% (9) good, and 21% (3) adequate (no participant chose ‘limited’ or ‘insufficient’ understanding of the scene). The average comprehension level across the whole group was 3.9 (very close to ‘good’), while in the sub-group of English native speakers it was slightly higher, 4.1. In the open question that followed, participants explained that the criminal is demanding compensation money from Gabriele for pushing drugs in a club without the owner’s permission: about half of the participants focused their answer on the need to pay the money back, and half on the drug-dealing side of the situation, but their answers show that they all understood the meaning of the scene.

The second question focused on a linguistic aspect, i.e. the use of colloquialisms, idioms and taboo words in the dialogues. More specifically, they were asked to say how likely the following sentence would be in

spontaneous (non-dubbed) English: ‘What are you, fucking nuts? Jesus, kid, where’s your head?’. 5% (1 subject) answered that the sentence was very natural, 32% (6) that it was quite natural, 47% (9) natural enough; by contrast 10% (2 subjects) found it ‘not very natural’ and 5% (1) ‘unnatural’. Interestingly, none of the English native speakers found the sentence ‘unnatural’ or ‘not very natural’: their overall response was positive, ranging from 4 who found it ‘natural enough’, to 2 who stated it was ‘quite natural’ and 1 ‘very natural’.

At this point participants were shown the subtitled version of the same clip and assessed their comprehension as follows: 53% (10) very good, 42% (8) good, 5% (1) adequate. The group average was 4.5, but in the sub-group of English native speakers it was 4.6 (once again, slightly higher). Participants’ explanations of the scene demonstrated that they all (but one) understood what was going on.

Once again, the second part of the question was on a linguistic aspect, i.e. how natural the sentence ‘Whaddya thinkin’? Damn you’ (in the English subtitles) sounds. 21% (4) found it ‘natural’, another 21% (4) were prepared to concede it was ‘natural enough’, but 42% (8) said it was not very natural and 16% of participants (3) found it downright ‘unnatural’. The English native speakers were especially critical, with 57% (4) stating the sentence was not very natural and 14% (1) unnatural: only 2 subjects said that it was ‘natural enough’. Perhaps the deviant spelling adopted in the subtitles to convey dialect in writing was not considered very convincing by the subjects.

When asked to compare their comprehension of the two versions of the clip, this time 42% of participants (8) preferred the subtitled clip, while 48% (9) found the two versions equally comprehensible; only 10% (2 participants) found the dubbed version easier to understand. As regards their enjoyment, once again the subtitled version was preferred (53%, corresponding to 10 subjects), but the English dub was also appreciated (21%, 4 subjects) and almost one third of participants enjoyed them both (26%, 5 participants). Among the English native speakers, the majority (4, i.e. 57%) did not find any difference between the dubbed and the subtitled version in terms of comprehension, while 2 preferred subtitling and 1

dubbing; as regards their enjoyment of the clip, the results were perfectly balanced, with 3 subjects preferring the dubbed version, 3 preferring the subtitled version, and 1 claiming to have enjoyed them both.

4.3 Section 3: Mr Cinaglia

In Clip 3 Mr Cinaglia is approached by Mr Finucci, who gives him advice for his future political career: he suggests that Cinaglia deserves a higher position in office and suggests a chat with the mayor before the forthcoming elections. The clip was shown in Italian with English subtitles first. This clip turned out to be the least clear: 10% (2 subjects) stated their comprehension of the scene was very good, 32% (6) good, 26% (5) adequate and another 32% (6) limited. The average comprehension score in the group was 3.2, but this time it was even lower (3) in the native speaker sub-group, in which no subject reported ‘very good’ comprehension of the scene. Overall, 11 participants understood that it was suggested to Mr Cinaglia that he should go and see the mayor and his ex-wife about going for a higher position, but all the other participants gave confused answers or openly stated that the meaning of the scene was unclear.

The second question asked participants to comment on the following subtitle.



Picture 2: subtitle presented for participants' comment

Participants had to explain what they understood by ‘making it onto the party’s ticket’. Only 3 of them were able to explain it satisfactorily (i.e. being selected as a party candidate in the forthcoming elections). 10 participants only understood that Cinaglia may not get re-elected, and the other 5 participants got it entirely wrong or did not even attempt to explain the meaning.

Participants were shown the dubbed version of the clip and this time 16% (3) reported very good comprehension, 58% (11) good, and 26% (5) adequate (no participant chose limited or insufficient). The average comprehension score was 4.4, but in the English native speaker group it was lower, 3.7, with only one person reporting ‘very good comprehension’. The first question asked subjects to comment on the dubbed version of the same exchange analysed before, i.e. Mr Finucci’s sentence: ‘What I’m trying to tell you is that this time you risk not making it onto the list of candidates’. This time 14 participants understood the meaning perfectly. 4 of them, however, were still unsure what position or process was being alluded to. In the second question on the dubbed clip, subjects were asked to explain the following line uttered by Mr Finucci: ‘you should have a more important position than the one you hold now, you know, like assessor’. The reason for choosing this line was the presence of the word ‘assessor’, a transparent calque of *assessore*, used in the translation because of lip-synch constraints. Indeed, this time only 3 subjects were able to infer that a higher position was being alluded to, while the majority understood that Finucci was mocking Cinaglia. Among the English native speakers, only one understood the correct meaning, and in their explanations no subject used the word ‘councillor’ or ‘local government’ or something along those lines. One subject hypothesised that the sentence meant ‘Perhaps that he should be more on the outside, assessing what is going on’. In this case, it appears that the calque caused confusion and the translation was less than successful.

The comparison between the two versions of the clip yielded the following results: 67% of participants (12) understood the English dubbed version better, 17% (3) both versions equally well, 11% (2) did not

understand either version very well and only 5% (1 participant) preferred the English subtitles. Results in the sub-group of English native speakers were similar, with a large majority of preferences for the dubbed version (71%). Participants noted that the political references were clearer and sounded ‘more natural’ in the English dubbed dialogues, while the English subtitles were less comprehensible. The English dubbed version was also considered more enjoyable by 63% of subjects (12), while 16% (3) had no preference, another 16% (3) preferred the original version with English subtitles and 5% (1) did not really like either version. Most of the English native speakers enjoyed the English dubbed version more (4 subjects, 57%), 1 subject preferred the subtitled version, 1 liked both and 1 liked neither. Preference for the dubbed version was explained by its higher comprehensibility.

4.4. Section 4: Samurai and Manfredi

In the final clip, Samurai, a powerful criminal boss, turns up at Manfredi’s door: the latter is the head of a large Romani family also engaged in criminal activities. Samurai is there to complain about one of Manfredi’s cousins trespassing on an area controlled by Aureliano’s family (a reference to the fight outside the club in Clip 1); he is also trying to mediate and avoid a war between rival gangs. Participants watched the dubbed version first. 11% of them (2 subjects) claimed they had understood the scene very well, 50% (9) that their comprehension was good, 28% (5) adequate and 22% (4) limited.⁸ The average self-reported comprehension score was 3.2, but in the group of English native speakers it went up to 3.6. When asked to explain the scene, however, only 3 subjects made the connection with the fight they had seen in Clip 1 between Aureliano and the young ‘gypsy’: interestingly, they were all native speakers of English. All the participants correctly understood that Samurai was there as a negotiator, but some

⁸ Only 18 subjects answered the questions on Clip 4: owing to time constraints, one subject did not manage to complete the questionnaire.

linked this exchange with Gabriele and his drug-dealing business (see Clip 2).

In the second question participants were asked to explain this line uttered by Samurai: 'I get the feeling you don't speak my language. But I don't speak Sinti and I don't give a rat's ass about it'. Only 2 participants correctly identified Sinti⁹ as the language spoken by Manfredi and his family; 10 participants answered they were not sure, and the rest of them misinterpreted the line completely.

After watching the same clip in Italian with English subtitles, their comprehension levels were as follows: 27% (5 participants) very good, 55% (10) good, and 18% (3) adequate. This time the average group score and the score in the sub-group of the native speakers was the same, namely 4.1. At this point participants were asked whether the two characters shared the same language and culture: 54% answered 'no', 23% yes, 12% were unsure, 11% answered 'yes and no' and explained that they have a shared culture (Italian) but that Manfredi also has his own culture.

When comparing the two clips, the version that was better understood was the one with English subtitles for 66% (12) of participants, the English dub for 17% of them (3 subjects) and another 17% had no preference. Interestingly, some participants explained that the English dubbed version allowed them to concentrate on the extralinguistic signs in the scene and notice the cultural differences between the two characters. However, the Italian version with English subtitles was preferred by 61% of the subjects (11), with only 22% (4) preferring dubbing and 17% (3) enjoying them both. In the smaller sub-group of English native speakers, preference for the subtitled version was marked in terms of comprehension (6 subjects out of 7), slightly less so in terms of enjoyment (4 chose the subtitles, 2 the dubbing, and 1 enjoyed them equally).

⁹ The language is generally known as 'Sinte Romani', but in both the dubbed and the subtitled versions the translators used the word 'Sinti', which refers to the people.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The analysis presented in Section 4 has produced a number of interesting results. The various percentages obtained for comprehension and enjoyment levels are here presented in tables for easier reference. Firstly, Table 1 includes all the comprehension self-evaluations after viewing each clip; column 1 lists the clip versions in the order they were seen by the participants. Table 2 contains the average comprehension scores for the whole group of participants and for the sub-group of English native speakers.

Table 1. Self-rated comprehension levels after viewing the clips

	insufficient	limited	adequate	good	very good
Clip 1 sub	5%	32%	37%	26%	0
Clip 1 dub	5%	0	37%	21%	37%
Clip 2 dub	0	0	21%	47%	32%
Clip 2 sub	0	0	5%	42%	53%
Clip 3 sub	0	32%	26%	32%	10%
Clip 3 dub	0	0	26%	58%	16%
Clip 4 dub	0	22%	17%	50%	11%
Clip 4 sub	0	0	18%	55%	27%

Table 2. Average comprehension score (whole group vs. English native speakers)

	Comprehension (average score)	
	Whole group	Native speakers
Clip 1 sub	2.4	3.6
Clip 1 dub	3.8	4
Clip 2 dub	3.9	4.1
Clip 2 sub	4.5	4.6
Clip 3 sub	3.2	3
Clip 3 dub	4.4	3.7
Clip 4 dub	3.2	3.6
Clip 4 sub	4.1	4.1

Unsurprisingly, the data show a clear comprehension advantage for the mode used in the second viewing of each clip, be it subtitling or dubbing: this was expected, as it is fairly obvious that comprehension improves the second time one watches a clip. More interestingly, what emerges is that there is considerable variation in self-rated comprehension levels from one clip to the other: this is probably related to the translational difficulties each clip contained. For example, participants felt that they had not understood much of Clip 1 on first viewing (subtitled version); by contrast, their comprehension of Clip 3, which was also viewed with English subtitles for the first time, was better.

What is perhaps more interesting is that these data also show a clear comprehension advantage for dubbing on first viewing (Clip 2 and Clip 4). The answers to the open comprehension questions have shown that subjects were able to provide more accurate explanations of a scene after viewing it in a dubbed version, whereas after watching a subtitled version (Clip 1 and Clip 3) they were able to reproduce the general gist but fewer details. This may be explained by the concentration required by subtitling: as one of the participants remarked when explaining his/her preference for the dubbed version, there is '[N]o need to spend time reading (subtitles). This helps watching the actual film which aids comprehension'.

Another noteworthy result is that comprehension levels among the English native speakers were always higher than the group average, with the exception of Clip 3: while better comprehension by native speakers needs no explanation, it can be hypothesised that in the case of Clip 3 they were negatively affected (more than the speakers of other languages) by the use of the word 'assessor', which seems to suggest an advisory role. Another interesting language-related pattern that has emerged is that the native speakers of English had more tolerance for colloquial and taboo language when it was used in dubbing, whereas they were less convinced when it appeared in the subtitles (see Subsection 4.3).

At the end of every section, the questionnaire asked participants to indicate which version they had understood better and which one they had enjoyed the most. Table 3 presents all the answers grouped together for ease of comparison.

Table 3. Preferences in terms of comprehension and enjoyment

	Comprehension				Enjoyment			
	Dub	Sub	Both	Neither	Dub	Sub	Both	Neither
Clip 1	63%	10.5%	16%	10.5%	42%	37%	16%	5%
Clip 2	10%	42%	48%	0	21%	53%	26%	0
Clip 3	67%	5%	17%	11%	63%	16%	16%	5%
Clip 4	17%	66%	17%	0	22%	61%	17%	0

Unsurprisingly, for each clip the translation mode which participants felt had provided them with a more comprehensible text was also the translation mode they preferred. Moreover, once again the results are higher in both measures (comprehension and enjoyment) for the translation mode used in the second version of each clip.

However, what is perhaps more interesting is that the majority of our participants had not been exposed to dubbing before and yet they seemed to appreciate it considerably, both in terms of comprehension and enjoyment. This also applies to the group of English native speakers, who were not familiar with dubbing at all.

Indeed, the final question in the experiment asked participants which version they would choose if they were to watch this series: 50% answered 'Italian with English subtitles', 33% 'English dub', 6% did not express a preference and 12% Italian with no subtitles. Although the original Italian with English subtitles would still be preferred by half of the respondents, more than one third would go for the English dubbed version, that was appreciated for its good quality, for allowing viewers more time to watch the images and for providing an 'easier', more relaxed viewing mode. To sum up, although this was only a small-scale case study, it seems to indicate that there might be a niche in the English-speaking audiovisual market for dubbed foreign language TV series, as long as the dubbing is of excellent technical quality.

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