

The 'gook' goes 'gay' Cultural interference in translating offensive language

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Abstract & Keywords

English:

Racial slurs and swearwords resonate through *Gran Torino* (2008). As lexical leitmotifs, linguistic taboos play a strategic role in constructing the film's narrative. Their importance in the meaning making process thus require a scrupulous approach to their translation, above all for their potentially explosive semantic content. This paper reflects on the ideologically loaded issues implicit to the meaning transfer of offensive language; an effort must be made to distinguish the functional uses of these lexical fields and their impact when attempting the transfer of aesthetical content between linguacultures that have different societal values and taboos. Drawing on a syncretism of perspectives from politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987), linguistic anthropology (Allan and Burrigge 2006), discourse analysis as adapted to translation by Hatim and Mason (1997), and methodological approaches falling within Descriptive Translation Studies (Toury 1995), the article focuses on significant examples from *Gran Torino*; derogatory racial utterances from the source linguaculture (North-American urban contexts) are compared with the target text renderings in the variety of Italian most commonly used in dubbed and subtitled films. The first part of the paper outlines the analytical, methodological and theoretical frameworks adopted. The second part examines the samples and the outcomes are discussed, forming tentative conclusions on the influence of cultural norms in the translation process.

Keywords: traduzione multimediale, multimedia translation, audiovisual translation, linguistic taboos, swearwords, cultural transfer

Racial slurs and swearwords resonate through *Gran Torino* (2008). As lexical leitmotifs, linguistic taboos form the warp and weft of the film script playing a strategic role in constructing the film's narrative. Their importance in the meaning making process thus require a scrupulous approach to their translation, above all for their potentially explosive semantic content. This paper reflects on the ideologically loaded and highly sensitive issues implicit to the meaning transfer of offensive language; an effort must be made to distinguish the functional uses of these lexical fields and their impact when attempting the transfer of aesthetical content between linguacultures that have different societal values and taboos. Focusing on significant examples from *Gran Torino*, derogatory racial utterances from the source linguaculture (North-American urban contexts) are analysed, then compared to the target text renderings in the variety of Italian most commonly used in dubbed and subtitled films. The first part of the paper outlines the analytical, methodological and theoretical frameworks adopted. The second part examines the samples and the outcomes are considered referring to current translation research. Finally the resulting effects and shifts in meaning are discussed and some tentative concluding observations are offered..

Syncretism of approaches: swearing in *Gran Torino*

The framework sustaining this analysis draws on a combination of elements from politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987), linguistic anthropology (Allan and Burrigge 2006), principles of discourse analysis as adapted by Hatim and Mason to translation (1997), and methodological approaches falling within Descriptive Translation Studies (Toury 1995). Such an analytical syncretism is necessary in order to sustain this scrutiny of the full translation process involved in rendering this particularly sensitive lexical area that goes beyond word level to engage with far more complex issues of a cultural nature. The analysis investigates the significance of ethnophaulisms[1] in the film and its construction of a unique narrative. Considering the lingua-cultural distance between the source culture and target culture perspectives the analyses reveal a significant role played by macho-driven insults in the Italian language. From the premise that there are always two linguistic and cultural polysystems (Even-Zohar 1990 9) at work in translation, Pym observes (2004: 3):

for some scholars and more particularly in some fields of research, the focus has shifted from texts to mediators. Many of us are no longer stopping at the sociocultural dimensions of source and target texts. We would like to know more about who is doing the mediating, for whom, within what networks, and with what social effect.

There are several issues regarding the professional status of dubbers and subtitlers within the Italian film industry (see Paolinelli and Di Fortunato 2005) which underpin the socio-cultural perspective taken for this analysis, but they need not be discussed in detail here. In short, it is important to note that Italy is one of the so-called dubbing countries in the European context with a high consumption of foreign audiovisual products (see Antonini 2009). Furthermore, it is generally acknowledged that Italy produces some of the best dubbed audiovisual products on a worldwide scale, although the quality of dubbing in television has not been universally praised (Duranti 1998: 482).

The massive use of American telefilms in the burgeoning television industry has recently resulted in lower standards, especially at the translation end of the process; adapters and actors barely manage to survive the loss of nuances [...] and the excessive simplifications and real howlers often noticeably mar the quality of translated dialogue.

Considering the sheer volume of business generated and the quantity of dubbed products on the Italian market it is surprising to learn that the Italian dubbing industry is to all intents and purposes a closed shop; there are relatively few dubbing directors, adaptors and translators working within the field. Those who do are highly respected and have long and well-established track records, as such they wield enormous power and influence on current dubbing practices in the Italian context. (Pavesi 2005: 137)

From a theoretical standpoint the approach for this analysis is close to Simeoni's (1998) sociological perspective on the translator's habitus. The notion of translator's habitus, Venuti's theories on domestication and foreignization (1995), and Hatim and Mason's reflections on ideology (1997) are all relevant to the case in point because taboo areas in the source culture have been re-interpreted (by the translator, with a particular mindset and cultural perspective) to introduce similar taboo areas for the target culture.

Besides the methodology, this research belongs to the corpus of studies now generally referred to as either Audiovisual Translation (AVT) or Screen Translation. The two definitions are contentious and refer to distinct approaches to the definition of the texts that are being studied as audiovisuals; the risk of oversimplification is enormous, but suffice here to say that this debate is per se productive of significant research (see Bollettieri-Bosinelli 2002; Chaume 2004, 2009; Chiaro 2008, 2009; Delabastita 1989; Diaz Cintas and Remael 2007; Gottlieb 2006; Gambier 2003). For the sake of this article, the perspective taken is the one of AVT, although what audiovisual translation means exactly still begs a precise definition. The dichotomy between its conception as translation proper or adaptation is highlighted by Diaz Cintas and Remael (2007). They note that the spatial and temporal constraints imposed by the medium have prompted the preference for the term adaptation, although this 'seems to equate the [translational] process to a *lesser activity* and becomes enough of an excuse to carry out a linguistic transfer that is clearly inadequate but nonetheless justifiable since it is only a case of adaptation' (2007: 9).

While the intersemiotic and multimodal characteristics of film translation cannot be ignored, they should not undermine the significance of the translator's role, rendering her/his work as merely instrumental to the overall audiovisual product. I agree with Taylor who affirms that 'the word is still the anchor for everything' (2000: 153). He was discussing solutions and strategies adopted in subtitling but his comment could equally apply to dubbing and, to some extent, to many audiovisual experiences (aesthetic constraints in films and their rendering are to be noticed not only in the case of *Gran Torino* in which language characterisation and use of racial slurs are entwined). It is thus crucial to recall that Jakobson's 'translation proper' firmly remains in its rightful place as the core to meaning transfer in audiovisual products.

Why the film *Gran Torino*

Clint Eastwood left his hallmark on *Gran Torino* (2008), a film that he directed and produced, for which his son wrote the musical score, and in which Eastwood himself plays the leading role. *Gran Torino* is a film whose verbal and extra-verbal script count for most of the mise-en-scene, narrating the story of Walt Kowalski, a Korean war veteran, retired Ford worker and 'full-blown, unrepentant racist' (Schenk 2008:6). The central theme is Walt's relationship with his young Hmong neighbour, Thao. Initially hostile towards Thao and his family, Walt emerges as an unlikely father figure as the story develops and ultimately sacrifices his life for the very people he once despised.

There are several reasons why *Gran Torino* was chosen for this study; firstly, the plethora of racial terms in the source text provides ample and variegated material for analysis. There are over fifty direct derogatory utterances and numerous other allusions to race and ethnic origin. Fourteen different epithets are used for people of Asian origin, while insults to other social groups such as African Americans, the Irish, Italians, Poles, Jews, and Hispanics pervade the film script. Secondly, *Gran Torino* is to be considered a high-quality audiovisual product in both the original and dubbed versions. Eastwood is a respected actor, an accomplished film director, and a guaranteed box office hit. For example, *The New York Times* review, entitled 'Hope for a Racist, and Maybe a Country' (12 December 2008), tells us that Eastwood 'has slipped another film into theaters and shown everyone how it's done' with a film which shows 'an urgent engagement with the tougher, messier, bigger questions of American life'. However, the reviewer describes the main character Walt as 'a foulmouthed bigot with an unprintable epithet for every imaginable racial and ethnic group', and ends with the observation: '*The film has some exceedingly foul language, a great many racist slurs and bloody violence*'.

The dubbed Italian version was also well received and won awards at the *Gran Gala del Doppiaggio Romics 2009* for best dubbing actor (Michele Kalamera who dubbed Eastwood) and best dubbing director (Filippo Ottoni). Moreover, the film deals with controversial issues such as ethnic prejudice, political correctness, old-age, multiculturalism, shifting values, and the changing face of society, thus provoking debate among critics and in the media alike. Daniels (2009) summarises two opposing points of view regarding the film:

Gran Torino can be viewed as a story of one man's personal triumph over racism and his redemption through his friendship with the Hmong Lora family; and, that certainly seems to be the intention of the film's director, the author of the screenplay, and the interpretation of many critics. Yet, a different reading of the film suggests that the central narrative relies on the intertwining of racialized stereotypes juxtaposed with heroic white masculinity.

The analysis of the rendering in the examples below shows that the translators' dilemma for *Gran Torino* rests in its interlacing offensive language and racism in the verbal exchanges. Daniels' reading of the core narrative of the film highlights the issue at stake; the question of meaning transfer here is not purely a linguistic one but also linked to socio-cultural norms.

A biting language for a biting film

When *Gran Torino* was released in the US, it was hailed as a masterpiece yet simultaneously condemned for its politically incorrect language. Eastwood himself spoke out against the critics. In an article entitled 'Eastwood slams the 'politically correct culture'' (*Daily Express* 26 February 2009), he is quoted as saying:

People have lost their sense of humour. In former times we constantly made jokes about different races. You can only tell them today with one hand over your mouth or you will be insulted as a racist. [...] I find that ridiculous. In those earlier days every friendly clique had a "Sam the Jew" or "Jose the Mexican" - but we didn't think anything of it or have a racist thought. It was just normal that we made jokes based on our

nationality or ethnicity. That was never a problem. I don't want to be politically correct. We're all spending too much time and energy trying to be politically correct about everything.

As the film's debut in Italy prompted no such controversy, was there something amiss in the linguistic transposition? From a translation critic perspective, are there socio-cultural and ideological issues relevant to political correctness and race talk which must also be allowed for in the translation process? Conversely, from a translator perspective, how to translate these lexical items which have no corresponding terms in the target language? Scatasta (2002: 99) notes:

Gli insulti a sfondo razziale sono invece molto diffusi nella lingua inglese, in particolare negli Stati Uniti dove praticamente esistono termini offensivi per ogni razza o etnia [mentre] in italiano gli insulti rispecchiano soprattutto rivalità fra località vicine o fra il Nord e il Sud del paese.

[Racial insults are [instead] very common in the English language, particularly in the United States where offensive terms exist for practically every race or ethnic group [while] in Italian insults reflect above all local rivalry or between the North and South of the country]

There are no immediate solutions for 'equivalent results' (Nida 1964; Catford 1965) in the rendering of racial insults. Scatasta (ibid.) goes on to say that for their translation, it is 'comunque [...] inutile tentare di tradurre un insulto razziale americano con un italianissimo "terrone" perché si cadrebbe nel ridicolo' [however it would be useless attempting to translate an American racial insult with the very Italian 'terrone' because it would just sound ridiculous].

This contribution does not focus on an in-depth discussion of the underlying reasons for the restricted number of racist epithets in neostandard Italian – suffice it to say that in comparison, Anglophone cultures have had far more contact with other ethnic groups over the last 200 years and almost always from a position of dominance. Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore the fact that in recent decades Italian society has also begun to experience the effects of multiculturalism with a significant increase in immigration to Italy from areas as diverse as China, North Africa, and Eastern Europe. The question of dealing with mass immigration into Italy has only been on the agenda of Italian Home Ministers for the last 20 years while there has been a palpable rise in hostility towards peoples of other ethnic or geographical backgrounds.

This broad brush contextualisation serves only to suggest that the Italian language has not yet recorded the variety of racial slurs that British, American, and Australian varieties of English already have. Undoubtedly, racism and racist attitudes are alive and kicking in Italy (one only has to hear about the chants of 'negro di merda' (shitty nigger) on the football terraces, or peruse the right-wing newspaper *Il Giornale* to know it). Nonetheless, this phenomenon has not manifested itself linguistically in the variety of explicit racial terms present in Anglophone cultures. According to Scatasta (2002: 100) however, it is simply a matter of time before the Italian lingua-culture generates its own racial slurs: 'Il cambiamento della società italiana, però, fa ipotizzare che purtroppo nasceranno presto anche da noi insulti legati alla razza o all'etnia' [the changes in Italian society, however, makes one think that unfortunately racial or ethnic slurs will soon emerge here].

In her analysis of insults in Italian films, Polselli (2007: 138) notes that racist discourse is largely represented indirectly, with implicit references. However, when direct racial insults are actually uttered they tend to pivot around the nationality or regional origin of the person in question, qualified by a negative adjective like *sporco* [dirty], *di merda* [shitty], or the more vulgar *del cazzo* [prick]; (see Scatasta 2002: 100). Polselli (2007: 171) goes on to comment: 'il rinforzo degli insulti etnici con insulti scatalogici o legati alla sfera sessuale, conferm[a] ancora una volta come questi ultimi siano le offese distintive della lingua italiana' [the strengthening of ethnic insults with scatological or sexual references confirms once again that the latter are the distinctive verbal offences of the Italian language].

The distinctive feature of ethnic insults in Italian is not, therefore, the reference to the ethnic origin of the person in itself, but the addition of scatological or sexual insults, usually with undertones of (passive) homosexuality. The very reference to homosexuality makes the utterance truly offensive – in terms of its reception – from an Italian perspective, as the Italian lingua-culture seems to persist with the politically incorrect stereotype of homosexuals as impotent, lacking virility and generally contemptible (see Tartamela 2006; Zappettinini 2010). This last perspective seems to be confirmed in the renderings in the sample analysed below. For these lingua-cultural references, a word on the nature of linguistic taboos in the respective cultural contexts is useful in understanding how meaning transfer of these has been handled in the Italian rendering.

Culturally embedded linguistic taboos

The perception of what constitutes a linguistic taboo or verbal offense is not static within a language community (Hughes 1991; Gorji 2007), let alone across cultural boundaries. Usage, connotations, and even semantic groups can shift, both diachronically and topographically. As Allen and Burridge (2006: 106-107) point out: 'blasphemy, religious profanity and religious insults have lost their punch [in Anglophone cultures today], what is now perceived as truly obscene are racial and ethnic slurs'. By contrast it would seem that in Italy no similar shift has taken place. Deep-rooted Catholicism, a male dominated society and a language which subsequently reflects those patriarchal values are factors which ensure that blasphemous and religious insults still rank highest in terms of taboo in Italian sociolinguistic contexts. Conversely, insults of a homophobic nature casting aspersions on 'male masculinity', which are considered politically incorrect and unacceptable in societies with a more secular outlook, are recurrent in popular discourse in Italy and are undoubtedly the prevalent form of verbal abuse if audiovisual translation can be deemed a reliable gauge of social mores.

What follows is an attempt to reveal the ways in which one society's socio-linguistic taboos are re-interpreted by another's and the effects this can have on the resulting translated text. One could go a step further and surmise that in confirming, reiterating, and possibly disseminating certain lingua-cultural attitudes to ethnic or sexual otherness, Italian AVT with its 'translational routines' (see Pavesi 2005: 51) impedes social evolution and promotes the translator's ideologies of what are social norms, that is, her/his habitus. Thus Simeoni (1997: 23) states:

we are responsible as translators for the conservative decisions we make, not only because we want to avoid 'negative sanctions' (Toury 1995: 163) but also because those choices are the ones we know and fully

assimilate during our training periods and our practice, given also the relational character of our highly personalised backgrounds.

The film, its situation, and its verbal exchanges

One particular sequence has been chosen from *Gran Torino* (duration 00:12:40,000-00:14:15,000) to present a sample of the density and effects of the racial slurs and insults in the film. In this scene Thao is subjected to a tirade of racial and sexual insults perpetrated by a group of Hispanic gangbangers[2]. The scene opens as he is ambling down a deserted road, his head buried in a book. The menacing sound of a heavy bass riff can be heard blasting out of an approaching car. The subtitles identify the song as the ominously entitled *Esto es guerra* (This is War), by rap artists *Convoy Qbanito*. A growing sense of foreboding is evoked as the car full of youths gets closer and starts to cruise alongside the unsuspecting Thao. One of the gangbangers lets out a long wolf whistle, leans out of the back window and, with a smirk, starts to taunt. Thao walks on and is staunchly silent. He remains impervious throughout the scene ignoring the crescendo of insults, vulgarities, and threats. Retribution arrives in the form of Thao's delinquent cousin Spider. Having observed the scene from his own gang's car he decides that his 'little cousin' needs his protection. His belligerent manner and verbal intimidation challenge the aggressors, who finally drive off in a cloud of dust leaving the apparently unperturbed Thao to his cousin.

The whole scene is steeped in dysphemism with racial and sexual overtones. Allan and Burrige (2006: 31) define dysphemism as 'a word or phrase with connotations which are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance'. Examples of dysphemistic expressions include 'curses, name-calling, and any sort of derogatory comment directed towards others in order to insult or wound them' (ibid.).

Initially in a sarcastic vein, the tone of the gangbangers' derisive comments becomes increasingly acerbic while Thao's enigmatic smile infuriates his assailants. According to Allen and Burrige (2006: 31) insulting language is used by groups or cliques to denigrate their opponents, therefore it is typical of gang conduct:

Speakers resort to dysphemism to talk about people and things that frustrate and annoy them, that they disapprove of and wish to disparage, humiliate and degrade. Dysphemisms are therefore characteristic of political groups and *cliques* talking about their opponents. [my emphasis]

There are several situations in the film *Gran Torino* where racial slurs, sexual insults and other linguistic taboos are used, although serving different pragmatic functions and therefore to different effect. A parallel example in a subsequent scene to the one discussed here shows Walt, the protagonist, throwing down the verbal gauntlet to a group of black youths. Their contemptuous, disparaging retorts provoke a ping-pong of dysphemisms regarding his age and colour. The adversaries exchange a series of verbal blows before Walt finally brandishes a gun, thereby sealing his supremacy. Although the scene contains numerous ethnophaulisms and reference to ethnic origin, the cause of the conflict in that case appears to be more generational than racial. Idiolectal and socio-cultural differences are ultimately transcended by certain shared codes of behaviour which demonstrate mutual understanding on one level at least - how to deal with confrontational situations.

On the contrary, the scene under examination here illustrates a multi-layered and complex culture clash between two minority out-groups. Both the Hmong and the Hispanics portrayed here could be considered the lower echelons of US society, representing ethnic sub-groups within the dominant social system who are economically and socially disadvantaged with a high percentage of youth unemployment. Yet despite the fact they share the stigma of being 'outsiders' to the predominant white middle class, there is no sign of solidarity between these two ethnic groups. Quite the reverse, the discrimination based on ethnic otherness is exaggerated to extreme levels where sexuality, customs and habits, and the issue of dominance are all called into play. The macho Latino youths deride the 'effeminate' Asian male as personified by Thao. The puerile pleasure the gangbangers derive from attempting to decimate what they perceive as Thao's 'face', his 'public self-image' is indicative of the stereotypical Latino ethos which deems homosexuality an affront to male dignity. The concept of face in this instance is defined by Goffman (2005: 5) as 'the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact.' These offensive insinuations regarding Thao's sexuality juxtaposed with blatant racist taunts like 'gook', 'slope' and 'rice nigger' are almost comic in their hyperbolic effect. The voice prosody however is sufficiently curt to retain an edgy menace while the constant and emphatic enunciation of the adjective 'fucking' renders the intentionality (Hatim and Mason 1997: 219) perfectly clear.

The meaning of 'gook' is difficult to date and equally unclear although its use became more widespread following the Korean War: for 'slope', the etymology is also rooted in the wars between the US Army and Asian countries in the Twentieth century, while 'rice-nigger' has more recent origins in modern street slang. Table 1 below outlines the possible etymology or at least the known denotations and connotations of the terms.

Gook	Asians	Term most likely dates back to the Philippine-American War (~1900) and has been used against a wide range of peoples, usually Asians but occasionally Europeans and even the English. Unknown origins, possibly 'goo-goo', from the Tagalog language (a major language spoken in the Philippines). Although many have it originating in Korea either by referring Korea's original name, Hanguk, or during the Korean War when Koreans would ask American GI's 'Mi Guk?' ('American?' in Korean) which sounded like they were saying 'Me gook'. Adopted for use in the Vietnam War it should only apply to Koreans, but the Vietnam War made it most popular when applied towards the Vietnamese (RSDB).
Slope	Asians	Slope; US slang. An oriental person; more recently in particular, Vietnamese (abusive); also as 'slopehead' in <i>OED</i> . Origin, coined during Korean war, etymology, probably from slope, slant, reference to Asian eyes or shape of head.
Rice-Nigger	Asians	Rice-nigger is a common 'derogatory slang term for a Chinese or other Asian person' (<i>Urban Dictionary</i>).

Table 1. Etymologies of racial slurs pertaining to Asian ethnicities

Thao's defence strategy throughout is absolute silence. His avoidance of conflict means he makes no verbal attempt to shield himself from the onslaught of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs). An FTA can loosely be defined as

‘those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or the speaker’ (Brown and Levinson 1987: 67), which can be anything from asking a favour, demanding payment or as in this case verbal acts which imply challenges, disapproval, criticism, contempt or ridicule. (ibid.: 66). Having established the situation and context, what follows is a contrastive analysis whose purpose is to describe the translation process that aimed to respond to what has already been identified as a gap between the two lingua-cultural systems.

Analysis of offensive language in *Gran Torino*

Six examples have been drawn from one sequence in chronological order in order to provide an overview of the core issues of this study. At the same time these examples bring to light the recurring features of the language under discussion; it is crude, vulgar, and politically incorrect. The table below focuses on some of the dysphemistic and racial expressions found in the examples to highlight the changes at word level which have taken place in the target language rendering. In comparing the source text with the transpositions, significant shifts in semantic emphasis can be noted, which as we will see, ultimately modify the global meaning of the stretch and its cultural significance.

<i>English</i>	<i>Italian</i>	<i>Back translation</i>
chinito	culo giallo	yellow ass
Jackass and the Rice Stalk	Pollifrocio Gialla neve	fag/queer/queen/fairy/bugger yellow snow
Homey	finocchietto giallo	little yellow fennel
(fucking) slope	muso giallo (di merda)	yellow muzzle
gooks	topi di fogna	sewer rats
fucking rice niggers	froci mangia riso del cazzo	queer rice-eaters of the prick.

Table 2. Synopsis of the lexis to be discussed.

The main issue addressed in the analyses focuses on culture-bound ethnophaulisms and the translation solutions for reproducing their effects. While the above table shows at a glance the obvious attempts at finding pragmatic equivalents for the already noted lingua-cultural gap, it is necessary to contextualise the expressions within the dialogue to fully grasp the implications of their use in terms of characterization and their complete verbal and extra-verbal cultural references.

The subsequent examination illustrates the disconcerting ways in which homophobic undertones in some of the source text insults have been greatly magnified in the target text rendering. The focus of the offensive language is redirected from race to sexuality, compensating racial slurs with heavy weight gender-based and homophobic insults. All examples show first the source text, then the target text followed by its back translation.

Example 1.

Yo! Hey! Is you...is you a boy or is you a girl, man? I can't tell.
 Ehi, Cosa sei? Sei un maschietto o una femminuccia, non si capisce
 [What are you? Are you a little boy or a little girl? It cannot be understood.]

The first utterance sets the tone; it is provocative and a direct threat to Thao's face but is not overtly racist – the focus here is on Thao's apparently ambiguous sexuality. The opening taunt in the source text contains the marked use of a nonstandard verbal inflection of the verb ‘to be’; the third person singular is used instead of the second (‘is you a boy or a girl’ instead of ‘are you a boy or a girl?’). It has been generally observed that variations on standard English verbal inflections are a common feature among some sociolects and speech communities, particularly in North American ethnic minority speakers (Wolfram and Schilling 1999, 2000; Rickford 1999; Labov 1969, 2001) and learners of English as a second language (Prévost and White 2000; Haznedar 2003). It is also the feature of some sociolects and dialects within British English speech communities (Trudgill 1990, 1994, 2002). In the context of the film dialogue, the nonstandard inflection is an example of ‘prefabricated orality’ used to create natural-sounding speech and aid in character portrayal (Chaume 2004a: 168). While the conjugation of Italian verbs is equally problematic for non native Italian speakers, in film dialogues the non-native status of the speaker[3] is often highlighted by the use of infinitive verbal forms. Here however, no attempt has been made to reflect the source text nonstandard speech variety; neither a hint of a sociolect nor grammatical error has been rendered in the target text.

The idiomatic expression ‘I can't tell’ to mean ‘I am unable to distinguish’ has no literal equivalent in Italian, so an impersonal use of the 3rd person with the negative form of the verb *capire* (understand) has been employed. This changes the thematic emphasis (Baker 1992: 169-71) of the affirmation, however, implying that Thao's gender cannot be determined by *anyone* who looks at him, whereas the active phrase in the source text (‘I can't tell’) places the responsibility firmly on the speaker of not being able to discern Thao's sex. The Italian diminutive forms *maschietto* and *femminuccia*, and the repetition of the interrogative, ‘are you’ accentuate the infantile nature of the taunt in the target language version, but, the voice prosody is quite different in the two texts; the source text has a gruff, brusque tone, while the target text has the effect of imitating a child's voice, rendering the insult far less pungent than the original.

In the next example the racial slurs begin with the term ‘chinito’, which could be described as the Hispanic diminutive for ‘chink’.

Example 2.

Hey, chinito, hey, if you was in the pen, I'd be fucking you in the ass. You'd be my bitch...
 Ehi, culo giallo, se eri nella mia cella ti rompevo il culo. Diventavi la mia puttana.
 [Hey, yellow ass, if you was in my cell, I broke your ass. You became my whore.]

Chinito has been rendered in the target text with *culo giallo*; here the ‘classic’ dubbese[4], expression *muso giallo* [yellow muzzle] [5] takes on a more vulgar guise with an oblique reference to homosexuality. Nonstandard syntax is found again in the source text with the second conditional subordinate clause ‘if you was in the pen...’ instead of ‘if you were in the pen’. This is rendered in the target text with *Se eri...* this use of the imperfect tense

where the subjunctive should be used is marked. Although quite common in the spoken language, it is indicative of the low socio-cultural background of the speaker and still considered incorrect in neostandard Italian (Berruto 1987) therefore reflecting the conjugational error in the source text. The conclusion of the sentence pushes innuendo to the explicit, illustrating an interesting socio-cultural comparison between SL and TL in terms of linguistic taboos. While in the ST the gangbanger says 'I'd be fucking you in the ass' – the target language expression *Ti rompevo il culo* is not so sexually explicit, it literally means 'I'd break your ass'. Apart from its literal meaning 'to break', *rompere* has other connotations in Italian, for example, to disturb, to irritate, to nag. But accompanied by graphic gestures and kinetic action, we are left in no doubt that 'I'd be fucking you in the ass' means exactly that, referring to sodomy in a very crude and violent way.

Example 3.

What are you reading, Jackass and the Rice Stalk?
Che stai leggendo, Pollifrocino o Giallaneve?
[What are you reading, Polly-poofter or yellow snow?]

The rhetorical question, 'What are you reading, *Jackass and the Rice Stalk?*', performs several functions within the context of the stretch. In the first place, it mocks the very fact that Thao is reading, perhaps to suggest that 'real men' do not read books. In addition to this, the insinuation that he reads fairy stories reinforces the first comment about his being somewhat childlike, if not effeminate. Thirdly it reiterates the gangbangers' point of view that Thao is stupid, and finally there is the ironic racial undertone. In order to achieve all this, the title of the fairy tale *Jack and the Beanstalk* has been distorted to the comical 'Jackass and the Rice Stalk' a mildly racial and dysphemistic insult. 'Jackass' is American slang for idiot while 'Rice Stalk' carries obvious ethnic connotations. Here then, the two culturally specific elements require special attention in their rendering in the target language. A literal translation might not have been the best solution for two reasons. *Jack and the Beanstalk* is a fairy tale well-known in the English-speaking world, with over two hundred years of circulation in English, although it is probably of Slavic origin but it is not widely known in the target culture. Furthermore, a literal Italian translation would not have allowed for the necessary wordplay that renders the insult humorous. In order to overcome these issues, the translator has in fact chosen to retain the lexis of fairy tales and has also maintained the racial insult by using an example familiar to the target culture and adapted it to the purpose. In an attempt to keep to the same semantic field, the adaptors have played on the names of two female characters from children's fiction. *Pollicina* (Thumbelina in the English version of the fairy tale) becomes *Pollifrocino* (*frocino* is a diminutive of *frocio*, an insult to gays) while *Biancaneve* [Snow White] becomes *Gialla neve* [yellow snow]. Here, then, the strategy appears to be one of dynamic equivalence or equivalent effect (Nida 1964: 159). However there is a distinct semantic shift in the target language solutions adopted in the rendering; the first insult, *Pollifrocino* is related to homosexuality rather than stupidity, implicit in the source text, and the fact that the target text contains[1] the names of two fairy tales, not one, both conveying feminine, or perhaps in this case, effeminate connotations.

Example 4.

Look at me when I talk to you, homes.[6]
Ehi, finocchietto giallo, guardami quando ti parlo.
[Hey, little yellow *fennel* (poof/fag/queen/queer), look at me when I speak to you.]

As Thao's passivity is unmoved by ridicule, the gangbangers' sarcasm turns to more aggressive heckling in an attempt to goad the boy into reacting. The urgency of the source text imperative 'Look at me' and the street slang appellation, 'homes' have been transposed in the target text with an insult that plays on sexuality and race. Here it is necessary to explicate the term *finocchio* (literally 'fennel', as noted above), which is a dysphemistic term for homosexual in colloquial Italian. The etymology and the semantic shift of this derogatory expression have uncertain origins, however there is an interesting urban legend that connects the American English derogatory term 'fag' or 'faggot' for homosexuals with the Italian *finocchio*. According to writer Giovanni Dall'Orto in his 'The history of eleven terms for homosexuals':

The etymological explanation which has really caused a scandal in recent years links fennel to the medieval act of burning sodomites at the stake. According to this explanation it was customary to use wood from the wild fennel plant, or even bundles of fennel thrown onto the fire in order to cover the smell of burning flesh. [my translation]

Dall'Orto traces the origins and history of the expression – unfortunately without providing any evidence of rigorous criteria for his etymological and lexicographic research – but finally comes to the conclusion that 'the most likely etymology is without a doubt the one which links the current meaning of *finocchio* with the meaning the word had in the middle ages when it had the acceptance of 'despicable', 'contemptible', and 'worthless'[7]. The *Online Etymology Dictionary* also acknowledges a similar legend regarding the American insult 'faggot', but it quickly adjusts its aims and suggests the legend is not relevant, at least as far as England is concerned:

The oft-heard statement that male homosexuals were called faggots in reference to their being burned at the stake is an etymological urban legend. Burning was sometimes a punishment meted out to homosexuals in Christian Europe [...] but in England, where parliament had made homosexuality a capital offense in 1533, hanging was the method prescribed. Any use of faggot in connection with public executions had long become an English historical obscurity by the time the word began to be used for 'male homosexual' in 20th century American slang, whereas the contemptuous slang word for 'woman' was in active use. It was used in this sense in early 20c. by D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce, among others.

There is an extremely significant etymological and lexicographical point to raise regarding the word *finocchio*. Were it necessary to translate this term from Italian to English with its derogatory connotations towards homosexuals, it certainly could not be rendered with its denotative equivalent, 'fennel'. The translator could only have recourse to a pragmatic equivalent in the English language, but it would be essential to consider into which Anglophone sociolect and in what context the expression would be used. As with other categories of taboo words, the vast array of insults to homosexuals which exist in English-speaking communities, such as 'fag', 'poof', 'bugger', 'queer', to name just a few, are not interchangeable and are very much specific to a particular speech

community (see Hughes 2006; Allen and Burridge 2006). British English and American English often have very different terminology when it comes to swearing and insults.

Returning to our analysis, it could be argued that although there is no ‘fag’, ‘gay’, or ‘bugger’ in the example examined here, the insult *finocchietto giallo* fits in well with the general mood and linguistic context of the stretch which juxtaposes racial slurs with homophobic undertones. It could even be affirmed that the insistence on insulting homosexuals in the target text is actually very much in keeping with the Italian way of delivering racial insults, which often have an added sexual reference to enhance the offensive impact (see Polselli 2007: 136). Yet this constant *deviation* or shift in rendering racial slurs is the crucial finding of this study as its recurrence in the translator’s solutions is evidence of a non-accidental approach; it could further be argued that although not accidental this does not mean that this deviation is necessarily *wanted* or *explicitly* planned. Precisely because of the uncertainty in assessing the translator’s awareness of the act of deviation, the discourse here refers more to the norms of expectation, to Toury’s law of standardization, and to Simeoni’s postulation of the translator’s habitus.

Moreover this shift in semantic emphasis has consequences for meaning transfer at text level. For example, the theme of the ST utterance ‘Look at me when I talk to you’ is the verb in imperative mood, ‘Look’. This is important because it highlights the fact that the gangbangers find Thao’s apparent indifference disconcerting. So much so that there is no insult, rather an exhortation on the part of the assailants who want to provoke a reaction. Such insistence on a homosexual gibe in theme position of the sentence modifies this meaning in the Italian dubbed film.

Thao continues to behave according to his culture and costume, his face-saving action being a refusal to engage with the provocations of his antagonists. According to Goffman (2005: 5), every social group has ‘lines’ of ritual behaviour, that is, patterns of verbal and non verbal acts which express how the individual maintains face in social situations: ‘Each person, subculture and society seems to have its own characteristic repertoire of face-saving practices’. In fact in a later scene it is explained that the Hmong keep their head bowed in social interaction and never look their interlocutor directly in the eye because it is considered rude. The audience is also told that smiling and laughing is a way of hiding embarrassment and unease in the Hmong culture, which is exactly what Thao does in this scene.

Example 5.

Fucking slopes, man, everywhere you look, man.
Dovunque ti giri trovi musi gialli di merda
[Everywhere you turn you find shitty yellow muzzles]

Gooks/Slopes everywhere we go, man.
Merdotsi topi di fogna
[Shitty sewer rats]

Go back to your rice paddy.
Tornatevene nelle risaie del cazzo
[Go back in the rice paddies (of the prick)]

The invective gets stronger and the racial slurs mount up. In the target text ‘slopes’[8] is rendered with *musi gialli*, previously used in the same sequence for *chinito*. This highlights the lack of alternatives in the TL for the variety of epithets and slurs in the SL. The verbal tick ‘man’ has been eliminated. ‘Gooks’[9], yet another racial slur dating back to the Korean war is rendered with *topi di fogna* which means ‘sewer rat’. This choice has little relevancy and is inaccurate. The racial slur ‘swamp rat’ does exist in the source language and is in fact used by Walt, the reference being to the geographical characteristics of the Vietnamese or Korean countryside. Sewer rat instead would imply an urban animal and has no ethnic connotations. The reference to ‘rice paddy’ is kept in the target text.

Example 6.

Yo, what’s up, motherfuckers?
Ehi- che volete vuoi, figli di puttana?
[Hey, What do you want, sons of bitches?]

They fucking with you?
Ti stanno rompendo? Girate al largo pezzi di merda!
[Are they breaking you? Keep away you pieces of shit!]

Fuck you, homeboy
Andate affanculo
[Go and do an ass]

Go fucking back to your country
Tornate nel vostro paese di merda
[Go back to your country of shit]

Oh, good, more fucking rice niggers
Oh, bene, altri froci mangia riso del cazzo
[Oh, good, more fag/queer/poof rice eaters of the prick]

In the last stretch of dialogue the confrontation with Thao’s cousin triggers a series of scatological and sexual dysphemisms, notably ‘motherfucker’ which Pavesi (1996: 79) claims is impossible to translate literally into Italian ‘dal momento che una simile resa esprimerebbe un concetto tabu, il rapporto incestuoso, fortemente interdetto nella lingua italiana’ [Given that such a rendering would express a taboo concept, incestuous relationships, which are strongly prohibited in the Italian language]. Certainly, incestuous relationships are considered taboo in the Italian culture; but one must hasten to add that they are held to be a universal taboo by anthropologists, sociologists, and psychoanalysts alike (Levi Strauss 1949; Durkheim 1897, 1963; Freud 1918/2009). The question at issue here is the verbal representation of this societal taboo. Hughes (2006; 320)

goes so far as to say that 'Clearly this term represents in its literal sense the violation of the most extreme sexual taboo, that of incest, and has thus been long regarded as a heinous term unmatched in impact'. This observation does not explain the verbal taboo in Italian either. What would explain it is probably more to do with the nature of the incest nominated in the insult, i.e. with the mother. The bond between Italian mothers and their sons is practically sacred, notoriously strong, if not verging on the Oedipus complex – and it might be assumed once again that these enduring links between religion and society omnipresent in Italian culture influence its forms of taboo language.

The last overt racial insult, 'fucking rice niggers' is translated with *froci mangiariso del cazzo* [queer/fag rice-eaters of the prick]. The additional gay insult reaffirms the predilection in the target text for homophobic rather than racial dysphemisms. Secondly, this invented term of abuse, like 'maccheroni eater'[10] features eating habits. Allan and Burridge (2006: 189) emphasize:

Increasingly, it seems, food and drink are featuring in racial and ethnic slurs. Whereas early racial abuse displayed strong moral stereotyping (often with religious overtones) in modern times it plays much more on superficial characteristics to do with appearance and dietary habits. Abuse terms show a rich exuberance of racial insults based on food. Most of the expressions are extensions of the names of the food items stereotypically associated with each group.

Concluding Remarks

Adapting *Gran Torino* for an Italian audience that would have listened to the dubbed version with Italian voices performing the dialogue, the translator has adopted, for the most part, a target-text oriented translation strategy. Modifying insults to create new humorous epithets, wordplays, and illusions, the translator's norms became those of the target society. As a matter of fact, one of the most stimulating and debatable features of the film, its language, is often lost with regard to racial slurs in favour of a homophobic slant – partially due to linguistic constraints, but here is also argued partially due to more significant societal and translator's habituses. Here we have a rather paradoxical subversion of Venuti's theory of domestication/foreignisation (1995); originally focusing on the effect of Anglophone literature as a literature of a dominating language which imposed domesticating strategies of translation on incoming foreign literature, the paradigm is inverted in this target-oriented rendering. In this context, discussing domesticating approaches, it is useful to relate to a comparative study of translations of Harry Potter carried out by Jeremy Munday (2008: 121) in which he compares the Italian and Spanish versions with the source text. Following the analysis he poses the question: 'Is Italian culture given central position in its own culture, forcing the ST to adapt to it?'. The analysis of *Gran Torino* goes towards answering this type of research question, suggesting that the Italian translation follows a strategy of target-oriented macro-strategy. Such a strategy privileges the target-language's own linguistic and cultural context over the depiction of foreign context, thus a minority language domesticates the foreign to preserve its lingua-cultural specificity. Munday's question is then very relevant if asked of *Gran Torino*, or indeed, of AVT strategies in Italy in general. The target culture appears to prefer domestication, at least when it goes to the cinema.

What does this mean for racial slurs? How does this cultural interference impact on the lexical focus of this study? Firstly, it means that the racial content, although still evident in the target text, is ultimately undermined by the overwhelming presence of homophobic dysphemism. Secondly, the ironic and comic elements are brought to the fore in the target text, not least by the semantic prosody employed by the dubbing actors. This has the effect of dulling the dramatic edge which the source text creates. Finally, the emphasis is again on the lack of real alternatives in the target language for the array of racial insults in the source language; for example the adjective *giallo* [yellow] is repeated four times in the space of a couple of lines. This could be seen as a demonstration of Toury's law of 'growing standardization' whereby a marked source language expression is rendered with a more neutral option in the target text (1995: 267-74).

To speculate on the outcomes of a foreignizing strategy in *Gran Torino* would be pure conjecture, however an attempt to envisage the possibilities is useful to our analysis: on the one hand it could be argued that working to obtain creative foreignizing effects would be a very time-consuming process; one that might not be successful in terms of audience understanding or achieving what could be termed 'linguistic naturalness'. To paraphrase Pym, (2008: 324-326), risk avoidance is common practice with translators because there is little incentive to attempt creative, therefore risky, translation strategies. In other words, they are not encouraged, financially, socially or symbolically to break away from conservative choices. On the other hand, foreignized racial slurs might distance the audience from the film, but in so doing could enhance the dramatic power, perhaps providing deeper insight into the source culture. Instead the domesticating process renders the insults familiar and sometimes comic to the Italian target audience but masks the source text flavour.

To conclude, what becomes clear from the analysis, and most interesting from a sociolinguistic perspective is how the domesticated product reveals a mere racial slur is not sufficient to be offensive in the target culture; according to the translator and her/his habitus, what really offends are homophobic insults.

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Notes

[1] A contemptuous expression for (a member of) a people or ethnic group; an expression containing a disparaging allusion to another people or ethnic group, *OED*.

[2] A gangbanger is 'a member of a street gang, especially one who engages in gang violence', *OED*.

[3] For an overview of how non-standard syntax spoken by non-native speakers is rendered in Italian film dubbing, see Serenella Zanotti, 'Racial stereotypes on screen: dubbing strategies from past to present', forthcoming.

[4] Antonini (2009) defines dubbese as 'the hybrid language variety that most Italian screen translators resort to when they translate and adapt a film or any other fictional and non-fictional programme for the big and the small screen (Cipolloni, 1996; Rossi, 1999). The term "dubbese" (in Italian doppiaggese) was coined by Italian screen translators to negatively connote the linguistic hybrid that over the years has emerged as the "standard" variety of Italian spoken by characters in dubbed products (films, series, etc).'

For a full discussion on how the insult *muso giallo* entered the Italian language via AVT see Filmer 2012.

[6] 'Homes' is a variation of the American street slang term 'homeboy'. *Merriam-webster online dictionary* defines it as 'a boy or man from one's neighborhood, hometown, or region, a fellow member of a youth gang, an inner city youth'. *Urban Dictionary* also defines it as a term of respect, or as having French origins, from 'homme' which means man.

[7] '(Obsolete) a silly, worthless person [14th Century; from latin *fenuculu(m)*].

[8] US slang. An oriental; more recently, spec.a.Vietnamese (abusive) Cf. slopehead. Origin, coined during Korean war, etymology, probably from slope, slant, reference to Asian eyes or shape of head, *OED*.

[9] 'US slang. Used as a term of contempt: a foreigner; *spec.* a coloured inhabitant of south-east Asia or elsewhere, *OED*.

[10] A target text rendering of 'wop' the Anglo-American slur for Italians used in a previous scene.

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