

The politeness/rudeness gradient in translation: examples from TV series

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Citation: Bruti, Silvia (2021) "The politeness/rudeness gradient in translation: examples from TV series", in Giuliana Elena Garzone, Elena Liverani (eds) *Tradurre l'oralità. Aspetti pragmatici e culturali*, *mediAzioni* 31: A80-A104, <http://www.mediazioni.sitlec.unibo.it>, ISSN 1974-4382.

1. Introduction

Pragmatic and cultural aspects are at the core of all human interaction, and they represent a challenge in translation because they are characterised by a great deal of variability in different linguistic-cultural systems, even when these systems are not particularly remote from one another. The risk, when transposing these aspects, is that of altering the dynamics of interaction to the point of subverting it.

Based on this consideration, in this contribution I discuss phenomena that contribute to the dimension of politeness in contemporary TV series and their translation from English into Italian in the modality of dubbing (with some references to interlinguistic subtitling). This topic, in fact, despite being central, has so far not been given the attention it deserves in translator training. Politeness, as shown in the relevant literature (cf., *inter alia*, Culpeper 2005/2011; Leech 2014; Locher 2006), is in the majority of cases the preferred strategy of interaction, which is targeted at reaching a desirable social balance and solidarity. However, there are occasions in which the reverse objective is aimed for, as interactants are hostile and aggressive, as happens, for example, with a certain frequency in some types of computer-mediated communication (Dynel 2012; Lorenzo-Dus 2009; Bednarek 2012; Beers Fägersten and Stapleton 2017, Pistolesi 2002). Between the two extremes lies a vast array of intermediate gradations.

By means of examples drawn from a variety of contemporary shows (e.g., *Dawson's Creek*, *Riverdale*, *Skins*, *Sherlock*)¹, I attempt to disclose how (im)politeness is the result of the orchestration of several meaning-making resources (Kress 2010: 157), in which several elements, e.g., speech acts, turn-taking rules, modalisation, gestures, etc. all contribute to the overall outcome. Taking into account the challenges of translating such strategy across different languages and cultures, I show how politeness is often reconstructed differently in audiovisual target texts, with inevitable repercussions in the perception of the story's world and characters.

The pair of languages English/Italian has not been the object of many contrastive pragmatic studies. After some pioneering work by the PIXI group in the late 80s and early 90s (Aston 1988; Gavioli and Mansfield 1990) which compared some service encounters in Italy and the UK, not many studies have followed in these footsteps. One of them is about requests, by Verzella and Tommaso 2020, but, overall, other language pairs seem to have attracted more interest (e.g., English/Greek: Sifianou 1992, Sidiropoulou 2021; English/German: House 2014; English/Chinese: Chen 1993; and the miscellaneous L. Ruiz de Zarobe and Y. Ruiz de Zarobe 2012 where different combinations are examined).

The contribution is organised as follows: section 2 reviews the most influential approaches to politeness and impoliteness and highlights the most significant shifts in perspective in the course of time. Section 3 discusses pragmatic issues in translation and draws attention to some crucial areas that would need to be prioritised. Section 4 offers a reflection on the translation of pragmatic meaning, with a special focus on politeness/impoliteness, in a set of examples from TV series. The final section draws the various threads together and suggests possible paths for future exploration.

¹ Some of the examples are drawn from teen TV series, as the language of young people is innovative and full of emotion, hence potentially challenging in translation. In addition, other examples are drawn from *Sherlock* the series, as Sherlock's idiolect, with all its idiosyncrasies, is responsible for the success of the character and the show, so it is equally fundamental in translation. In both sets of examples (im)politeness plays a crucial role.

2. Politeness and Impoliteness – the state of the art

Politeness is a paradigm that shares many similarities with translation, as is interestingly pointed out in a recent publication by Sidiropoulou (2021). Both are mainly concerned with relational aspects of meaning and give a relevant role to the hearer. Indeed, if politeness is recognised as such, the judgement depends on the addressee of the act of politeness; likewise, the judgement of a translated text rests with the addressee (for example, following the tradition started by House's translation quality, 1977/2014, when a translated text has been carefully contrived, the addressee may be tricked into thinking that it is an original text)². Another evident similarity lies in the continuous adjustments that concern the management of face needs in politeness and the construction of identity in translated texts. In addition, both paradigms are characterised by variation along the genre dimension, a deep awareness of gender-related issues, and ethical and moral responsibility.

In the relevant literature, politeness has always been recognised as a pragmatic phenomenon, i.e., as a series of strategies, some evidently conventional, others more indirect in nature, employed by speakers to achieve an array of goals.

The so-called first wave of studies refers to pioneering studies back in the 1970s (Lakoff 1973; Brown and Levinson 1978/1987; Leech 1983), all of which proposed conversational maxim- and pragmatic theory-based perspectives on politeness. First, Lakoff (1973) interpreted Grice's maxims as rules of clarity and put forward two prior rules of pragmatic competence, "be clear" and "be polite". She established her own three rules of politeness linked to three features, formality, hesitance and equality, which she exemplified as follows: "don't impose/remains aloof"; "give the addressee his/her options"; "act as though you and the addressee were equal/make him/her feel good".

Later, Brown and Levinson (1978) introduced a face-saving view of politeness, claiming that interlocutors strive for mutual face maintenance (through the development of a concept put forward for the first time by Goffman in 1955) and

² For Venuti (1995: 20) domestication is a type of translation in which a transparent, fluent style is chosen to reduce the strangeness of the foreign text for target language readers.

that their face is at the centre of all communicative situations, in which it is possible to lose it, enhance it, or safeguard it.

Leech's individual contribution (1983) was the addition of a specific politeness principle to the other maxims regulating communication. This principle encourages social balance and the preservation of an effortless and unproblematic relationship between interlocutors. Among speech acts, Leech argued, some are inherently polite and others inherently impolite, even though speakers may adopt strategies to somehow modulate them.

A so-called second wave of studies on politeness followed suit, shifting the focus onto a discursive perspective and highlighting "the interactional co-constructivist nature of an individually based phenomenon" (Sidiropoulou 2021: 9). The third wave still prioritised the dynamic co-construction of politeness in interaction (Haugh 2007; Locher 2004; Terkourafi 2005; Leech 2014) but attached equal importance to cross-cultural variation (Kádár 2017).

Interestingly, from the end of the 20th century, what until that moment had been the negative counterpart of politeness, i.e., impoliteness, began to be investigated for its own sake (Culpeper 2005; 2011). Impoliteness as referred to in these studies no longer corresponded to the violation of expected social norms, but, as Locher states, "widened [...] to instances of conflictual and face-aggravating behaviour" (2015: 5).

By way of summarising, it can be observed how studies on politeness have evolved from analysing interaction as a system of rational choices made by an ideal speaker to evaluating how choices about what counts as (im)politeness are made in specific contexts. Discursive approaches have set in, with special attention to cross-cultural variation (Watts 2003; Locher and Watts 2005; Locher 2006). Impoliteness, likewise, cannot be ascribed to specific expressions, because linguistic expressions are not impolite in themselves, but impoliteness depends on the way they are used and, most importantly, on the way they are perceived by recipients (Culpeper 1996: 351).

Currently, the pervasiveness of impoliteness is increasingly evident in a wide range of contexts, genres, and interactions. Studies focusing on TV programmes

have shown how impoliteness, regardless of the genre, is widespread and can be considered as “incivility-as-spectacle” (Lorenzo-Dus 2009: 100) or “vicarious pleasure” (Dyner 2013/2017: 462) strategy in the sense that it entertains the viewer at someone else’s expense by exploiting aggressive humour. Some studies evidenced how it is particularly recursive in contests and quizzes, e.g., *The Weakest Link*, *Britain’s Got Talent*, where competition partially accounts for a certain degree of aggressiveness, but also in political debates and interviews, and, more recently and noticeably, in TV fiction, especially TV series. This line of research has been pursued, among others, by Monika Bednarek (2012) in her investigation of the language of nerds, e.g., the character of Sheldon from *The Big Bang’s Theory*. Sheldon and many other outstanding and eccentric deviant characters (e.g., *Doctor House*, *Sherlock*) are defined by their behaviour, which is “‘antisocial’, ‘abnormal’, ‘rude’, or ‘not quite human’” (Bednarek 2012: 199), as they share difficulty in building rapport and in applying social conventions. Their interactants, some in particular, become the target of this antisocial behaviour, which often borders on the pathological, but at the same time proves to be the source of (bitter) humour on the external axis for benefit of the watching audience.

3. Pragmatic issues in translation

As recognised by House, herself a pioneer in contrastive pragmatic analyses and translation (1989; 2003; Blum-Kulka and House 1989), contrastive analysis is a key tool:

[...] contrastive discourse analyses are crucial for translation because they provide translators and translation evaluators with the necessary empirical foundation for explaining changes in the target text. There is a need for more language-pair specific contrastive discourse research. Translation studies would greatly benefit from its findings. (House 2018: 44)

Kranich (2016), who has extensively worked on “English-German contrasts and their impact on translation” (2019: 116), highlights, next to those identified by House (1997; 2014), some typical areas that deserve investigation when dealing with pragmatic contrast with a view to translating texts. In particular, she pinpoints the degree of subjectivity and addressee orientation (e.g., *I* vs. *we*, inclusive *we*

vs. exclusive *we*), the explicitness/implicitness dimension (already extensively signalled by House 1997; 2014), and the use of repetition vs. variation (Musacchio 2005). Many more aspects could be added, for example degrees of directiveness in the performance of speech acts, which is discussed by De Pablos-Ortega (2019) for British and Peninsular Spanish in original and translated films. Or also change in the quantity of information, either as addition or omission, or even the deletion of something that is implicit, which deprives the recipient of the target text of the opportunity of drawing inferences from the text.

All these dimensions provide illustrative examples of how languages that are quite close genetically and typologically behave differently, preferring different patterns of use. Most of all, however, Kranich notes that if translators opt for a covert translation, i.e., a translation that sounds like an original in the new lingua-cultural context, they introduce genre variations:

[they] aim [...] at communicative, rather than formal equivalence of texts, [and] tend to make adaptations to target language norms to some extent, but at the same time they carry over pragmatic features of the source language text, thereby introducing variation into the genre. (Kranich 2019: 115)

Put differently, this means that if translators are willing to render the spirit of the source text, they will apply a cultural filter (House 1997; Katan 2004) to better locate the text in the target context. When translators have a project in mind, each of their choices will be like a puzzle tile; if, on the other hand, they tackle the translation of a text as a set of unrelated choices, the result will probably be distant from the message and spirit of the source text, or it will communicate a contradictory message at different points in the text.

This idea is further elaborated by means of a sample analysis of translating choices in TV series in section 4.

4. Examples from TV series

In what follows, some examples of interactions from TV series are discussed. The focus is the translation of interactions, therefore little attention is paid to the lip sync constraints in dubbing, which are often attributed exaggerated importance

in analyses. This is in line with Spiteri Miggiani's consideration that, when drafting dialogues for dubbing, "the attainment of a realistic oral register, which contributes to a credible ensemble, seems to be even more essential than lip synchrony" (2019: 34).

I have grouped examples in two macro-sets, symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships. In the former, given the intimacy and closeness between collocutors, communication can be more direct and abrupt, exempting speakers from the use of some politeness strategies. In asymmetrical relationships, the management of conversation is instead more linked to the dimension of power, with the person in the most powerful position dictating the rules of the exchange, among which is the level of politeness.

The examples are drawn from some TV series that revolve around the life of adolescents, e.g., *Skins* (2007-2013), *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003) and *Riverdale* (2017-). *Skins* is a British teen comedy drama which narrates the adventures of a group of teenagers living in Bristol, during the two years of sixth form to A levels. The plot delves into problems that many adolescents face in their lives, such as dysfunctional families, mental problems, sexuality, drug abuse and bullying. *Dawson's Creek* is a teen drama devoted to the lives of a group of school friends beginning high school and then continuing into college. It is set in the fictional town of Capeside, Massachusetts. *Riverdale*, which is currently in its fifth season, is an American teen drama based on the characters of Archie Comics. In addition to the focus on the life of teen-agers attending Riverdale High School, the plot is interspersed with elements of mystery that are not always explained. Finally, some examples from the series *Sherlock* (2010-2017) are also considered, because the main character is a sociopath who disregards social norms and expectedly his speech is quite productive in terms of impoliteness. Cumberbatch's Holmes has in fact been described as "cold, techie, slightly Aspergerish" (Mitchison 2010). The translations that are analysed, either the dubbed or subtitled version, are always official: for the teen series, I transcribed the Netflix dubbed dialogues, whereas for *Sherlock* I used the translations of the DVD version, both dubbing and subtitling.

4.1. Symmetrical relationships

A first example to be considered is drawn from *Skins*, episode 1, season 2. A group of young girls meet Maxxie, an older boy they already know, and his friend Tony. Attracted by something strange in Tony's appearance and behaviour, one of the girls questions him directly with "What's up with you?". He answers very formally, quoting the scientific name of his health problem, "traumatic subdural hematoma with complications". Another girl feels the need to rephrase an expression she does not understand and asks him abruptly if he is "mental". Despite this, however, it is evident that all the girls in the group consider him very attractive.

Characters (<i>Skins</i> e1, S2) ³	ST	TT
Girl 1	Hi Maxxie.	Ciao Maxxie. [Hi Maxxie]
Maxxie	Hi.	Ragazze.
All girls	Hi.	
Girl 2	Who's that?	Chi è quello?
Maxxie	That's Tony.	Lui è Tony.
Girl 3	Hey. What's up with you?	Ehi. Ma sei uno zombie per caso?
Tony	I had traumatic subdural hematoma with motor and perceptive complications.	Ho avuto un ematoma cranico subdurale con complicazioni motorie e percettive.
Girl 4 (Queenie)	Are you mental?	Sei picchiato?
Tony	Yes.	Sì.
		[voice over] Chi se ne frega.
Girl 5	I'd still give you one.	Io ti divorerei lo stesso.
Girl 3	Totally. He's well fit. Yeah, Queenie.	Ci credo, è un bel pezzo di manzo, vero Queenie?
Queenie	Yeah, he's buff.	Certo, da sbranare.
Maxxie	Hey, come on Tone. See you later, girls.	Dai andiamo Tony. È stata una gioia, signore.

³ In what follows I use the following abbreviations: ST for Source Text, TT for Target Text, e for episode, S for Season.

		Arrivederci, Maxxie!
Queenie	I want to give Maxxie one.	Quanto vorrei farmi Maxxie!
Girl 3	You can't. He's homosexual.	Non contarci, è omosessuale.
Queenie	Bummer.	Bello spreco.

This exchange was selected because it is a typical example of peer-to-peer interaction, where communication is certainly more direct and many of the conventions adults use are dispensed with. Politeness requirements among peers are often less stringent and binding, to the point that apparently offensive language is often used as in ingroup strategy, with no face-attacking purposes. This strategy, e.g., banter, has been included by Leech (2014) in the four impoliteness modes that can be distinguished in interaction: it is a form of surface impoliteness, when words and meanings do not correspond because the speaker's intention is not at all offensive and aggressive. The other challenging feature in the translation of a passage like this is the use of teen slang: even if there might be colloquial expressions available in the target language to transfer content, translators should ask themselves how frequent they are and if they are used in exactly the same configuration as in the source language (e.g., with the same degree of formality).

Girl 3 addresses the newcomer Tony in a very direct way, noticing that something is wrong with him. Adults would certainly avoid such direct questioning, but it is perfectly in line with younger speakers' behaviour. The question becomes even more pressing and rude in Italian, as it makes reference to Tony's weird look and appearance, which make him look like a zombie. Another girl makes this observation more explicit by asking Tony if he is "mental", an adjective that is definitely characterised by informality and means that his look makes one believe he is crazy. The same degree of abruptness is retained in Italian, as the adjective "picchiato" belongs to an informal register and well corresponds to the meaning of "mental". Tony takes no offence, and the exchange moves on to an appreciative section with more polite speech acts, although the complimenting strategies used by the girls involved in the interaction can on no account be defined as conventional. The girls express their penchant for Tony because of his looks and tell him they find him attractive: first, complimenting would appear to be usually less frequent from females to males, especially on looks (Golato

2005)⁴. In addition, in this specific case the use of informal language is typical of teen girls, e.g. “I’d still give you one”, “he’s fit”, “he’s buff”, who often use grown-up language, including some expressions that exhibit sexual attraction, in order to project an adult image of themselves. In Italian the choice is in favour of expressions belonging to the same domain, or isotopic line, in that all the terms establish a metaphoric correspondence: the boy is like juicy beef to be gobbled up. The debatable point is, however, that because of the frequency with which these expressions are used, they do not belong to core Italian teen talk (see Cortelazzo 2006; Tempesta 2006).

The conclusion of the exchange, with Maxxie taking leave from the girls, is translated with a remarkable shift in formality: the conventional leave-taking “See you later girls”, becomes “È stata una gioia, signore” (back translation: ‘It was a pleasure, ladies’). The expression sounds formal but could be justified if Maxxie had uttered it in jest, meaning to treat these young girls as if they were older, a thing they might appreciate. However, no trace of this interpretation is either in the source dialogue or in other semiotic codes.

Another example, still among peers, can be offered by an interaction in episode 5, season 1 of *Skins*. Tony and Michelle (the most popular and attractive couple in the series, at least in this season) just had a fight. Sid, worried, goes after Michelle, who gets attacked by a gang of chav girls⁵, who also accuse her of “giving them cheek”. Sid separates Michelle and the chavettes, but he is then himself attacked by them. The whole scene revolves around this expression, “give someone cheek”.

⁴ This tendency should be checked, because, to my knowledge, the majority of studies on compliments (see Bruti 2014 for a review) analyse data referring to the last decades of the 20th century. The way young females talk at present, especially in peer-to-peer interactions, does not seem to differ much from that of males of the same age (see Love 2021 for a discussion of the reduced gap in the number of swearwords used across genders).

⁵ “Chav” is defined by the Merriam Webster as “a young person in Britain of a type stereotypically known for engaging in aggressively loutish behavior especially when in groups and for wearing flashy jewelry and athletic casual clothing (such as tracksuits and baseball caps)” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chav>).

Characters (<i>Skins</i> e5, S1)	ST	TT
Girl 1	You gave me cheek.	Tu hai osato dare a me lo scrollo?
Sid	Sorry.	Scusa.
Girl 2	Sorry don't work. You gave her cheek.	Le scuse non bastano. Le hai dato lo scrollo.
Sid	Did I? I'm pretty sure I didn't. My mate, she gave you cheek.	Io sono sicuro di no. La mia amica ti ha dato lo scrollo.
Girl 1	You gave us cheek, too.	Tu invece lo hai dato a tutte noi.
Girl 3	You so did.	Sì, cosetto, fidati.
Sid	Is there any possible way I could avoid a kicking?	Secondo voi c'è la possibilità remota di evitare un pestaggio?
Girl 1	Well, you know, you could try talking your way out of it.	Se ci convincessi con le parole giuste...
Sid	Erm, ok. Er... <i>(they beat him)</i>	Eh, d'accordo. Eh...
Girl	Erm! Come on happy hour down Firkin!	Andiamo Emily. C'è l'happy hour da Firkin!

The scene can be described as a real assault, both verbal and physical. The chav girls' language is accordingly provocative, and Sid's tentative. The girls claim they have been offended first by Michelle and then by Sid, who came to her rescue, and demand compensation for the offense they suffered. All this is condensed in the expression, "to give somebody cheek". The meaning is to behave disrespectfully and talk back, in order to provoke. The dubbed dialogues also display a key expression, which is "dare lo scrollo", an expression that, as a native speaker of Italian, I had personally never heard before. The verb "scrollare" is quite well-spread as a transitive verb, with the meaning of 'to shake', as in "scrollare le spalle" ('to shrug one's shoulders'), but the expression "dare lo scrollo" is not even recorded in such well-established and authoritative dictionaries as Treccani and De Mauro. The noun "scrollo" is defined as the act of shaking, so we can understand how the movement of shrugging one's shoulder may be associated with a contentious attitude, but the expression is far from frequent in teen talk, and probably in this framework even less⁶. Even the web-

⁶ A query for the phrase "lo scrollo" in the Italian Web 2016 Corpus (itTenTen16) (4,989,729,17 words), available in the SketchEngine selection of corpora, gives only 24 occurrences, of which 17 are verbs (lo scrollo = 'I shake it'), and the remaining are for the most deverbal nouns with the

based search engine of translations in context, ReversoContext, proposes “guardare storto” (‘to scowl at someone’) as a possible translation option for “give cheek”. Luckily, the visuals of the scene allow viewers to properly contextualise this bizarre and uncommon expression, so the quarrelsome nature of the group of girls is obvious. Coherently, the Italian dubbed dialogues omit some other markers of conversation and teen talk, among which substandard forms (“Sorry don’t work”), discourse markers (“Well”, “You know”), intensifiers (“You so did”), none of which is translated in the target text. The turn by Girl 3, “you so did”, in which the intensifier “so” is used to reinforce an ungradable verb, a typical feature of teen talk (see, *inter alia*, Aijmer 2011; Bruti in press) is transformed into another unlikely utterance, “Sì, cosetto, fidati”. If the expression “trust me” can be employed to convey a challenging attitude, the vocative “cos-etto” (literally ‘thing-y’) is rather atypical, not only because altogether infrequent in the language, but because diminutives⁷ soften the strength of a speech act, which does not seem to correspond to the intention of the speaker here. A provocative, offensive epithet would have been much more appropriate in this context.

In general, dubbing adaptors show they understood the spirit of the original, even though they often propose solutions that sound either unnatural, outdated or inappropriate for the character who utters them. If an attempt at applying a cultural filter was made, the result is however an unnatural-sounding Italian exchange.

4.2. Asymmetrical relationships

In asymmetrical relationships, like those between adults and teenagers, normally it is grownups that establish the rules of the exchange, among which are the degree of formality and the adherence to politeness requirements. Of course,

same meaning. Never does the noun appear with the meaning of saying something offensive to someone.

⁷ A diminutive can convey different meanings, either affection or endearment, or, in other cases, non-importance, as they are often used in childlike situations. In any case, the speaker’s attitude and intended strength here seems to be stronger (see, *inter alia*, Sifianou 1992).

there are atypical adults and atypical teenagers, who may subvert the unwritten rules of behaviour in society. The following exchange is drawn from *Riverdale*, episode 9, season 1. Archie Andrews, one of the most popular students at Riverdale High, a budding musician, and the captain of the football team, reluctantly agrees to escort Cheryl Blossom to her family's official start of maple syrup tapping because he gets an offer from her father that could help his future. In this scene Cheryl knocks at the Andrews' door and asks for Archie. The interaction is between Cheryl and Archie's father, Mr. Andrews.

Characters (<i>Riverdale</i> e9, S1)	ST	TT
Cheryl	Mr. Andrews! Nice haircut. Looking extremely DILF-y today. Is Archie home?	Signor Andrews, che bei capelli! Ha un'aria estremamente sexy , oggi. Archie è in casa?
Mr. Andrews	Cheryl, yes. Um... come on... in!	Cheryl, ... sì... Vieni pure, entra.

The exchange consists of some pleasantries because Cheryl wants to see Archie, but Mr. Andrews is the one who answers the doors, so she cannot ignore him. Compliments are often used in the opening of a conversation because they establish common ground and orient positively what is to follow. However, they are sometimes double-edged speech acts, because their content may embarrass the complimentee. In this case even more so, as the compliment is phrased in a very brazen way, as “DILF-y” is an acronym formed by combining the words “Dad I would Like to Fuck”, on the basis of the already existing and more well-spread MILF (“Mom I would Like to Fuck”), plus a hypocoristic suffix. Cheryl is in fact a vain and conceited girl, famous for her withering put downs, lack of civility and compassion, and blatant remarks. Here she shows no scruples in paying a brash compliment to an older male. Mr. Andrew's reply certainly gives away his embarrassment in the hesitation markers and pauses. The saucy expression remains a compliment in the Italian dub, but it is watered down and phrased in a more socially acceptable fashion. Although inappropriate, this compliment is perfectly in line with Cheryl's behaviour throughout the series, and therefore the rephrasing is not faithful to the spirit of the character, even though the speech act remains the same. This is good evidence that compliments are not always polite

speech acts, in that they can put the recipient in a situation of great embarrassment or at a disadvantage.

Another example where the difference in status and power accounts for the development of the interaction is drawn from *Dawson's Creek*. Jack, a new student, is forced to explore his innermost secrets while reading aloud in class a poem that he wrote leaving his friends shaken by the implications of what it all means: Jack happens to be gay, or so it seems. Meanwhile, another student, Pacey, tries to defend Jack in the face of his adversarial English teacher, Mr. Peterson, and ends up getting in trouble. In the passage below, the focus is mainly on the beginning of the exchange, when Mr. Peterson forces Jack to read his poem aloud in front of his classmates.

Characters (<i>Dawson's Creek</i> e14, S2)	ST	TT
Pacey (<i>to Jack</i>)	Is it just me or does that man get meaner every day?	È una mia impressione o quest'uomo peggiora di giorno in giorno?
Jack	It's not you.	Non è un'impressione.
Mr. Peterson	Excuse me, Mr. McPhee?	Stava dicendo, signor McPhee?
Jack	Uh, nothing...	Mm, niente.
Mr. Peterson	I trust that your poetry assignment went well, Mr. McPhee. We're all very aware of how critical it is to your deficient grade in this class. (<i>Jack just nods</i>).	Trovo che il suo componimento poetico sia abbastanza buono, signor McPhee, e siamo tutti consapevoli di quanto sia critica la sua posizione rispetto al resto della classe.
Jack	Sure, yeah... it went fine.	Certo, mi sono impegnato.
Mr. Peterson	Good. Then, perhaps you would like to read your poem for the class.	È vero. Quindi le farà piacere leggere il suo componimento ai compagni.
Jack (<i>nervously</i>)	Um, you said these poems were just for you.	Sì, ma aveva detto che avrebbe tenuto segreti i contenuti.
Mr. Peterson	I changed my mind. These things happen. Please, read us your poem.	Ora ho cambiato opinione. Sono cose che capitano. La prego, ci legga la sua poesia.

Jack	I'd really rather not...	Mi scusi, ma non voglio farlo.
Mr. Peterson	Mr. McPhee, what you would rather do is of no importance to me.	Signor McPhee, la sua volontà in merito non ha alcuna influenza sulle mie decisioni.
Jack	I-um, if it's okay with you, can I just hand it in?	Non può costringermi a far sapere cose...
	Read the poem.	Legga il componimento. [...]

In this scene illocutionary strength is modulated differently across the two languages throughout the turns. Jack is constructed as more 'assertive', but Mr. Peterson too comes across as even more forceful and unempathetic than in the original. In fact, in the source text Jack often appears tentative and hesitant with a conditional and a request (e.g., "I'd really rather not..." and "if it's okay with you") that become respectively a strong, volitional assertion and a deontic statement in the Italian dub. The distance between the two characters is somehow kept, as Mr. Peterson too is characterised as more obnoxious than he is in the original. When he utters the turn "Perhaps you would like to read your poem for the class" he is issuing an indirect order, but he does so by means of a conventionally polite requestive form. In Italian this becomes more forceful, as the hypothetical structure is turned into an instance of epistemic future, which denotes certainty and leaves no space for individual decisions. It should be noticed, in addition, that the Italian expression sounds unnatural and far-fetched. Likewise, his cruel comment "Mr. McPhee, what you would rather do is of no importance to me" becomes even more biting in Italian, turning a judgement of non-importance into a re-affirmation of his deontic power and independent (also erratic) will ("non ha alcuna influenza sulle mie decisioni").

4.3. The character of Sherlock, or the epitome of impoliteness

A character who has recently been the object of much media attention, precisely because he is the emblem of impoliteness, is Sherlock in the homonymous series (2010-2017), starring Benedict Cumberbatch. If Doyle's character was mostly known for his reasoning skills and power of observation, this contemporary media

Sherlock, apart from being exceptionally gifted and clever, shows very little emotion, ignores social mores and triggers a considerable number of impoliteness events. He often takes no notice of others, shows little or no diplomacy, tends to irritate or frustrate his interlocutors, and does not comply with turn-taking rules. Yet, although impoliteness seems to permeate his behaviour, in a study carried out with Zanotti (Bruti and Zanotti 2017), it emerged that the majority of Sherlock's turns are also characterised by lack of politeness where this might have been expected. In other words, the new, Sherlockian unmarked level ("politic" in Watts's words, see Watts 2003) of politeness needs to be re-defined. In what follows a couple of examples are discussed. In translation, it would be crucial to start from establishing the new norm of politeness/impoliteness for Sherlock, so as to properly characterise him for the target audience. For these examples, both dubbing and interlinguistic subtitling are considered, as the two generally display considerably different strategies.

Characters (<i>Sherlock</i> e1, S1)	ST	TT (dub)	TT (subs)
Sherlock	[...] Mrs. Hudson, I'll be late. Might need some food. <i>[Putting on scarf and coat and heading to the door]</i>	Signora Hudson, farò tardi. Mi prepari qualcosa. <i>[Mrs. Hudson, I'll be late. Get me something]</i>	Signora Hudson, farò tardi. Potrei aver bisogno di mangiare. <i>[Mrs. Hudson, I'll be late. I might need to eat]</i>
Mrs. Hudson	I'm your landlady, dear, not your housekeeper.	Sono la padrona di casa, non la sua governante. <i>[I'm the landlady, not your housekeeper]</i>	Sono la sua padrona di casa, non la sua domestica. <i>[I'm your landlady, not your housekeeper]</i>
Sherlock	Something cold will do. John, have a cup of tea, make yourself at home. Don't wait up! <i>[Exits]</i>	Basta qualcosa di freddo. John, si serva una tazza di tè, si metta comodo. Buonanotte!	Andrà bene qualcosa di freddo. John, prenda un tè, si metta a suo agio. Non aspettatemi!

		[Something cold is enough... Goodnight]	[Something cold will be good]
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As this example shows, Sherlock's behaviour disrupts conventional schemas, for example by not replying to questions, not introducing himself to strangers, and by imposing duties on others. More precisely, this is a case of requestive sequence in which the character first drops some hints, by saying "Might need some food", which is characterised by informality (in the ellipsis of the subject) and projected onto a hypothetical dimension, thus obtaining some mitigating effects. The second turn by Sherlock, after Mrs. Hudson's rebuttal, in which she reinstates her status as Sherlock's landlady (so implicitly recalling what is and what is not included in her duties), contains instead a future, which leaves the interlocutor little room for negotiation. He then closes off the encounter in peremptory tones, then turning to John Watson with imperatives, this time to invite him to help himself to a cup of tea and take a seat. What is essential is the gradual shift from a hinted order to an explicit one, which is also typical of Sherlock's interactions with people he is close to, like Mrs. Hudson, who seems to be used to it and certainly knows how to deal with him. Interestingly, it is as if Sherlock sometimes made an effort to be more conventional and polite, but it doesn't take long till his instinct to give orders takes over again, especially if he is under pressure. This gradual shift from 'quasi' polite to total lack of politeness is not retained in the dubbed dialogues, where the first turn contains an explicit imperative, "Mi prepari qualcosa" ('Get me something'), whereas the second sounds more appeasing, as the term "basta" is used, meaning 'is enough'. The reversal of graduality, which might seem a trivial detail, does not restore the gruff character of Sherlock, his contempt for conventions, which, however, with certain interlocutors, is manifested as absence of etiquette and social pleasantries more than as a directive and aggressive strategy.

In the interlinguistic subtitles the tentativeness of Sherlock's first turn is reproduced as "Potrei aver bisogno di mangiare", which, despite being appropriate for the level of politeness displayed, is modelled on the original and does not sound very convincing in Italian, thus representing an instance of the so-called dubbese or *doppiaggese* (see, among many, Rossi 2006; Sileo 2018).

His second turn includes instead an upgraded request by means of the future tense in “Andrà bene qualcosa di freddo” (‘Something cold will be good’).

In this other example, another instance of non-politeness, the tendency is reversed in the translation, as the strength of Sherlock’s linguistic behaviour is toned down.

Characters (<i>Riverdale</i> e3, S1)	ST	TT (dub)	TT (subs)
Sherlock	Is that it? No habits, hobbies, personality?	Tutto qui? Nessun’abitudine, passatempo, passione?	Tutto qui? Niente abitudini, hobby, personalità?
John	No, give us a chance! He was an amateur astronomer. [...]	No, fammi finire! Era un astronomo dilettante. [...]	E dai! Era un astronomo amatoriale.
Sherlock	Fortunately, I haven’t been idle. Come on.	Per fortuna Ø non sono rimasto con le mani in mano. Muoviti. [Fortunately, I haven’t been sitting on my hands.]	Fortunatamente <u>io</u> non ho oziato. [Fortunately, I haven’t been idle.]

Dubbing-specific limitations such as isochrony might account for the decision of dropping the subject pronoun “I”. It is however through this personal pronoun, which in Italian can be dropped, that the oppositional meaning (a strong contrastive focus) is expressed in the original (“Fortunately, I haven’t been idle”). The interlinguistic subtitles provide a much more vivid representation of Sherlock’s impoliteness. By employing the more formal verb “oziare” (‘laze’), the possible space constraint issue in subtitles is effectively circumvented. All in all, however, there does not seem to be a project behind translation, as both strategies sometimes closely follow the original and result in implausible Italian utterances, or opt for more natural options, which might not correspond to the intended (im)politeness level in the original.

5. Concluding remarks

From the analysis of examples drawn from various TV series, of which only a sample has been discussed in this contribution, it emerges that (im)politeness is a rather multi-faceted phenomenon and cannot be reduced just to the performance of face-threatening acts as in Brown and Levinson's model (1978).

The way social solidarity is built in interaction, strengthened, maintained, or even neglected, varies across languages. This depends on cultural habits that are inextricably intertwined with the linguistic fabric of texts.

Despite the important role that a comparison between pragmatic and discursive strategies across language pairs would play in translator training, this type of study, perhaps because extremely time-consuming in gathering comparable data, has not frequently been addressed. As I hope to have shown in some of the discussion above, politeness does not depend on the performance of face-threatening acts only, but on a vast array of choices along different dimensions, such as speech acts, turn-taking rules, vocatives, modalisation. It would be extremely beneficial to integrate all these elements with others belonging to different semiotic codes, e.g., voice qualities, proxemics, gestures, gaze. Choices on all these levels are dictated by the social status and roles of the participants in an interaction and the tendency to conform (or not) to established social conventions. Consequently, the evaluation of an utterance or a sequence in terms of (im)politeness is the result of the orchestration of all the meaning-making resources that have been used.

Another aspect that has turned out to be quite interesting and challenging is the use of teen talk and slang, which very often significantly contribute to the level of (im)politeness of an exchange. They are complex in themselves in that they are extremely changeable and volatile, but also because finding convincing correspondences (not only in terms of word meaning, but also of frequency, formality, etc.) in another language is far from easy.

Furthermore, even though I have intentionally not dwelt on the constraints of audiovisual translation modes (that is, fitting the dialogues in the TL in the audiovisual scenario for dubbing, severe space-time constraints for subtitling),

these technical aspects may play a role and condition the rendering of meaning in the TT. However, it seems to me that when TV products are somehow ‘marked’ (e.g., characters use a diastratically, diaphasically or diatopically marked variety or behave peculiarly, as in the case of Sherlock), translation tends to mirror the ST closely, without attempting to apply any cultural filter. Choices seem to be local more than global and do not rely on the useful mechanism of compensations that is possible in translation, thus changes in illocutionary type and politeness often appear accidental and not part of a strategic plan developed by the translator to reproduce the spirit of the original. These are however impressions obtained from the analysis of some texts but should be confirmed by a deeper and wider investigation into different genres.

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