



The AALITRA Review

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY TRANSLATION
No. 3, May 2011

Website: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~aalitra/>

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To cite this Article:
Anna Colombi,, “Vulgarity and Allocation in the Italian
Dubbed Version of *Taxi Driver*”, *The AALITRA Review: A
Journal of Literary Translation*, No.3 (Melbourne: Monash
University, 2011), pp.80-85.

Published by
MONASH UNIVERSITY

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Vulgarity and Allocution in the Italian Dubbed Version of *Taxi Driver*

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Abstract

This article outlines problems that pertain to the dubbing of the film *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976) into Italian. Aside from the various constraints of audiovisual translation, such as lip synchronization, it focuses on the extensive omission of vulgarity and on the problem of allocution. Despite the importance of the link between vulgarity and violence in *Taxi Driver*, much of the vulgarity of the original has been completely suppressed in the Italian. At the same time, in the Italian dubbed version there is frequent inappropriate use of the Italian formal mode of address “lei”, but no lexical items that would justify this use are present in the original. Consequently, the Italian audience’s perception of the main character and ultimately of the entire film is completely different from that of the Anglophone audience.

In my analysis of the Italian dubbed version of *Taxi Driver*, I have borne in mind all of the typical obstacles of audiovisual translation: line length, coordination of frame and utterance, number of characters speaking at the same time, lip synchronization and so on. I have paid particular attention to lip synchronization in all of the three forms theorized by Thomas Herbst in “Why Dubbing is Impossible”: quantitative, qualitative and nucleus. As Herbst explains, quantitative lip synch means that the length of the translated text has to be roughly the same as the original, as we don’t want to see lip movements on the screen and hear no words or vice versa. Qualitative lip synch concerns the sounds of the dubbed version. These should be compatible with the lip movements we see on the screen. For example, we always need to dub a round vowel in the original with a round vowel in the translated version. Nucleus synch, finally, refers to certain movements of the body that are only articulated when a stressed syllable is pronounced, such as shaking one’s head or raising one’s eyebrows. Keeping these major obstacles in mind, I will examine the two main problem areas in the Italian dubbing of *Taxi Driver*: vulgarity and allocution. We will see that the suppression of some vulgar language, combined with an unjustified extended use of the Italian formal mode of address (“lei”), results in a different perception of both the main character and the entire film.

Vulgarity and violence are inseparably linked in *Taxi Driver*. They provide a realistic description of the environment in which the action takes place: the city of New York at the end of the 1970s. From the very beginning of the film, most of the characters encountered by Travis Bickle, the film’s protagonist, are vulgar: his employer is vulgar, the girl he tries to be nice to at the porn theatre is quite vulgar, his fellow cabbies use many vulgar expressions, and Sport (Iris’s pimp) is very vulgar indeed. Almost all of the characters are part of this microcosm of verbal and physical violence in New York City.

The film can be divided into two parts: in the first part there is a preponderance of verbal violence; whereas in the second part, in addition to verbal violence, we have a whirlwind of physical violence and death, beginning with scene 16 and culminating in the massacre at Iris’s apartment. In the original version, the coarse language of the characters mirrors this violence. In the Italian dubbed version, however, much of this vulgar language has not been rendered into Italian. In particular, Travis’s vulgarisms in the first part of the film have been completely suppressed. The “first Travis” has been censored.

Let us consider some examples, taken from scene 4 of the film in which the taxi drivers are having a break from work at a café. Wizard’s “Whatever the fuck it is, she uses a lot of it” becomes “Comunque si chiami ne aveva su una tonnellata”, with no equivalent for “the fuck” and no vulgarism in the Italian dubbing. Then we have a case in which a vulgar expression is maintained. Wizard describes a sexual experience he has recently had while driving his taxi,

and his language becomes quite colourful. He says: “In the middle of the Triboro bridge... this woman is beautiful... she changes her pantyhose [...] I fuck her brains out.” This is correctly rendered as “L’ho scopata che a momenti le usciva il cervello dagli occhi.” When Travis starts to speak, his “No, he got cut up by some crazy fucker” becomes a banal “matto” (simply “crazy”) in the Italian. Finally, there is a “Fuckin’ Mau Mau land” dubbed as “Quella è la zona di Mau Mau” with no equivalent for “Fuckin’” in the Italian.

The entire film is studded with examples of vulgarisms mistranslated in the Italian dubbing. Most of them are pronounced by Travis. For instance, in scene 8, his “Jesus Christ, I’ve got a taxi!” is rendered as “E poi il tassì ce l’ho anch’io, no?” Thus, the Italian Travis avoids swearing altogether. Later in the film, a “Shit!” in scene 16 becomes “Brutto schifoso” in the Italian. A less vulgar expression is preferred to the equivalent “Merda”. The same word is later translated as just “Ah!” (scene 20) during the conversation between Travis and Sport outside Iris’s apartment block, and completely ignored in scene 21, when Travis is in Iris’s apartment. It is not difficult to see that mistranslating all these vulgar expressions with items which are not quite as vulgar or not vulgar at all can change the perception of a character dramatically.

Another reason why the “first Travis” of the Italian dubbed version is a very different character from the original is the inappropriate extended use of the Italian form “lei” in the Italian version of the film. The fact that Travis uses this mode of address throughout most of film and with most of the characters makes him seem kinder than he really is in the original version. This is due to the problem of allocation. The English form “you” can be translated into Italian as either “tu” or “lei” according to the specific social situation in which it is used. As Maria Pavesi argues in “L’allocuzione nel doppiaggio dall’inglese all’italiano”, we need to find equivalence between two different systems: the English system, which codifies allocation at a lexical level, usually with vocatives, such as “Sir” or “Madam”, but also with other kinds of lexical markers, such as more formal terms; and the Italian system, which codifies it at a grammatical level, with pronouns and verbs. Pavesi speaks of two allocation parameters: superiority-inferiority and distance-nearness. These two parameters apply to different languages and help in finding equivalence between two different language systems. If the superiority-inferiority parameter prevails, this means that we have asymmetry. As a result, in a translation into Italian, a “superior” character would use the “tu” form when addressing an “inferior” character, but the “inferior” character would address the “superior” one with the “lei” form. This is what is likely to happen in a working environment between a manager and an employee, for instance. When the second parameter prevails, we have reciprocity, which means that both characters would symmetrically use either one form or the other. Reciprocity is likely to be used in everyday conversation among people of the same age, profession, etc.

Let’s have a look at Travis and Betsy’s first date (scene number 5). This is the dialogue in the original:

BETSY: 15,000 volunteers in New York alone is not bad but, Christ! The organizational problems...

TRAVIS: I know what you mean, I’ve got the same problems. I gotta get organized. You know little things like my apartment, my possessions. I should get one of those signs that says “One of these days I’m gonna get organized”.

BETSY: You mean organized?

TRAVIS: Organized. Organized. It’s a joke. ORGANIZED

BETSY: Oh, you mean organized, like those old signs they have in offices that says “Thimk”?

TRAVIS: You like the place you work at?

BETSY: That’s good people working force. I think Palantine’s got a good chance.

TRAVIS: You know you have beautiful eyes?

TRAVIS: You like the guy you work with?

BETSY: He’s okay.

TRAVIS: Yeah but, I know, but do you like him?

BETSY: He's funny and he's very good at his job...he's okay though he does have a few problems.

TRAVIS: I would say he has quite a few problems. His energy seems to go in the wrong places. When I walked in and I saw you two sitting there, I could just tell by the way you were both related that there was no connection, whatsoever. And I felt when I walked in that there was something between us, there was an impulse that we were both following so that gave me the right to come in and talk to you, otherwise I never would have felt that I had the right to talk to you or say anything to you, I never would have had the courage to talk to you. And with him I felt there was nothing and I could sense it when I walked in I knew I was right. Did you feel that way?

BETSY: I wouldn't be here if I didn't.

This is the Italian dubbing:

BETSY: 15.000 propagandisti soltanto a New York non sono pochi, ma abbiamo problemi organizzativi.

TRAVIS: Eh, capisco benissimo, sono problemi che ho anch'io. Anch'io devo organizzarmi, piccole cose, la casa dove vivo, tutta la mia roba. Voglio farmi un cartello con sopra scritto "Un giorno devo orgasmizzarmi".

BETSY: Vuol dire organizzarmi?

TRAVIS: Orgasmizzarmi.Orgasmizzarmi è uno scherzo. Un gioco di parole che mi ha raccontato un amico.

BETSY: Ah, orgasmizzarmi. Non so che cosa vuol dire ma è meglio non approfondire, credo.

TRAVIS: Le piace lì dove lavora?

BETSY: Sì. Ho un sacco di colleghi simpatici e Palantine ha molte probabilità.

TRAVIS: Lei ha degli occhi bellissimi.

TRAVIS: E quel suo collega le piace?

BETSY: Sì, è un bravo ragazzo.

TRAVIS: Sì, ma le ho chiesto se le piace.

BETSY: Be', è divertente e in gamba nel suo lavoro. È a posto, anche se ha qualche problema.

TRAVIS: Già, secondo me ne ha parecchi di problemi. Mi pare uno di quelli che spreca le sue energie. Quando sono entrato e vi ho visto lì tutti e due che parlavate, ho capito da come vi comportavate che non vi somigliate. Ma proprio niente. E nello stesso istante ho sentito che fra noi due c'era qualcosa, qualcosa che ci spinge l'uno verso l'altro e questo mi ha dato il diritto di parlarle, sennò non avrei avuto il coraggio di venire da lei e di dirle quello che le ho detto. Non avrei avuto neanche il coraggio di parlarle. Invece quello lì era un estraneo.

Lui era un estraneo per lei e io no. L'ho capito subito. O mi sbaglio? L'ha sentito anche lei?

BETSY: Sennò non sarei venuta.

In the original dialogue there are neither vocatives nor any other type of formal verbal markers. Despite this, in the Italian dubbing Travis addresses Betsy by the "lei" form. In this context, the "lei" form sounds quite strange given the situation (they are out on a date) and the level of intimacy between the two characters. Travis is complimentary of Betsy's eyes, makes a joke, and even dares to express his opinion of Betsy's colleague. It is thus clear that the "tu" form would be more suitable to this situation of intimacy stated by Travis himself ("And I felt when I walked in that there was something between us, there was an impulse that we were both following"). According to Margherita Ulrych, "reciprocal 'tu' is reserved for close relationships and to signal the progression from acquaintanceship to greater intimacy" ("Fim Dubbing", p. 149). Intimacy is also mentioned by Pavesi as one of the situations creating reciprocity in allocution: "si userà il Tu quando c'è familiarità e intimità tra i due interlocutori, o comunanza di interessi, la stessa professione o, in generale, l'appartenenza ad uno stesso gruppo" [The *Tu* form will be used when there is familiarity and intimacy between the two interlocutors, or common interests, the same profession or, generally speaking, when belonging to the same group] ("L'allocuzione nel doppiaggio", p. 120). Curiously, the joke Travis makes in this

sequence, which turns on the word “organized” and is not vulgar in the original, is rendered as the quite vulgar “orgasimizzarmi” in the Italian. “Orgasmizzarmi” implies a reference to orgasm not present in the original, as if the translator wanted to compensate for the many vulgarisms attenuated elsewhere by deliberately inventing a coarse joke where the joke is not coarse in the original. While acknowledging the translator’s effort to compensate, we can’t help but wonder why they did not adhere more closely to the source film elsewhere, and translate English vulgarisms with Italian vulgarisms exactly where they are located in the source film.

The “lei” form sounds even more out of place when Travis and Betsy go out on a second date, in scene 8. Here is the dialogue in the original version:

BETSY: Hi, there.
TRAVIS: Hi. Did you have a nice day today?
BETSY: Not particularly.
TRAVIS: Got a present for you.
BETSY: Oh!
[...]
TRAVIS: Where are you going?
BETSY: I have to leave now.
TRAVIS: Why?
BETSY: I don’t why I came in here. I don’t like these movies.
TRAVIS: Well, I... You know, I didn’t know you’d feel that way about this movie. I don’t know much about movies but if I had known...
BETSY: Is this the only kind of movies you go to?
TRAVIS: Yeah, I come and... This is not so bad.
BETSY: Taking me to a place like this is about as exciting to me as saying “Let’s fuck”!

The dialogue is dubbed as follows.

BETSY: Salve.
TRAVIS: Salve. È andata bene in ufficio?
BETSY: Niente di speciale.
TRAVIS: Un regalino
BETSY: Oh!
[...]
TRAVIS: Ma dove va?
BETSY: Me ne vado a casa.
TRAVIS: Perché?
BETSY: Non so perché ci sono venuta. A me non piacciono questi film.
TRAVIS: Ma guardi che io... io non lo sapevo che lei la pensava così per questi film. Io poi non mi intendo di film. Se l’avessi saputo...
BETSY: E questi sono gli unici film che lei va a vedere?
TRAVIS: Sì, io ci vengo qui... mi pare che non sono mica male.
BETSY: Portarmi in un posto simile significa non avere il minimo rispetto per me!

Again, in spite of the fact that there are no vocatives in the original, and no other lexical elements which might signal a formal conversation, in the Italian version both characters are quite formal to each other. Travis uses a formal greeting (“Salve”), and says “Ma dove va?”, “ma guardi che”, “Io non lo sapevo che lei la pensava così”; as we can see, the “lei” form can be found in all three of these sentences. Betsy uses the same formal greeting (“Salve”), as well as the “lei” form (“E questi sono gli unici film che lei va a vedere?”), and seems quite formal when she says “significa non avere il minimo rispetto per me” at the end of the scene. In the Italian we thus have a symmetrical use of the formal mode of address. Therefore, according to Pavesi, we should have distance between the two characters; but this is not present in Scorsese’s film. This is Travis and Betsy’s second date, and, before entering the porn theatre, they seem quite close to each other. They stroll together through the streets of New York City,

Travis gives Betsy a present, and they seem to be excited to be going out together. The proxemic and kinesic markers that we see on screen, which Ulrych (p. 143) calls non-verbal codes, suggest nearness rather than distance. Furthermore, towards the end of the passage, Betsy becomes very upset with Travis for taking her to a porn theatre. So, it is even less likely that, when walking away from him, she would use the “lei” form to address him. In the original, Betsy is also slightly vulgar in the language she uses in this final part of the dialogue. She tells him “Taking me to a place like this is about as exciting to me as saying ‘Let’s fuck!’”. This is yet another feature of the dialogue that would not suggest the “lei” form in translation. Interestingly, this vulgarity is attenuated in the Italian and the sentence is rendered with “Portarmi in un posto simile significa non avere il minimo rispetto per me!” Instead, a much less vulgar sentence is used: literally, “Taking me to a place like this means not having any respect for me at all”.

In Travis and Betsy’s first and second date, thus, there are neither verbal nor non-verbal markers which could justify the use of the “lei” form in the translation. Moreover, it is highly improbable that a character like Travis, who has very little education, as he himself notes when applying for the job he then obtains, would use this form for so long. The form “tu”, on the contrary, would adjust perfectly to the character, the dating scenes, and, generally speaking, the microcosm of violence and vulgarity in which the entire film is set. *Taxi driver* is, in fact, a film which describes the darkest and most dangerous corners of the 1970s New York City. A real event, the attempted murder of Governor Wallace, inspired Paul Schrader to write the script for the film. It is not by chance that the film is highly realistic, as both Schrader and Scorsese wanted it to depict 1970s New York City in all its roughness. That is why Travis’s taxi goes to Harlem and The Bronx, as well as to other unspecified dangerous New York City blocks. With Travis’s taxi, the viewer ventures into the most dangerous blocks of the city. Of course, in the original, the language of the characters mirrors this microcosm, and vulgarity plays a key role in establishing the mood and meaning of the film. Travis himself describes the city in very rough terms in scene 6, when he picks up Palantine and his assistant. When asked, “What is the one thing about this country that bugs you the most?” he answers,

Whoever it is, he should clean up this city here because this city here is like an open sewer. It’s full of filth and scum. Sometimes I can hardly take it. Whatever becomes the President should just really clean it up. You know what I mean? Sometimes I go out and I smell it and I get headaches it’s so bad. You know? And they just never go away, you know? I think that the President should just clean up this whole mess. He should just flush it right down the fuckin’ toilet.

The roughness of the original is not mirrored in the Italian dubbed version:

Chiunque eleggono deve ripulire questa città perché questa città fa...fa proprio schifo e da tutte le parti, poi, gentaccia. Roba da rivoltare lo stomaco. Chiunque diventa Presidente prima di tutto deve darci una ripulita, capisce cosa dico? Certe volte il puzzo ti piglia alla gola e ti fa venire il mal di stomaco, capisce?...è come se...come se ci si soffoca. Io credo che quello che diventa Presidente prima di tutto deve buttarla nel cesso tutta questa immondizia e poi tirare l’acqua.

The reason why the Italian does not sound as crude as the original is twofold. Both allocution and vulgarity are involved in making the scene in the Italian less rough. First of all, the fact that Travis uses the formal mode of address when speaking to Palantine makes his Italian speech less crude, and to a large extent less sharp, than the original speech in English. We must say, though, that in this case the “lei” form is not completely out of place. Travis is addressing a public figure, a politician. Therefore, it is quite natural for him to show respect through the formal mode of address. Secondly, many vulgarisms present in the original are rendered with much less vulgar phrases: “fa proprio schifo” for “is like an open sewer”; “da tutte le parti poi gentaccia” for “it’s full of filth and scum”. The whole imagery related to sewers and garbage, expressed in the original dialogue through various similes, does not even appear in the Italian.

Even though a few sentences such as “Certe volte il puzzo ti piglia alla gola e ti fa venire il mal di stomaco” and “Quello che diventa presidente prima di tutto deve buttarla nel cesso tutta questa immondizia” are quite direct and crude in the Italian too, they are not as rough as those in the original. To sum up, even if we can understand the reason why the translator used the “lei” form, and we can hear some vulgar language in the Italian, we still feel that more could have been done to mirror the sharp crudeness of the original, by making the dialogue more direct through the “tu” form, and by adhering more closely to the imagery of sewers and garbage.

This last scene epitomises Travis’s view of the city he lives in. From the very beginning of the film the viewer is shown New York City in all its “filth and scum”, and this “filth and scum” is shown through Travis’s eyes. As previously mentioned it is, in fact, through Travis’s taxi that the viewer gains access to the most dangerous blocks of the city. It is through Travis’s body and eyes that we can see how miserable Iris’s life is. Since we can see New York City only through what Schrader calls a “one-eyed view of the world” (qtd in Pazzotta, pp. 67-68), we can’t but accept this view and embrace it. As well as Travis’s view, we must accept Travis’s language in all its vulgarity and crudity. Translating much of the coarse language in the original film with dialogues free of vulgarisms, and using the “lei” form in most of Travis’s dialogues, results in a different and less realistic view of this microcosm of vulgarity and violence, a microcosm which both Schrader and Scorsese wanted to be as realistic as possible. What we see (and hear) in the Italian dubbed version is a different and less realistic view of this microcosm, a different and less realistic Travis, and, ultimately, a different and less realistic film.

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