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Cross-cultural Pragmatics: The Translation of Implicit Compliments in Subtitles

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the strategic function of implicit compliments, aiming to evaluate their contribution to positive and negative politeness and their translation in interlingual subtitles (from English into Italian).

KEYWORDS

Interlingual subtitles, pragmatics, compliments, politeness, indirectness.

BIOGRAPHY

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1. Introduction

The present paper aims to investigate the translation of some aspects relating to the texture of linguistic politeness in interlingual subtitling. Starting from the premise that the process of subtitling can reduce the original text of at least 40% of its length by cutting the elements that may be recovered through the non-linguistic communicative channels or those that are linked to the expressive function, e.g. terms of address, discourse markers, politeness formulae, reformulations and dysfluencies (Hatim & Mason, 2000), this paper will focus on compliments, as an example of culturally-constrained speech acts (Pomerantz, 1978).

Compliments are primarily aimed at maintaining, enhancing, or supporting the addressee's face (Goffman, 1967) and are used for a variety of reasons, the most significant of which is perhaps to express admiration or approval of someone's work/appearance/taste. On the basis of several socio-pragmatic studies (Wolfson, 1981, 1984; Manes & Wolfson, 1980; Wolfson & Manes, 1980; Herbert, 1991; Holmes 1988), it is evident that compliments are routine formulae and tend to use a few syntactic patterns and a limited vocabulary that are instrumental in the expression of admiration and praise. Some points, however, need to be raised to question this claim: firstly, as Pomerantz maintains (1978), compliments

pose a severe problem for the addressee, namely how to reconcile the need to be supportive of the speaker and to avoid self-praise. Furthermore, it might also be argued that compliments, although primarily polite speech acts or “face flattering acts” (cf. Manno, 2005), can make complimentees feel uneasy or embarrassed, thereby creating a threat for their negative face. Thirdly, it is evident that speech acts like compliments are subject to sociolinguistic and cultural variations (Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989). As a result, macroscopic cultural and linguistic differences in the giving and accepting of compliments can be observed across languages. Certain cultures are considerably more prone to complimenting than others, or they may prefer more indirect means of performing speech acts such as, for instance, expressing praise. This might be the case in English, a language where negative face work plays a crucial role and that has been described as an excellent vehicle for mitigation and understatement. On considering all these aspects, we may advance the hypothesis that implicit compliments, i.e. more covert forms that do not look like compliments on the surface level, cannot only solve the dilemma that Pomerantz illustrated, but turn out to be more efficient strategies as they are largely more respectful of the complimentee’s territory and loosen the pressure on his/her negative face.

After briefly recalling the results of the main studies on the topic, this paper concentrates on implicit compliments in some British and American films in order to answer two essential research questions:

- 1) To what extent are these less formulaic speech acts successful with the addressees (i.e. speech acts that achieve the aim of creating good rapport and solidarity, or even, in some cases, some other more covert illocutionary aims)?
- 2) How are these implicit speech acts translated in interlingual subtitles? More specifically, if they are either simplified or altered, can the chosen translation be considered appropriate for the target language and culture?

The corpus of analysis is made up of various British/American films that have been distributed on DVD: *Eyes Wide Shut*, *Philadelphia*, *Sabrina*, *Shallow Hal*, *There’s Something about Mary*, *Tootsie*.

2. Subtitling

It is recognised that interlingual subtitles reduce the original script by simplifying it (Pavesi, 2002), due to the rigid space and time constraints that this translation medium imposes. In addition, the transformation from the oral script to the written subtitles also contributes to the quality of the language, which becomes more formal and neat, almost devoid of the many sociolinguistic and pragmatic markers that give spoken language its natural flavour (Bussi Parmiggiani, 2002: 180).

Given these limitations, it has been observed that some elements are bound to be deleted more than others. Reduction strategies mainly apply to redundancies in the spoken text, but also to modulating and pragmatic markers, which are considered less important for conveying the conceptual meaning of the original. Yet, as has appropriately been shown (Kovačič, 1996; Blini & Matte Bon, 1996; Bussi Parmiggiani, 2002), deletions of these aspects “may create a substantially different interpersonal dynamics from that intended” (Hatim & Mason, 2000: 438). Blini and Matte Bon (1996) have thoroughly demonstrated that modifying or eliminating such markers in the written subtitles corrupts the sociolinguistic and pragmatic meanings conveyed by the original. In fact, the expression of connotative, affective and stylistic meaning is entrusted to the images and the auditive codes only. If these codes do not provide adequate evidence of these aspects, the original semiotic frame will turn out to be completely distorted (Pavesi, 2002: 134). A compromise should therefore be aimed at, in which “the illocutionary aspect of the text should therefore be privileged by trying to reproduce the same speech acts in the target language on the basis of a careful analysis of the [...] pragmalinguistic elements” (Blini & Matte Bon, 1996: 328; my translation).

It is on this basis that I am going to analyse different English films with Italian subtitles, aiming to determine whether compliments retain the function they have in the original and whether the subtitles manage to capture some of the pragmatic force and make the dialogue sound as authentic and natural as possible, while paying due attention to technical constraints.

2.1. Implicit compliments

As Holmes correctly remarks (1988: 446-447), compliments most typically attribute a positive quality to the addressee, even when the compliment seems to refer to a third party:

Complimenter: What a polite child!
 Recipient: Thank you. We do our best.

The utterance is easily interpreted as a compliment because it praises the recipient for bringing up her children so well.

Let us consider an example from our film data.¹

(1)

Film: <i>Tootsie</i>	
English soundtrack	Italian subtitles
<i>Julie</i> : Well, the baby and I are gonna up to my	Beh, io e la mia bambina andiamo

dad's farm upstate.	alla fattoria di mio padre, su al nord.
It's not exactly the fast lane, but it's kind of fun.	Non è esattamente prima classe, ma ci si diverte.
Maybe you'd like to come along?	Non vorresti venire con noi?
<u>You know, since my dad met you he's your biggest fan.</u>	<u>Sai, da quando mio padre ti ha vista è il tuo più grande ammiratore.</u>

In example (1) the last part of Julie's utterance seems to focus more on her father than on Dorothy (Tootsie), whom she is actually addressing. Yet, in saying that after their meeting her father has become Dorothy's most enthusiastic supporter, she implicitly compliments her. In fact, those who have fans are the object of praise and admiration. The compliment is therefore implicated and can be reconstructed by means of bridging inferences. To put it differently, we could say that we are in front of a case of pragmatic ellipsis, where the implicated meaning can be accessed because of the shared interpersonal and contextual knowledge between the collocutors (cf. on the different types of implicit meanings Bertuccelli Papi, 2000). It is to be ascertained whether the same level of indirectness/inexplicitness is retained in the subtitles or whether more explicit forms are preferred. In this case the translation is diagrammatic, i.e. the relationship content/expression closely reproduces that in the original. The compliment is preserved and is likewise characterised by a certain degree of indirectness: there is no positive vocabulary applying to the addressee, who is in fact only cursorily referred to.

2.2. Implicit compliments and indirectness

As pointed out above, in the plethora of studies devoted to the compliment event, the majority of scholars agree that compliments are formulaic in nature, with frequently repeated syntactic patterns and lexical material (cf. Bruti, forth. for an overview), and that at least in Western languages, they contain an expression of admiration on the part of the speaker concerning a possession, accomplishment or personal quality of the addressee (cf. Holmes, 1988, Herbert, 1991). Yet, as Boyle advocates (2000), compliments are not necessarily formulaic and in certain genres there is a marked preference for implicit forms (cf. also Herbert, 1991: 383). By implicit compliments Boyle means two different speech acts: one that refers to the addressee's achievement, whose recognition strongly depends on indexical knowledge; and one that compares the addressee to someone he/she thinks highly of. The latter type also requires a great deal of indexical knowledge and reciprocity of perspective in order for the compliment to be taken as such. The expression of praise rests on a comparison, whose interpretation depends on the addressee's knowledge of the object of the comparison.

Both implicit compliments referring to achievements and those involving

comparison seem to be able to solve the dilemma posed by compliments (Pomerantz 1978), i.e. reconcile the need to agree with assessments and to avoid self-praise. Furthermore, both types obey a phatic function not only in the sense that they use small talk to establish rapport, but also because they reach greater affiliation with others.²

Lewandoska-Tomaszcyk (1989: 77) also considers non-canonical compliments and contends that the less formulaic, i.e. more indirect, praising and complimenting forms, the better social effects in terms of solidarity they may bring about. In other words, the choice of non-routine language presupposes the special care the speaker takes in uttering a compliment, hence his/her personal involvement and sincerity. It is however also true that less conventional instances of compliments may engender more ambiguity and consequently require more interpreting on the part of the addressee (ibid.: 82).

Indirectness in performing speech acts is one of the objects of Thomas's study (1995: 120). By recalling Dascal's study (1983), she claims that it is both costly and risky. It is costly because an indirect utterance takes longer for the speaker to formulate and for the hearer to process; it is risky because it is not always successful. On the whole, indirectness is recognised as a universal phenomenon that takes different forms in different languages. Variations occur according to a number of variables, namely power, distance, rights and obligations, rank of imposition, urgency of the situation, etc. but it is always meant to obtain "some social or communicative advantages" (1995: 143), the most important of which concern politeness or regard for face. The others include the desire to make one's speech more interesting (in some cases also less interesting by deflecting attention from one's speech), to strengthen the illocutionary force of one's message and to achieve competing perlocutionary goals.

According to Brown and Levinson's famous model (1987), there is a direct relationship between face threatening acts and indirectness: the more potentially threatening an act, the higher the degree of indirectness that is required. At this point some considerations are in order: first of all people may intentionally decide to perform face threatening acts bald on-record avoiding more indirect strategies; secondly, indirectness is not only used in potentially face-threatening acts. The case of compliments is an emblematic example in that they are essentially polite acts that take special care of the addressee's positive face. Yet, it is not always so as people often have uncomfortable feelings about being complimented because their personal territory is being invaded. As a consequence, in compliments it can be hypothesised that indirectness is used for several reasons: most strategically to redress the balance between positive and negative face, by reducing the possibility of getting too close to the addressee, thereby invading his/her territory, for example by embarrassing him/her; to increase the force of one's utterance by using unconventional wording; and to involve the addressee by asking him/her

to cooperate to construct the implied meaning.

Among non-conventional compliments one should distinguish between two main sub-classes, those that use indirect phrasings to compliment the interlocutor, which can be considered cases of pragmatic ellipsis and are felicitous only if the interlocutor draws a series of bridging inferences, and those that similarly employ non-routine language and would seem to praise the addressee but turn out to have a different covert illocutionary force when projected on a macro level.

(2)

Film: <i>There's Something about Mary</i>	
English soundtrack	Italian subtitles
<i>Mary's mother</i> : Oh, here she comes. Oh, honey, you look beautiful.	Oh, eccola. Cara, sei bellissima.
<i>Mary's stepfather</i> : <u>Oh shit look at that! You better be careful, boy!</u>	<u>Merda guarda lì. Farai meglio a stare attento, ragazzo!</u>

(3)

Film: <i>Shallow Hal</i>	
English soundtrack	Italian subtitles
<i>Mrs. Shanahan</i> : Nice to meet you, Hal. <i>Hal</i> : The pleasure is mine, Mrs. Shanahan. Wow.	Piacere, Hal. Piacere mio, Mrs. Shanahan.
<u>I can see where Rosemary gets her figure.</u>	<u>Adesso capisco da chi ha preso la sua linea Rosemary.</u>

In (2) the indirect compliment, which alludes to Mary's beauty, is exploited to warn Ted, the boy who is going to take her out, against taking advantage of her. In (3) the praise of Rosemary's figure seems to be an indirect compliment paid to her mother. In actual fact, the plot of the film³ turns it into a speech act that has different illocutionary forces depending on two different communicative axes: an internal character-to-character axis, with two modalities, for Hal sees his own reality; and an external one, from character to audience, for it is a true, heartfelt compliment for Hal, who is under a spell and therefore actually sees Rosemary and her mother as two lovely, slim ladies; whereas for both the intended addressee, Mrs. Shanahan, and the film audience it is a cruel form of mockery. This paper is only concerned with the class of implicit compliments. "False" compliments of the type seen in examples (2) and (3) will not be dealt with.

Turning now back to implicit compliments, I would like to recall Boyle's (2000) distinction between two major types, one that pivots around the addressee's achievements and another that compares the addressee to someone he/she thinks highly of. In the corpus of data that I have

considered so far both types seem to be well represented, provided that the notion of comparison is interpreted with a certain degree of flexibility.

(4)

Film: <i>There's Something about Mary</i>	
English soundtrack	Italian subtitles
<i>Magda: So, who's the lucky guy?</i> <i>Mary: His name's Pat. I met him at the driving range.</i> <i>Magda: Is he good-looking?</i>	<u>Allora, chi è il fortunato?</u> Si chiama Pat. L'ho incontrato al golf. E' attraente?

(5)

Film: <i>Philadelphia</i>	
English soundtrack	Italian subtitles
<i>Charles Wheeler: That's why as of 9.03 this evening, right after the dessert course, Highline Incorporated is now represented by Wyant, Wheeler, Hellerman, Tetlow & Brown.</i> <i>Andy: Outstanding!</i> <i>Charles: And more specifically our senior associate Andrew Beckett.</i> <i>Andy: Yes! Charles I sincerely appreciate your faith in my abilities.</i> <i>Charles: <u>Faith Andy is a belief in something for which we have no evidence. It doesn't apply in this situation.</u></i> [...]	Per questo, dalle 9.03 di stasera, proprio dopo il dessert, hanno deciso di affidarsi a Wyant, Wheeler, Hellerman, Tetlow & Brown. Magnifica decisione! E in modo più specifico al nostro giovane socio Andrew Beckett. Charles, grazie per avere così tanta fede nelle mie capacità. <u>Aver fede vuol dire credere in qualcosa che non si può provare.</u> <u>In questo caso, credimi,</u> <u>la fede è fuori questione.</u> Grazie, Charles. Te lo sei meritato.
<i>Andy: Thank you, Charles.</i> <i>Charles: No sweat, buddy.</i>	

(6)

Film: <i>Sabrina</i>	
English soundtrack	Italian subtitles
<i>David: Well, I may know nothing of Dow Jones, but I do know something about kisses.</i> <i>Linus: <u>You could lecture on that at Vassar.</u></i>	Non ne saprò nulla del Dow Jones, ma di baci sono esperto. Potresti tenere <u>un corso universitario.</u>

The compliments in examples (4), (5) and (6) are centred on some outstanding deed performed by the addressee or, more loosely, on his/her qualities. In all cases the compliments are implicitly conveyed for the

positive remarks that are made do not concern the addressee directly but somehow reflect on him/her. In (4) Mary is indirectly complimented with the expression 'the lucky guy', which refers to the man she goes out with. The expression 'the lucky guy' presupposes that she has a whole range of positive qualities. The subtitles quite effectively reproduce the indirect compliment. In (5) Charles Wheeler's assertion about faith contains an oblique recognition of Andrew Beckett's indisputable qualities as a lawyer, something that he has just proven on the ground by winning a valuable client. In (5), however, the phrase 'to have faith' is translated with *avere fede* instead of the more correct *avere fiducia*, because otherwise the implicit compliment in Wheeler's final declaration would have been lost. In (6) the compliment is of a very implicit nature as no positively denoted item is used in the wording. Linus is praising his brother for his way with women by recognising in him an uncommon talent. The compliment refers therefore to David's achievement but we can read between the lines a note of sarcasm and criticism because David shows a complete disregard for anything but fun, women and cars. The subtitled version closely reproduces the original, preserving the compliment in its implicit form, but applies the universal of normalisation (Laviosa-Braithwaite, 1998: 289) by removing the cultural reference that the Italian audience might not understand (i.e. Vassar, an exclusive college located in the heart of the Hudson Valley).

The type of implicit compliments involving a comparison between the addressee and someone he/she thinks highly of are also quite abundant, but the comparison may be either extended to someone the speaker values highly or may take the form of a relation of some different kind, like for example that of group inclusion. So the complimentee is shown praise because he/she is a member of a set. This is the case of both examples (9) and (10). Let us consider both subtypes in turn.

(7)

Film: <i>Sabrina</i>	
English soundtrack	Italian subtitles
<i>Sabrina</i> : You don't object?	Non disapprova?
<i>Linus</i> : To you? <u>It's as though a window had been thrown open and a lovely breeze swept through this stuffy old house.</u>	Disapprovare? Di lei? <u>E' come se fosse stata spalancata una finestra</u> <u>e in questa casa</u> <u>fosse entrata una fresca brezza.</u>
How could I object?	Come potrei disapprovare?

(8)

Film: <i>Sabrina</i>	
English soundtrack	Italian subtitles

<i>Linus</i> : How do you say in French, my sister has a yellow pencil?	Come si dice in francese "mia sorella ha una matita gialla"?
<i>Sabrina</i> : Ma soeur a un crayon jaune.	<i>Ma soeur a un crayon jaune.</i>
<i>Linus</i> : How do you say, <u>my brother has a lovely girl</u> ?	Come si dice " <u>mio fratello ha una ragazza graziosa</u> "?
<i>Sabrina</i> : Mon frère a une gentille petite amie.	<i>Mon frère a une gentille petite amie.</i>
<i>Linus</i> : And how do you say, <u>I wish I were my brother</u> ?	E come si dice " <u>vorrei essere mio fratello</u> "?

(9)

Film: <i>Sabrina</i>	
English soundtrack	Italian subtitles
<i>David</i> : Have you always lived here? <i>Sabrina</i> : Most of my life.	Ha sempre abitato qui? Quasi tutta la vita.
<i>David</i> : <u>I'd swear I know every pretty girl on the North Shore.</u>	<u>Pensavo di conoscere tutte le ragazze della zona.</u>

(10)

Film: <i>Eyes Wide Shut</i>	
English soundtrack	Italian subtitles
<i>Gayle</i> : You don't remember me, do you? You were kind to me once.	Lei non si ricorda di me, vero? Fu molto gentile con me una volta.
<i>Bill</i> : Only once? That sounds like an oversight.	Una volta sola? Una svista imperdonabile.
<i>Gayle</i> : <u>Do you know what's so nice about doctors?</u>	<u>Lei lo sa perché i medici piacciono tanto?</u>
<i>Bill</i> : Usually a lot less than people think.	Piacciono molto meno di quel che la gente si immagina.
<i>Gayle</i> : <u>They always seem so knowledgeable.</u>	<u>Sembrano sempre così...</u>
<i>Bill</i> : They are very knowledgeable about all sorts of things.	<u>Consapevoli. Ci capite.</u> Oh, veramente riusciamo a capire...
<i>Gayle</i> : But I'll bet you work too hard. Just think of what they miss.	...un sacco di cose. Ma lavorate troppo.
	Pensi a tutto quello che vi perdete!
<i>Bill</i> : You're probably right.	Probabilmente è così.

Example (7) shows a compliment that is achieved by means of a comparison as Sabrina is likened to a pleasant breeze that brings new air into an old, stuffy building. The subtitles preserve the compliment, yet the

effect of praise derived from the contrast between the 'lovely breeze' on the one hand and the 'stuffy old house' on the other is lost because the house is described neutrally. The overall force of the compliment is therefore diminished.

In (8) we find once more an instance of praising that is obtained by setting up a sort of comparison. Linus asks Sabrina how to translate some sentences into French. He starts with a neutral textbook sentence like 'My sister has a yellow pencil' but then goes on with 'My brother has a lovely girl', referring in fact to Sabrina. The compliment is further reinforced by Linus's personal appreciation when he says that he would like to be in his brother's place. The subtitles closely follow the original obtaining the same effect on the complementee, which is, however, not linguistically expressed but conveyed by the smile on Sabrina's face.

Example (9) shows David taking Sabrina home. The conversation between them is amusing, since he has not recognised her and she exploits this knowledge gap to make fun of him. So he converses with her in a flirtatious and joyful tone and asks her a series of questions that reveal his honest ignorance. Here, in order to emphasise the fact that he has never met her before, he says that he thought he knew all the pretty girls in the area. Sabrina is therefore complimented by being included in the set of the pretty girls that live nearby. The subtitled version opts for a more reduced form where the compliment is turned into a neutral assertion because in the original it pivots around the adjective 'pretty', which is essential for the compliment to be perceived as such and is, in fact, deleted from the subtitles.

Likewise, example (10) shows how the complementee is praised for being part of a group of people that are the object of esteem, i.e. doctors. The fact that Bill, the addressee of the compliment, is himself a doctor is explicitly mentioned only when Gayle switches from the general pronoun 'they' to the inclusive 'you' in 'I'll bet you work too hard'. In Italian the identification of Bill as a doctor is rendered more explicit as the second person pronoun plural *voi* is more frequently resorted to: *Ci capite... Ma lavorate troppo. Pensi a tutto quello che vi perdete.*

3. Concluding remarks

We can now draw the various threads together and try to answer our research questions. Implicit compliments may be more costly to understand as they require a good degree of shared knowledge between the collocutors, but they certainly reduce the potential threat to the addressee's negative face that often emerges in the form of embarrassment in front of overt compliments. In fact, on such occasions the complementee tends to respond so as to downplay the expressed praise. On the contrary, with implicit compliments the complementee finds it less difficult to accept the content of the assertion made by the speaker

and the verbal gift (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1987) represented by such an avowal (Herbert, 1990: 208). In all our examples of implicit compliments there is no verbal response because the implicit structure of the speech act allows the addressee to remain silent, but acceptance is signalled by information entrusted to the visual channel: very often a gesture or an expression on the complimentee's face. The use of non-formulaic language and of a varied style also makes it easier for the addressee to trust the speaker's intention, to judge it as genuine and, consequently, to accept the compliment.

As for the second research question, i.e. the appropriateness of the translation of implicit compliments in subtitles, it can be noted that since such compliments tend to be followed by an accomplishment that is not verbally exhibited – the compliment response is entrusted to the iconographic code –, at least the expression of praise is usually granted some space and is almost always fully retained. In those cases in which the subtitles recur extensively to reduction the pragmatic loss is even more severe than in overt compliments (cf. Bruti, *forth.*). The force of the compliment can in fact be reduced to some extent, the extreme case being where it turns the speech act into a neutral assertion. When the positive evaluation derives from the whole sequence of words, the removal of some elements or the rephrasing of the original wording may downgrade the illocutionary force of the compliment. This is, for instance, the case in example (7) where the positive evaluation derived from comparing the breeze to a stuffy atmosphere is lost. An instance of the obliteration of the compliment is represented by (9), where the pivot of the compliment, the adjective 'pretty', is eliminated from the subtitles. An intermediate case is offered by (6), where the choice of neutralising the cultural reference entails losing the positive connotations attached to it. In evaluating the impact of the translation of compliments in Italian subtitles, one should consider the different politeness requirements of the target language and culture. Despite the paucity of studies on politeness in Italian (Held, 2005), one can recognise that as in most Mediterranean countries (Sifianou & Antonopoulou, 2005), positive face is very often privileged over negative face. This disposition can be observed in the many cajoling strategies used with more or less sincere commitment for the benefit of addressees. The impression is therefore that implicit compliments are successful in Italian subtitles when the original wording is skilfully reproduced so as to involve the addressee in a co-operative decoding task of contributing meaning to the speaker's utterance. Otherwise, if something is expunged, the effect might turn out to be scarcely convincing, especially in a language that tends to favour exaggerated forms of approval. Both the limited cases examined and the little attention that the phenomenon has so far been granted in the literature suggest the need for further enquires into this matter.

Notes

¹ In the examples, compliments are underlined both in the original English and in the Italian subtitles.

² One further aspect that has not been adequately dealt with concerns the hidden illocutionary force that may lie behind the surface of a compliment (e.g. a provocation, or a piece of criticism), which can be fathomed if the macro-illocutionary force of the whole speech event is taken into account.

³ In *Shallow Hal* the protagonist, Hal, is hypnotised so that he sees ugly, fat women as if they were beautiful models. The spell is removed only at the end and he discovers that he has really fallen in love with the fat but sweet Rosemary.

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