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The Portrayal of Real-Life People in Audiovisual Translation

1. Introduction

The study of audiovisual texts has been enriched in recent years by a number of studies [Bosseaux 2015, 2019; Chaume 1997; Pavesi 2006; Sánchez-Mompeán 2020] which have focused on the importance of the voice and prosody in the representation of fictional speakers. The following section highlights some of the studies which have contributed to the present state of the art on this topic. Any interest in actual historical facts included in fiction – that is one way of looking at it – has progressed

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on a par with a growing interest by film and TV authors in delving into the lives of real people, not only historical figures, but also contemporary celebrities of every walk of life. In other words, although biopics have always existed, in the past few years – with *The Queen* by Stephens Frears [2006] being arguably the first mainstream title of this vogue – prying into the lives of celebrities has become synonymous with a search for the minutiae of mimetic impersonations.

There is a widespread impression that audiences expect naturalness and consistency in the actors and actresses' performances – especially their vocal performances – which are often praised or criticized accordingly in the press and on the internet. Actors and actresses often discuss the accents they perform in great detail, going through the stages of preparation with dialogue coaches and justifying their choices. The way these voices are dealt with in any audiovisual mode, but especially in dubbing, where a new soundtrack replaces the source one, is naturally filled with challenges, frequently not satisfactorily met by the teams responsible for the foreign-language versions. Given the sheer volume of the dubbing industry, increased with the advent of streaming technology, it would seem advisable that stakeholders and professionals, like voice actors and actresses and their directors, also invested time and effort in exploring ways of improving dubbed versions and their reception among viewers. After all, their “applied” studies have a greater impact on change and progress than academic studies coming from the “ivory tower.”

Technology is also a key factor, since digitization has very much changed the way dubbing productions are made. Sound editing need not be limited to a straightforward recording of voices, but is able to manipulate, digitally, voice quality, pitch, speed, and type. This kind of technology is often used to economize the process of dubbing by avoiding frequent rerecordings and no longer needing many actors in the studio at the same time, or not having them there at all, as was the case during various periods of COVID-19-related lockdown. However, there is probably room for exploring ways of using progress in technology to improve the (artistic) quality of dubbed versions, as well. As for the professional side of dubbing, a common complaint refers to the “radio-play” effect, which means that dubbing actors' (as real people's) voices can be recognized by audiences regardless of source text film or character, which is a major obstacle in achieving willing suspension of disbelief. A related point is a common practice in the industry that strives to keep willing suspension of disbelief

by always casting the same dubbing voice for the same (real-life) actor or actress, regardless of the role (fictional or non-fictional character) they play, though this is not always possible, and does not solve the “radio-play” effect for dubbing actors and actresses who are regularly assigned two or more big film stars who appear frequently in film and television.

Between mimetic impersonation, parody, and more subtle evocations, this article focuses on a few meaningful examples and highlights some of the strategies chosen for their adapted versions.

2. How Can Dubbing Sound ‘Real’? Who Are Real People in AV Fiction and How do They Sound in Dubbed Versions?

Dubbing is an attempt to create an illusion, almost by definition, so how real can it be? The research question addressed here is not how dubbed versions can become more real(istic) but how the oral features are rendered in AVT for characters portrayed as real-life people especially when these features are an important part of the source text? Typically, in countries where dubbing is common or the preferred mode, it is reserved for fiction, whereas documentaries and news programs almost universally, opt for subtitling or voice-over. So, although dubbing is not theoretically limited to fiction, in practice, that is the overwhelming case. Technically, dubbing consists of replacing the original soundtrack, or, more precisely, part of the original soundtrack, with different sounds, usually involving voices (oral sounds) rather than special effects or music, although special sound effects and music may also be dubbed onto an audiovisual at a later stage of editing or production. Thus, it is important to remember that dubbing – much like subtitling and other audiovisual editing and manipulation techniques – need not involve translation [Ávila 1997].

If dubbing and subtitling do not entail translation (i.e., they can be intralingual or interlingual renderings or involve free commentary), then translation can (theoretically) pick and choose by which sound or visual editing technique it wishes to be shown, in sync or otherwise, although social norms reduce freedom of choice tremendously here. There is no ‘objective’ or theoretical need for synchronicity, it just seems like a very good option for AVT. Thus, we (should) speak of ‘translation for dubbing’ rather than just ‘dubbing’ in the sphere of AVT, since it cannot be taken for granted that dubbing (in its sound editing sense) entails translation, just as AVT does not entail dubbing, although the term ‘dubbing’ is frequently

used as an abbreviated expression for a certain mode of AVT (too often as if only dubbing and subtitling existed as AVT modes), hopefully only when there can be no confusion and no perception of mistaken terminology. From this point of view, the term ‘dubbing’ is often perceived as meaning that original soundtrack voice recordings are substituted for different ones, as a means of providing a foreign-language version of a film or show. A characteristic of dubbing, in this sense, in opposition to nearly every other AVT mode, is to create an illusion among the viewers that the dubbed sound is in fact the original sound (thereby making the whole audiovisual text ensemble ‘the original’), not necessarily by means of duping the audience but by offering the illusion through the willing suspension of disbelief [Coleridge 1817].

A key component of this illusion is lip-sync, which in turn means that the dubbed voices must be heard in the intervals when lips (of the same character as each voice) can be seen moving (and at other times when the voices are understood to be coming from a character whose mouth cannot be seen on screen), and that the types of oral sounds heard must be, overall, consistent with the way the lips move to produce such sounds (only to the degree that lip movement is clearly in view of the spectator), as might be explained by articulatory phonetics.

Dubbing, as a profession, and an industry, has, of course, its own history, with different national trends and periods, along with certain common characteristics. We do not wish to open a chapter on the history of dubbing; suffice it to say that over time a tradition is created which people grow used to or are actually born into. Tradition provides norms, the criteria, and trends that weigh heavily down on dubbing practices and these gradually change over time. For example, in different countries, at different times, audiences’ tolerance towards imperfect articulatory lip sync is also different; there is no absolute value, no objective standard [Rowe 1960: 118].

Early dubbers in the film industry were often artists who worked in the theatre or radio broadcasts and regarded dubbing as an additional source of income [Sánchez-Mompeán 2020: 38]. Their acting style was certainly influenced by their background and to a certain extent and in some traditions, dubbing continues to sound artificial and overacted at times:

The intonation used by dubbing actors at the time has also been posited as one of the reasons behind this artificiality. Chaves [2000: 99] explains that Spanish dubbers generally adopted a special type of tune known as ‘la curva,’

characterised by the imitation of American English tones. In a similar vein, Ranzato [2013: 61] describes the vocal rendition of Italian dubbing actors from the early decades to the 1970s by making use of the term ‘birignao,’ a dubbing mannerism ‘often accompanied by prolonged vowels and other phonetic alterations of natural speech that made actors’ voices and inflections sound artificial and unnatural [Sánchez-Mompeán 2020: 38-39].

The influence, some might say burden, of this tradition weighs on contemporary dubbing renditions, to the point that for each audiovisual product, one is bound to ask whether and to what extent the tenet of authenticity has been respected (assuming authenticity as opposed to artificiality is the goal). Never as much as in recent years have audiences expected naturalness and consistency in the language spoken on screen; and, nowadays, actors’ and actresses’ vocal performances can often be found mentioned in the promotional paratext of film and TV productions. Of course, as Bednarek [2017: 131] observes as regards TV dialogue, the extent to which any type of fictional dialogue can be described as ‘realistic’ is a good question. As Queen (quoted by Bednarek) states [Queen 2015: 170], citing a trade manual on the use of dialect in voice animation, “what is most important is that dialects appear authentic to audiences and can be clearly understood by them,” overlooking the fact that these two requirements may often be at odds with each other.

As mentioned in the introduction, nowadays actors and actresses often reveal the preparation of their performance, which frequently includes the help of dialogue coaches whose role has become more and more important since the early 1980s [Bruti and Ranzato 2022]. The role of these professionals adds another piece to the collective job of building a ‘natural voice’ in cinema and television, as works on prosody and the voice in audiovisual products have highlighted [besides Sánchez-Mompeán 2020, see also Bosseaux 2015, 2019, and Kozloff 1988].

Authenticity in telecinematic dialogue, of course, does not only stem from the quality of voice but on other elements, too, such as the use of informal and ‘vague’ language, lexical choices appropriate for the time and place, and a respectful rendition (in both source and target texts) of the ambient sound naturally blending with dialogue.

Vagueness is a feature of natural conversation that is frequently reproduced in fictional dialogue [Biber, Johansson *et al.* 1999: 115; Quaglio 2009: 76-77]. However, as Zanotti [2014: 355] observes, its translation

may pose problems because languages have “different socio-pragmatic norms and conventions for the appropriate deployment of vagueness” [Teraschke and Holmes 2007: 198]. Orality and the scripted orality of fiction have been investigated by several authors [including Baños-Piñero 2009, 2010; Baños-Piñero and Chaume 2009; Romero Fresco 2006, 2009], in their analyses of the degree of naturalness in source-text dialogues and their translated versions. The development of a language of dubbing in a traditionally dubbing countries such as Italy has been recognized as partly calqued on conversational routines and lexicon belonging to the Anglo-American culture [Pavesi 2006: 42-46]. The combined effect of intended features of orality and lip-sync, along with calques and theatrical and radio traditions of voice acting, is often labelled dubbese [e.g. Romero Fresco 2006] (first proposed as a concept in Italy as *doppiaggese*), thus providing a name for a specific variety of language (e.g., German, Italian) that is often easily distinguishable from other varieties, including national audiovisual productions. Along with an audience’s acceptance of willing suspension of disbelief, what works and does not work in dubbing is contingent on an audience’s tolerance for a varying degree of ‘less than perfect,’ and since perfection is a tall order, tolerance is a very important concept to bear in mind.

The selection of lexical, and more generally, linguistic features appropriate for the time and place in which a given story is set is arguably the least researched of these essential components of authentic-sounding dialogue. And surprisingly so, given the efforts poured into attaining this type of faithfulness by the authors of the best ‘quality’ TV series, for instance. To mention just one of such shows by way of example, the series *Mad Men* [Weiner 2007-2015] was relevant not only for its striking visual code, but also for its finely chiseled, meticulously constructed dialogue. *Mad Men* is a period drama, set (mostly) in the 1960s, which offers profound insights on the way we humans are today as opposed to the way we were before. The language used in the show is one of its strong points:

No show in American television history, it is safe to say, has ever put so much effort into maintaining historically appropriate ways of speaking – and no show has attracted so much scrutiny for its efforts. The three seasons that have been broadcast, set between 1960 and 1963, triggered endless arguments in online discussion forums, with entire threads devoted to potential anachronisms. Among recent small-screen forays into historical fiction, only

“Deadwood,” which ran on HBO from 2004 to 2006, generated remotely comparable discussion about the authenticity of its language. (Commenters on that series tended to focus on whether its torrents of colorful, modern-sounding cursing were out of place for a South Dakota mining camp in the 1870s – which they almost certainly were.) [Zimmer 2010a]

And apart from a few anachronisms here and there (to the author’s regret, one of the characters utters the phrase “the medium is the message” four years before the publishing of Marshall McLuhan’s book), “the show does an admirable job overall in taking us back to an earlier linguistic and cultural world, and the dialogue hardly ever jolts us out of that world. For lovers of language as well as lovers of finely wrought period drama, that’s a real treat” [Zimmer 2010b].

Sadly, this kind of refined meticulousness is seldom to be found in the foreign-language versions of these audiovisual texts. In any case, it would raise the question of how features of language variation such as these can be rendered in the integrated process of translating and dubbing and appreciated by viewers. But what is especially lacking is research which consistently delves into the topic of the anachronisms often found in audiovisual translations and their source texts, as just noted, one of the features which arguably hinder the achievement of an effective authenticity or willing suspension of disbelief. And, given that audiovisual utterances cannot separate lexical, grammatical, and discourse elements from mode of delivery, then another area which is very much in need of more research within translation and media studies is the concept of ‘compensation’ applied to compensatory strategies applied in such a way that elements that are lost or sacrificed from mode of delivery, declamation or pronunciation may somehow be recovered, if only partially, in choice of words, discourse or syntax, or vice versa. For example, if a character’s social class is conveyed in the source text through certain prosodic features, the dubbed version may prefer or be obliged to convey the same social class by means of specific lexical choices, not prosody. One reason for having to compensate in this way could be because of strong norms in the dubbing industry requiring very fixed prosodic patterns. This also shows how the ultimate nature and impact of a dubbed version is not entirely in the translator’s hands, and certain choices need to be negotiated among various parts of the dubbing “chain of production.”

As for the importance of background sounds and noises, Sánchez-Mompeán [2020], quoting Aitken [2001], refers to the influence of Italian neorealism which favored location shooting in order to convey a naturalistic portrait of the social reality of everyday life through spontaneous-sounding dialogues and realistic ambience sounds. And, of course, location shooting has long been a favorite of some cinematic traditions (for example, British cinema) and is arguably favored in modern and contemporary productions. The same goes for many television shows, from series to sitcoms, the latter frequently recorded live (for example, in the USA). The ‘laboratory’ sound of dubbing can jar with audiovisual products conceived and filmed in this way. The impact of poor mixing in the creation of a dubbed version has been undervalued and, in general, neglected by research. Dubbed dialogue should be considered as one of the elements of the larger context of an audiovisual product sound environment. According to Chaume [1997: 315], non-verbal information has been neglected or taken for granted in Translation Studies, “as if translation of verbal utterances took into account every single paralinguistic, kinesic or semiotic sign which cohesively complements verbal signs.” It must be said now that to be fair, in practice, if not in research, the evolution of sound engineering, affected by digitization, just like every other aspect of AV production, editing, distribution, and broadcasting, has been able to find solutions to these problems through improved, digital editing of soundtracks. The different sounds and sound sources in digital format can be dealt with separately as if we were dealing with seven or eight different soundtracks which are played together in sync for the final result of sound mixing. The dialogue, and sometimes each character, has its own track, the music has another, and so on, enabling separate editing and dubbing for each track.

Ambient (analogical, celluloid) sounds used to be customarily suppressed or muffled in many imported TV productions in Italy, with the result of making the dubbing stand out as even more artificial. The importance of background sounds often remains unnoticed in the critical discussion on films. As Chion [1994: 144-145] puts it, natural sound or noises were for a long time the forgotten elements, the repressed parts of film not just in practice but also in analysis. There are studies on music, dialogue, on voice, but noises, “those humble footsoldiers, have remained the outcasts of theory, having been assigned a purely utilitarian and figurative value and consequently neglected” [*ibid.*].

3. Representing and Translating Real People: Mimesis, Parody or Invention

What does the concept of ‘real people’ even mean? People are looked at through the prism of the times we are living in. An assessment of the characters who are intended to resemble real-life counterparts easily shows how certain features are valued to a greater or lesser degree with respect to others, perhaps depending on the mood of the time. Various representations of King George VI, for example, examined in the following section, show that there are realities a director may or may not want to convey at any given time. This is equally true for source text directors as for dubbing directors, who may, in turn, have different agendas or priorities or constraints.

Dealing with representations of real people in film and TV can be a daunting challenge for audiovisual translators, especially when character portrayals are enriched by speech idiosyncrasies and distinctive accent renditions, which are known to be accurate on the basis of testimonies or even recordings. Actor Gary Oldman’s painstaking recreation of Churchill’s in *Darkest Hour* [Wright 2017] is one of many impersonations of the famous statesman. The Italian adaptation did not follow Oldman’s strategy of looking for precise cadences and rhythms [Serjeant 2017] and rendered Churchill’s speech in a standard Italian with no peculiar features. Homogenization is evident, for example, in a scene in which Churchill’s voice mingles with notably London-accented voices in an underground train. The contrast between the regional voices of London’s working-class and the upper-class accent of the prime minister are importantly contrasted for the only time in the film. Undoubtedly, reproducing the same effect of conspicuousness would have added, if not authenticity then at least, some other aspect of intended effect to the target version (fundamental differences of class between the prime minister and the ordinary people who travel underground).

The portrayal of real-life people in feature films and television shows is arguably the most problematic area of linguacultural transfer among telecinematic texts which (purport to) adhere to the code of realism, as the danger of parody, when a public figure is firmly present in the public’s imaginary, lurks behind even the most naturalistic intents [Ranzato 2019]. Public’s imaginary is likely a key intercultural hurdle for translation. For example, no matter how famous Churchill may be in any country, his

actual voice and speech mannerisms certainly do not hold the same privileged position as in the British imaginary, even though his words (e.g., “Blood, sweat and tears”) may be. So, what is real, or perceived as real, is contingent upon those aspects of the person being portrayed that are well known and shared by everyone, or by the intended audience, at least. Many real people are famous only in a few details, like their recognizable faces and a handful of biographical details. So, an important distinction must be made between real people and famous people, especially since a lot of real features of a person may not be widely known (including their speech mannerisms) and the many details of why and how they are famous may not all be one hundred percent accurate.

Some world leaders, such as like Kim Jon-un or Mao Zedong are famous icons, but very few people in the West would be able to recognize their speech idiosyncrasies. What is not widely known provides much room for maneuvering to film directors and script writers, and what is widely known to the source-text audience may be much less famous (recognizable) in the area of the dubbed version’s audience. So, although (partial) mimesis is an option, it may not always be available or desirable for certain dubbed versions, which may do well to explore compensatory strategies and internal cohesion for the dubbing proposal. Some famous politicians (e.g., Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger) used to be actors, which complicates categories of actor(actress)/real person, character. Besides, voice (dubbing) actors/actresses can also become celebrities or have been celebrities and that is why they are cast in certain films. To conclude this section, that all characters, fictional or otherwise, must be embodied by real people who are the actors/actresses, even animated characters require human voices. Some actors/actresses are more obscure and less well known (by their faces or voices), some become celebrities, and some become politicians, and each of these features can be exploited by a film (or dubbing) director to create a range of different intertextualities between films or TV shows merely by virtue of which (voice) actors/actresses are cast in them and what (niche) roles. An example for both film and dubbing can be found in famous voices being cast for Disney’s animated films. Disney tends to hire voices actors and actresses for dubbing based on how famous they are in the target text country and this practice is seen as giving priority to quality and box office success over finding voices that will sound like the source text celebrities’ voices.

One of the main criticisms levelled towards dubbing as opposed to subtitling is that it does not allow audiences to perceive or appreciate actors' voices. This means that audiences from Spain, Italy, Germany, and France, largely exposed to dubbing practices, are not able to recognize the voices and speech patterns of real people from foreign-language countries, including actors, politicians, and other celebrities. So, any portrayal, or at least most portrayals of their particular way of speaking must be by adaptation or compensation when faithful mimesis is unable to trigger recognition, and maybe not appreciation either of the nuances of a person's voice and speech. Voice stereotypes in film, and especially in foreign-language dubbing, can weigh more heavily in the final decision than the real-life portrayal of voices (of heroes) that may sound too distant from the producer's or the audience's expectation of what a hero should sound like.

4. Focusing on British Rulers across Genres

Before Tom Hooper's film on the monarch (*The King's Speech*, 2010), the reluctant king George VI was seldom in the forefront in film and television programs depicting his epoch. His timidity and lackluster temperament were probably not the stuff of celluloid dreams. There are, however, some examples of more than walk-on parts.

In *Edward & Mrs Simpson*, a 1978 miniseries on the abdication of Edward VIII, George VI's stammer is played down to say the least: in the famous 'war speech,' which would be the highlight of the 2010 film with Colin Firth, one cannot hear much more than a slight hesitation.

In the more recent TV drama *Bertie and Elizabeth* [Foster 2002] (from which the *King's Speech* generously draws), the point is made several times that when king George ('Bertie') is in the company of his wife Elizabeth, "he speaks beautifully." In this show, the future king in fact speaks fluently and without a stammer most of the time. The only occurrences when he does hint at a stammer is when he is under the severe gaze of his father or mother and when he is very tense or angry in relation to his brother, as well as when he gives a first public speech. The divide is clearly made between public and 'matrimonial' spheres. In his Coronation speech, too, however, there is no sign of a stammer.

Even Henry Enfield, who impersonates the same king in *Churchill: The Hollywood Years* [Richardson 2004] does not take advantage of the easy target of a stammer and lets his spoof George VI speak fluently.

The first film which shows a consistent impediment in the monarch's way of speaking is *Hyde Park on the Hudson* [Michell 2012], in which Samuel West impersonates a tormented king. Times have changed and the emphasis has shifted from power and status to the insecurity of two heads of state (George VI and Roosevelt) united by their respective disabilities.

As actor Colin Firth construed the character of George VI for the *King's Speech*, he drew upon his grandfather's accent to replicate the king's old-fashioned speech patterns (NPR 2010). It is true that hearing the real king's speech,³ given on the 3rd September 1939, one would not imagine the struggle with words that the king supposedly engaged in, although it is evident that the speech had been much rehearsed and even 'staged.' We can acknowledge a spectrum from the extreme of ignoring or playing down a speech impediment and, on the other hand, of focusing on the same disability, making it the protagonist of the story, but the fact remains that the way 'reality' is ultimately represented or perceived accords with the mood of the times. Of course, the king's struggle in his famous speech is also very much portrayed visually, through the picture, body language, and facial expressions.

As attested by the increasing number of films and TV series dedicated to them, general interest has grown in the life of celebrities within "living memory" or because of their frequent appearances in the media. What makes the film and TV shows based on their lives different from period pieces of earlier times can be a quest for socio-historical realism, which includes prior linguistic research. Valleriani [2021: 90-91] reports how the whole cast of *The Crown* [Morgan 2016-in production] worked intensely with dialect coach William Conacher to achieve the upper-crust [Wells 1992: 280-283] accent typical of the Royal family (literally, the Queen's English). They were asked to pay special attention to the enunciation of vowel sounds. The "quest for socio-historical realism" [Ranzato 2018: 212] in this series is demonstrated, according to Valleriani [2021: 120], by the characters' adherence to the original counterparts in terms of rendition, for example, of the single vowel sounds, typically expressed in the general raising of both front and back vowels as an indicator of this type of speech. As regards George VI's popular and longevous daughter, Elizabeth, Conacher says that nailing the way the real-life Queen Elizabeth spoke as a young woman is essential for getting the character. He states,

³ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opkMyKGx7TQ>>, visited 18 February 2022.

for example, that the queen barely opens her mouth when she speaks. So, the first thing he asked actress Claire Foy to do was relax her jaw but then not allow very much space between her teeth: with this operation she immediately obtained the kind of timbre that she needed [Laneri 2017]. According to actress Helen Mirren, who also impersonated the queen, “her voice has changed, and I can use that – she had a terribly posh voice when she was young. But now even the Queen, while she isn’t quite dropping the ends of her lines – though her grandsons do! – there’s a tiny bit of estuary creeping in there” [The Telegraph 2012].

In reference to the importance of using a vocabulary which is consistent with the time a story is set in, Ranzato [2018: 213] notices how lexical choices in Netflix’s Italian dubbing of *The Crown* are not always felicitous: one could refer, for example, to the translation of the word ‘support’ in the highly official occasion of the final salute to Winston Churchill (“to whom I shall look for help and support in the days which lie ahead”). The dubbing adaptation on Netflix chose the word *supporto* in its literal translation (*cui potrò sempre chiedere aiuto e supporto nei giorni che verranno*), an unforgivably contemporary anglicism in the place of the more philologically correct standard word *sostegno* chosen for the subtitles (*a cui potrò chiedere aiuto e sostegno nei giorni che verranno*). Lip-sync preoccupations might have been in the adapters’ mind in this case. This technical constraint, however, is successfully overcome or ignored by adapters in a high number of cases [see Ranzato 2016: 44, quoting Goris 1993 and Pavesi 2006]. *The Crown*’s dubbing team, in particular, seems to have had other priorities. Only a few minutes before her speech, the queen, shot in an extreme close-up, addresses her husband, Philip, with a well-articulated “Can you?” This was translated with an, again, extremely awkward, and unsynchronised anglicism (“Puoi farlo?”) which makes it really hard for the audience to keep the necessary suspension of disbelief.

Moving away from the aristocracy, but still keeping within the upper social class of the British political system, impersonators have had a field day of imitating the posh, Etonian way of speaking of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. In the attempt to ridicule him, however, parodic vignettes rarely capture his rhetorical devices which linguists have not failed to detect. Researchers have noticed, for example, his frequent use of the verb “to want,” especially during the pandemic crisis: “The dominance of the word ‘want,’ which Boris Johnson uses frequently, are indicative of a leader who adopts the benevolent position of a father figure and uses

authority to persuade people to do something for good reasons” [Vowles 2020]. The audiovisual depictions of Johnson as a character, however, even the very few realistic ones, seem to aim at capturing the undeniably comic side of the man while leaving out characteristic, but more ‘serious’ mannerisms, such as his frequent references to classical literature [Higgins 2019] or unusual lexical choices [Bouquet 2019]. Arguably realistic, for example, are the cameos of Johnson in the film *Brexit: The Uncivil War* [Haynes 2019], but while Richard Goulding’s replica of the politician’s voice and speech quirks is spot-on, the fragmented and somewhat incoherent phrases that the character uses are more like those we can hear in *Saturday Night Live* comedy sketches than to the speeches of the real Johnson. In other words, his clownish persona has the better of linguistic realism. The Italian dubbing adaptation avoids turning the portrayal into a parody and plays down the gruffness of Johnson’s voice in a subdued but overall suitable rendition.

5. Conclusions

From what we have outlined in this brief study of a very specific feature of AVT and dubbing in particular, a few conclusions can already be drawn. First, of course, is that in this day and age, characterized by fake news and virtual realities, knowing what is real is not always a straightforward business, nor is it always as high on the media’s agenda as might be expected. This affects both AV production, and, separately, the process of foreign-language dubbing. “Real” may refer to people, to events or to language, but if there is anything we have learnt about film and television, it is that it mostly artfully constructed, from costumes to casting to discourse, script, and speech. Secondly, there is an important initial distinction to be made between real people and fictional characters, but this, too, may eventually become blurred by complicating factors (e.g., cameos), and between celebrities and lesser-known people (in politics or in acting). Thus, the representation of real people is contingent on the agenda and perspective of the director. We may conclude from this that all public figures are both real people and characters, but the audiovisual character imposed on a real person depends on the script and camera work, even in documentaries or news programs, let alone fiction. George W. Bush, for instance, is the same person but may be portrayed as a very different character by a critical director like Michael Moore than, say, by Fox News, or other propagandists,

even when the audience is allowed to see and hear real (live?) recordings of the US 43rd President within such productions. We have not explored such real people as actors in depth; they may be divided according to whether they are relatively unknown or celebrities. As celebrities, like Robert de Niro or Arnold Schwarzenegger, they can provide multiple levels of audiovisual intertextuality, which is not possible in novels, for example. In dubbing, this is sometimes achieved by being consistent in casting dubbing voice actors and actresses for such film stars. Another consideration regards real people who have died recently or lived before our time (beyond living memory) and those alive. As in the case of Churchill, the public can be expected to be familiar with their voice quirks and features, and in that case, it is interesting to evaluate how far that ‘public’ extends (a whole nation or several nations; an older generation but not young adults; only educated people, and so on). Thirdly, research needs to be able to fathom how much realism and authenticity actually stack up as priorities for dubbing teams and audiences in relation to other potential criteria, such as willing suspension of disbelief, or entertainment or comprehension factors, or censorship, or box office. Related to this conclusion is the need to acknowledge that certain perceived shortcomings in dubbed versions may not be due to objective impossibilities that are exclusive to or inextricable from this modality of translation, but rather are related to labor constraints (e.g., performers’ guild) or localization companies’ agendas (e.g., industry stakeholders’ resistance to invest more or do research), the pull of tradition, or the novelties of technological progress.

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ABSTRACT

This is a study on real people, in particular their voices, as an important but so far undervalued factor in audiovisual translation, dubbing in particular. Along with the suspension of disbelief and credibility, expected goals for a dubbed version would seem to be authenticity of language, including not only words and discourse but also elements of delivery, such as accent and prosody (as a part of character portrayal); in short, a well-rounded, strategic proposal that can complement the picture at all times. The result of this study is that, compared to their AVT versions, much more care seems to go into reflecting the nuances of real voices and orality in the source texts, especially when famous and historical figures of the recent past are involved. In this respect, much work still needs to be done, for criticism to be fair and awareness of intervening factors greater, both in terms of professional quality and in academic research. Examples are drawn mainly from the portrayal of real historical figures from the United Kingdom, especially Churchill and Queen Elizabeth II and their representation in fiction and historical biopics.

Keywords: dubbing, authenticity, vocal performances, mimesis, anachronisms