

# Translation and censorship on Italian TV: an inevitable love affair?

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## Abstract

The present paper expands on prior research concerning the rendering of controversial language and themes in US TV series dubbed from English into Italian. The study of the pilot episodes of twelve recent TV series was carried out in an attempt to identify possible patterns in the adaptation of swearwords and other potentially disturbing elements, such as humorous comments involving references to sexuality, death, drugs and politically incorrect language. The analysis confirmed the presence of some form of censoring in all the episodes taken into consideration. Although the high percentage of deleted swearwords was the most evident and remarkable finding, the lesser impact of a considerable number of humorous lines was also found to be a common denominator across the board. No recurring patterns indicating a specific rationale for the deletion or toning down of either swearwords or other potentially disturbing elements seemed to emerge from the analysis, perhaps suggesting a certain level of arbitrariness in the translational choices made in the dubbing industry in Italy.

**Keywords:** audiovisual translation, TV series, humour, censoring, manipulation.

## Riassunto

Il presente saggio mira ad ampliare i risultati di precedenti ricerche concernenti la resa di linguaggio e temi controversi all'interno di serie TV statunitensi doppiate in italiano. Nel tentativo di individuare eventuali schemi ricorrenti nell'adattamento del turpiloquio e di altri elementi di potenziale disturbo, come ad esempio commenti umoristici basati su riferimenti alla sessualità, la morte, la droga e il linguaggio politicamente scorretto, si è svolto uno studio degli episodi pilota di dodici serie TV di recente produzione. L'analisi ha confermato la presenza di una qualche forma di censura in tutti gli episodi presi in considerazione. Benché l'elevata percentuale di turpiloquio eliminato sia stato il risultato più evidente e rilevante, si è anche riscontrato come comune denominatore il minore impatto di un numero considerevole di battute umoristiche. Dall'analisi non sembra emergere alcuno

schema ricorrente indicante uno specifico fondamento logico alla base dell'eliminazione o edulcorazione del turpiloquio e di altri elementi di potenziale disturbo. Si suggerisce che ciò potrebbe essere considerato un sintomo di un certo livello di arbitrarietà nelle scelte traduttive operate nell'industria italiana del doppiaggio.

**Parole chiave:** traduzione audiovisiva, serie TV, umorismo, censura, manipolazione.

## 1. Mixed-genre TV series and humour

In the last two decades, talk about the death of the traditional sitcom format, the one characterized by the classic 20 to 25-minute duration and the use of laugh tracks, has been periodically re-surfacing around American TV circles. With the recent popularity of reality TV on the one hand and the end of some of the most famous and loved sitcoms (e.g. *Friends*, *Will & Grace*, *Frasier*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*) on the other, the difficulty has been noted of replacing this well-known TV format with equally successful and popular, next generation comedies. This and other recent developments in TV entertainment on both sides of the Atlantic have brought about an exponential increase in the number of new generation TV series or what Mittell (2006) refers to in contemporary American television as narratively complex forms of storytelling. *Desperate Housewives*, *Six Feet Under*, *Nip/Tuck*, *Lost*, *House M.D.*, *Californication*, *Dexter*, and *The Sopranos* could perhaps be considered some of the most recent expressions of this trend. Among other aspects, such narrative complexity in recent TV series seems typically to entail a mixing of different genres (such as thriller and romance, medical drama and soap opera, drama and comedy, etc.) which makes it more common for viewers to encounter, for example, the odd black humour or off-colour remark, even in TV series whose main purpose is not that of being funny. Other potentially disturbing elements that might find a place in these new generation series include the portrayal of death, disability, sexuality, homosexuality, extreme violence, etc. and especially the sometimes light-hearted manner in which similar issues are dealt with.

The massive importation of such series into the Italian market raises the question of whether their continuous switching between different registers and genres will be successfully rendered in the dubbed version. In particular, the relative unfamiliarity of Italian viewers with, for instance, the juxtaposition of comedy with strong emotional impact scenes or vice versa poses the question of whether and how elements that are at odds with the predominant tone of a series are dealt with when these mixed-genre audiovisual products are dubbed for the Italian market. Starting from a trend observed in the Italian dubbing of US series (Bucaria, 2005, 2007 and 2008; Chiaro, 2007) involving the deletion or toning down of most

instances of potentially disturbing elements (see also Chiaro, 2007 and Bianchi, 2008), this paper will take into consideration examples from recent US TV series dubbed into Italian and presenting a mixture of comedy and other genres, in an attempt to analyze the degree of manipulation or censoring that they underwent in terms of the linguistic representation of clashing genres and of their humorous content in particular.

Despite the historical interconnection between censorship and audiovisual texts (Grievesson, 2004; Mathews, 1994), and censorship and translation (Rundle, 1999 and 2000; Sturge, 1999 and 2002; Fawcett, 2003; Jansen, 2005), virtually no attention has been devoted in academia to the often ambiguous relationship between the censoring of audiovisual texts and humour. In fact, although academic studies concerning the complex mechanisms involved in audiovisual translation (AVT) have occasionally touched upon the translation of humour and its manipulation (Vandaele, 2002; Bucaria, 2005 and 2007; Chiaro, 2007), not many seem to have tackled the issue in filmic texts that present the mixture of drama and comedy that has recently become quite popular in imported TV productions.

The present study builds upon prior research conducted by the author (Bucaria, 2007) on three US TV series (*House MD*, *Nip/Tuck* and *Six Feet Under*) and expands considerably on the material used for the analysis by including more recent, controversial series that have been meanwhile dubbed into Italian. The aim is to verify the results of the previous study in search of patterns for the rendering of potentially disturbing elements such as swearwords and references to sexuality, religion, death, disability, drug use, etc. The analysis is based on the pilot episodes of 12 US television series that have recently appeared or are still appearing on Italian TV screens. In addition to the three TV series used for the analysis in Bucaria (2007), the material for the present study includes *Arrested Development*, *Dead Like Me*, *Dexter*, *Dirt*, *Californication*, *Entourage*, *Pushing Daisies*, *The Sopranos* and *Weeds*. Unfortunately, a detailed description of the main characters and story lines of each series would require too much space. Therefore, the examples in the following sections will be only briefly contextualized and the reader may find further information on the series' official websites.

In line with what seem to be the most recent developments in quality TV à la HBO (McCabe and Akass, 2007), with very few exceptions, all the series included in the analysis are characterized, by strong language, explicit references to sexual practices, drug use, and politically incorrect language in general. In fact, in their analysis of the features of HBO programming and, by extension, of the reasons for its critical acclaim and audience success, McCabe and Akass note that the representation of the illicit in this premium cable TV channel's programming has become a synonym for risk-taking, ground-breaking television:

Evoking ideas of quality in terms of creative risk-taking and artistic integrity are cited as a way of justifying the explicitness of what can be allowed. HBO takes control of the illicit and encloses it within its institutional discourse of quality. (2007: 69)

While the authors tend to challenge the idea that the use of elements such as swearing, sexual explicitness, and extreme violence necessarily equals quality in TV programming, the fact remains that these characteristics are undoubtedly part of the DNA of some of the shows featured on US cable channels such as HBO and, more recently, Showtime. However, I will claim that some of the constituting features of these TV series' DNA tend to be altered in the transposition into Italian by means of dubbing.

The first part of the paper will provide evidence for the fact that strong and ambiguous language is in a significant number of cases diluted in the Italian dubbed version with respect to the English original. The second aim of this piece of research is to analyze the impact that the censoring of potentially disturbing elements has on the humorous content of specific lines dubbed into Italian. The hypothesis is that in a significant number of cases the omission or toning down, whether performed consciously or unconsciously, of the seemingly disturbing elements undermines the successful rendering of the humorous content in the target language. As a final note, it should be highlighted that the words 'censoring' and 'censorship' are used in this paper almost interchangeably to indicate the manipulation process as a result of which swearwords and other potentially disturbing elements were deleted or diluted. For further observations based on the intentional factor in censorship the reader is referred to Allan and Burrige (2006).

## 2. Translating potentially disturbing elements

### 2.1. Swearwords

One of the first elements, although by no means the only one, that allows viewers and researchers to gauge the actual impact of the censoring activity applied to the material in question is the rendering of vulgar language and profanities into the target language. In this section I will discuss examples containing swearwords that are generally considered as offensive, for example the ones referring to the sexual/scatological sphere (Chiaro, 2006) and to blasphemy. I will start by looking at the most common swearwords, e.g. different variations of "fuck" and "fucking" and occurrences of "shit", "bastard", "asshole", and some blasphemy, such as "god-damit", "hell", "Christ", "Jesus", etc. (Pavesi and Malinverno, 2000; Azzaro, 2005). Table 1 provides a concrete count of swearwords used in the pilot episode of each series in the English and in the Italian versions.

**Table 1.** Number of swearwords in the English and Italian versions

	English	Italian	% deleted swearwords
<i>Entourage</i> (HBO)	83	48	42%
<i>Dead Like Me</i> (Showtime)	52	11	89%
<i>The Sopranos</i> (HBO)	48	47	2%
<i>Californication</i> (Showtime)	49	21	57%
<i>Weeds</i> (Showtime)	44	40	9%
<i>Six Feet Under</i> (HBO)	43	9	89%
<i>Nip/Tuck</i> (FX)	36	27	25%
<i>Dexter</i> (Showtime)	32	22	31%
<i>Dirt</i> (FX)	17	11	35%
<i>House M.D.</i> (FOX)	6	1	83%
<i>Pushing Daisies</i> (ABC)	3	0	100%
<i>Arrested Development</i> (FOX)	2	1	50%

As Table 1 shows, *Entourage* presents the highest number of swearwords in the English version, while *Arrested Development* has the lowest number. In general, it is not surprising that fewer swearwords occur in shows originally aired on more family-oriented networks such as FOX and ABC, whereas creatively bolder and more innovative cable networks such as HBO and Showtime apparently make of strong language one of the elements that set their series apart from the rest of what is on offer on TV (see section 1). A comparison with the column showing the number of swearwords found in the Italian dubbed versions of the pilot episodes highlights an almost consistent deletion of the examples of swearing. *Pushing Daisies*, *Dead Like Me* and *Six Feet Under* seem to be the series with the highest swearword deletion ratio (100%, 89% and 89% respectively). *The Sopranos* and *Weeds* appear as the only two exceptions, with a number of swearwords that is approximately the same in both versions. Typically, the lesser impact of the dubbed version is due to either a complete deletion of the swearword (examples 1 and 2) or to a preference for the non-swearword option in Italian as in (3) and (4), in which “asshole” and “ass” were rendered as *cretino* [idiot, stupid] and *sedere* [butt] respectively.

- (1) House: I don't care if you can walk, see, wipe your own ass.  
*Non importa che uno veda o cammini*  
 [It doesn't matter if one can see or walk.]  
 (*House MD*)

- (2) Lucy: Well, maybe if you don't want your client in the celebrity "big asses" piece, she should stop her twice-daily trips to KFC.  
*Se non vuole foto della sua cliente nel servizio "celebrità fra i pesi massimi" le dica di smettere di mangiare pollo fritto.*  
 [If you don't want pictures of your client appearing in the "heavy weight celebrities" piece, tell her to stop eating fried chicken.]  
 (Dirt)
- (3) George: Why do you have to be such an asshole?  
*Perché devi essere così cretino?*  
 [Why do you have to such an idiot?]  
 (Dead Like Me)
- (4) Hank: I just so happen to have my GPS with me. I've stored it up my ass.  
*In caso di necessità mi oriento col GPS. Ho un modello incorporato nel sedere.*  
 [If I need to I can use my GPS. I have a built-in model in my butt.]  
 (Californication)

Omissions of the word "fucking" in adjectival position and of "shit" used in its figurative sense of "stuff, things" are also frequently observed cases, as is the deletion of blasphemy. (5) and (6) conveniently exemplify these trends:

- (5) Eric: Jesus Christ... fucking scared the shit out of me.  
*Mi hai fatto prendere un colpo.*  
 [You scared me.]  
 (Entourage)
- (6) George: Goddamn, she's selling my shit!  
*Maledizione, sta vendendo le mie cose.*  
 [Damn, she's selling my things.]  
 (Dead Like Me)

Another example of the suitably concealed use of blasphemy occurs in *Californication*. At the very beginning of the pilot episode Hank (David Duchovny) is having a dream in which he is talking to a nun in what looks like a church and he is expressing his frustration for his writer's block. As shown in (7), the word "god-damn" is replaced in Italian by the phrase *porca puttana*, which is however only hinted at (*porca putt-*) before Hank readily apologizes to the nun for his language.

- (7) Hank: I can't seem to be able to produce so much as a goddamn predicate.  
*E adesso non riesco più a scrivere due parole in croce, porca putt-*  
[And now I can't even put two words together, fuck!]  
(*Californication*)

The reduction in the number of swearwords almost across the board in our sample seems to be the most evident finding. However, a further look at Table 1 reveals that the diminished swearword frequency in Italian does not always follow any recognizable or consistent patterns, nor does it reflect the gap between the family-oriented or cutting-edge, cable-network collocation of the series in the United States. In an attempt to substantiate the reasons for some of these choices, a number of hypotheses are available, such as the possibility that different dubbing studios or even single dubbing professionals might have different standards as far as the use of swearwords in audiovisual products is concerned. However, if on the one hand *Dead Like Me* and *Pushing Daisies*, which were both dubbed by SEFIT-CDC, were rather heavily censored in their swearword content, on the other hand, although *The Sopranos* and *Californication* were also dubbed by the same dubbing professionals at LaBiBi.it, the two pilots present very different levels of manipulation, with 2% and 57% in swearword deletion ratio respectively.

The scheduling of a specific TV series on Italian terrestrial or satellite channels might also be seen as a potential justification for the cuts, with satellite channels possibly being more tolerant for swearword use than their terrestrial counterparts. However, with the exception of *Dead Like Me* and *Entourage*, all the twelve series have been at some point aired on one of Italy's national TV channels. Consequently, this does not provide a reason for the more extensive censoring present, for example, in *Dead Like Me* with respect to *The Sopranos*.

Perhaps a possible explanation for the inconsistencies in the rendering of swearwords might be found in the different themes and expectations that surround certain TV products, which in turn make the use of strong language or even humour in a given series more or less acceptable than in another. For example, considering characters in the show and perhaps because of the advertising campaigns which introduced it, viewers might expect *The Sopranos* linguistically and visually very violent. Conversely, the fact that a physician might often be blatantly disrespectful to his patients, co-workers and to medical ethos in general (*House MD*) or that death-related situations (e.g. *Dead Like Me* and *Six Feet Under*) might involve the use of strong language and occasionally humour is perhaps still a foreign concept for a large part of the Italian TV audience. Of course, whether supposed expectations actually correspond to the truth is always difficult to assess.

From this albeit cursory analysis, a fragmentary picture emerges that seems to point to the existence of a certain amount of subjectivity and arbitrariness in the choice to keep or delete swearwords. What seems to be clear is that some level of censoring as regards swearwords exists as an almost consistent phenomenon in the material that was analyzed, regardless of the idiosyncrasies of the individuals involved in the dubbing process of a given series or of the network that airs the show in Italy. In an attempt to offer further insight into whether one specific subject was censored more than others, the following sections will exemplify the censoring of humorous lines by means of the deletion or toning down of potentially disturbing elements relating to sexual and scatological references, death and religion, drug use, and politically incorrect language.

## 2.2. *Sexual and scatological references*

The sexual and scatological spheres are some of the most frequent targets of censorial intervention. This might involve the deletion of swearwords as well as of sexual references altogether. It will become clear from the examples below that this involves a downplaying of the humorous content as well.

(8) Johnny: You know what? For two years you guys mooched off me!  
You ate my food... you fucked my fall-out...

Eric: Your what?

Johnny: My Melrose Place fall-out pussy.

Johnny: *Sentite, per due anni avete vissuto sulle mie spalle, mi avete svuotato il frigo, vi siete fatti Melrose...*

Eric: *Che cosa?*

Johnny: *La mia collezione di cassette di Melrose Place.*

[Listen, you lived on me for two years, emptying my fridge, watching Melrose..., Eric: What?, Johnny: My Melrose Place video collection.]

*(Entourage)*

(9) Roxy: Time to bust that cherry.

*È il momento di mettersi alla prova.*

[It's time to put yourself to the test.]

*(Dead like me)*

In (8), on-and-off actor Johnny “Drama” Chase (Kevin Dillon) reminds his friends that when he was a star on the hit TV series *Melrose Place* he used to take advantage of all the benefits coming from his celebrity, including the sexual company of his female co-stars. The Italian version deletes not only the vulgar word for the female genitalia but also the sexual comment in general, which becomes a reference



to Johnny's *Melrose Place* video collection. This way the humorous representation of Johnny's matter-of-fact, "no-frills" attitude to sex has been removed. Example (9) refers to George's (Ellen Muth) very first assignment as a grim reaper, about which she is not very enthusiastic. The line in (9) represents fellow grim reaper Roxy's (Jasmine Guy) no-nonsense way of encouraging George. However, the reference to losing one's virginity is not clearly reflected in the Italian dubbed version, which fails to convey one of Roxie's personality traits and to offer a reason for George's surprised facial expression.

Failure to convey the humorous content in the dubbed versions also emerges from examples (10) and (12), in which some of the characters offer further demonstration of their edgy sense of humour.

(10) Karen: Bill and I didn't even touch each other until we were dead and buried.

Hank: Ok, are you trying to make me throw up now?

*Karen: Io e Bill non ci siamo mai sfiorati con dito prima che il nostro rapporto fosse chiuso.*

*Hank: Vuoi rinfacciarmelo e farmela pagare?*

[Karen: Bill and I didn't even touch each other until our relationship was over., Hank: Do you want to rub that in my face and get back at me?]

*(Californication)*

(11) Hank: Near the vaganus?

*Vicino all'ano?*

[Near the anus?]

*(Californication)*

(12) Lucy: How's the view from deep inside his ass?

*Com'è la vista con la faccia sotto i suoi piedi?*

[How's the view from under his feet?]

*(Dirt)*

In (10) from *Californication*, womanizing writer Hank is questioning his ex-girlfriend Karen's (Natascha McElhone) loyalty. To her protestations that she and her current fiancé had not started a sexual relationship before Karen and Hank's relationship was completely over, the man deliberately misunderstands the words "until we were dead and buried" to imply some sort of necrophile behaviour on the couple's part. As the back translation shows, there is no sign of the humorous misinterpretation in the dubbed version. Similarly, in (11) Hank is in bed with a married woman who is complaining of the fact that her husband thinks the clitoris

is located at the bottom of the vagina rather than at the top. Hank's use of the slangy term "vaganus" to indicate the area in question is not reflected in the Italian version, which opts for "anus" instead of a more creative solution.

Gossip magazine editor Lucy Spiller (Courtney Cox) in the TV series *Dirt* is also a strong female character who often uses language to reassert her role as a powerful woman on the cruel Hollywood scene. In (12) she is humorously accusing Brent Barrow (Jeffrey Nordling), editor of the magazine *DirtNow*, of being nothing but the loyal soldier of the owner. The Italian version tones down the vulgarity of the line by replacing the image involving an extreme case of "ass kissing" with that of being under somebody's feet (see also the Italian expression *leccare i piedi* [to lick somebody's feet]). As a consequence, the humour in Lucy's remark is considerably diluted, despite the fact that the more vulgar equivalent *leccare il culo* also exists in Italian and could have been conveniently used.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects is the rendering of relatively innocent expressions such as "make out" and "fool around" in (13) and (14), which were also the object of censoring.

(13) Silas:       Wanna fool around?  
                   *Ce la spassiamo?*  
                   [Do you want to have fun?]  
                   (*Weeds*)

(14) Turtle:     Come on, what do I gotta do to get a little? (...) Come on, just make out with me... then I'll show you where Vince eats breakfast.  
                   *Che devo fare per giocare con te? (...) Andiamo, gioca con me. Facciamo un giro della casa.*  
                   [What do I have to do to play with you? (...) Come on, play with me. Let's have a tour of the house.]  
                   (*Entourage*)

In (13) humour is conveyed by the comic timing of Silas' suggestion to have sex as soon as his mother (Mary Louise Parker) steps out the door. Although the more general Italian phrasing does not fail to convey Silas' wish, it does attenuate the comical eagerness of the two teenagers to engage in sexual activity behind their parents' backs, which is a recurrent theme in the episode. Similarly, in (14) Turtle (Jerry Ferrara), a member of movie star Vincent Chase's social circle, almost begs for the sexual company of a girl whose ultimate goal is to sleep with the famous actor. The humorous undertone of the scene lies in the fact that Turtle, who is probably the least handsome of Chase's friends, has to promise the girl that he will show her where Chase eats his breakfast as a way to seduce her. The Italian dubbed

version, on the other hand, opts for a less sexually explicit euphemism by using the verb *giocare* [to play], which does not fit the more straightforward Turtle and the already sexually loaded scene.

### 2.3. Death and religion

Since some of the series sampled openly revolve around the theme of death (e.g. *Dead Like Me*, *Six Feet Under*, *Pushing Daisies*), it is not surprising that the episodes examined should contain various references to death and religious beliefs. However, when the references have a humorous tinge, a certain level of manipulation can be noted.

(15) DeeDee: Now how'd I know you'd be the first person I see when I got to, uh – is this? (looks around) Which one is this?

Chuck: This isn't either: well, maybe it's both.

*DeeDee: Non avrei mai immaginato che avrei trovato subito te una volta arrivata in... dove siamo?*

*Chuck: Non lo so. Comunque, non importa. Anzi, tagliamo corto.*

[DeeDee: I would never have thought I'd find you when I got to... where are we?, Chuck: I don't know. Anyway, it doesn't matter. In fact, let's get to the point.]

*(Pushing Daisies)*

(16) Mason: You remember the first time you asked your parents about the D word? My dad just about shit his pants.

*Ricordi la prima volta che chiedesti ai tuoi genitori che cos'era la morte? Mio padre fu assalito dal panico. [Remember the first time you asked your parents what death was? My father had a panic attack.]*

*(Dead Like Me)*

In (15), Ned (Lee Pace) and Chuck (Anna Friel) have brought back to life DeeDee, who is confused as to whether she is dead or alive (“Which one is it?”). Chuck, who is still equally confused after being brought back to life by Ned, offers her an unclear explanation. The Italian version chooses to leave out the reference to life/death and Chuck’s comical hesitation by replacing them with a surprisingly assertive comment. Conversely, the implicit reference to death in (16), “the D word”, is made explicit in the dubbed version, which also omits Mason’s colourful description of his father’s strong emotional reaction to his question.

Examples (17) and (18) further show how the Italian dubbing omits important information that contributes to the humorous effect of the English dialogue. As a consequence, the black humour in both cases is diluted, respectively, through

the omission of the subtle criticism to the death penalty in the US and of Michael's desire not to see his siblings again unless one of their parents (and not a relative) dies.

(17) Emerson: Good, last meal can go a long way: our penal system makes a point of it.

*È una cosa importante, l'ultimo pasto del condannato.*

[A prisoner's last meal is important.]

*(Pushing Daisies)*

(18) Michael: I'll see you when the first parent dies.

*A quando morirà un parente.*

[See you when a relative dies.]

*(Arrested Development)*

The rendering of humorous comments concerning religion seems to be ambiguous and does not always allow for definitive conclusions on the reasons why a specific form of manipulation has been performed.

(19) Josh: Religion my ass, it's a straight up snuff film.

*La religione è una boiata. I film così li chiamano snuff.*

[Religion is rubbish. That kind of film is called snuff.]

*(Weeds)*

(20) George: When I was little my mom told me Santa Claus didn't exist, neither did the Easter bunny, the tooth fairy or the great pumpkin. Even though she didn't say so specifically I just sort of assumed that God didn't either.

*Quando ero piccola mia madre mi disse che Babbo Natale non esisteva, neanche il coniglietto di Pasqua, nè il topolino dei dentini. Anche se lei non lo disse chiaramente, diedi per scontato che nemmeno Dio esisteva.*

[When I was little my mom told me Santa Claus didn't exist, neither did the Easter bunny or the tooth fairy. Even though she didn't say it clearly I assumed God didn't exist either.]

*(Dead Like Me)*

(21) George: I was born again, but not in a creepy religious way.

*Ero rinata. Ma non in un raccapricciante senso religioso.*

[I was born again, but not in a chilling religious way.]

*(Dead Like Me)*

For example, the fact that (19) and (20) keep the irreverent comments on the Catholic religion as portrayed in the film *The Passion of the Christ* and the assumed similarity between God and other products of the imagination might be seen as an indication that such remarks are not considered worth censoring. Even in (21), although it perhaps fails to convey the reference to born-again Christians, the translation keeps the not-so-veiled criticism towards all things religious that characterize George's attitude to life. However, the frequent omission of examples of blasphemy noted in 2.1. points to the fact that the viewers' religious sensitivity was indeed a concern for the translators and adaptors of these series, and that perhaps taking God's name in vain is still perceived as more disturbing than expressing doubts about God's existence or other religious beliefs in a more articulate way, even when it involves a humorous take on the subject.

#### 2.4. Drugs

Needless to say, the series that contains the largest number of visual and verbal references to recreational drugs and drug use is obviously *Weeds*. Nevertheless, the more or less accurate rendering of the swearwords in the pilot episode reported in Table 1 is also reflected in a seemingly uncensored translation of references to marijuana. The only case in which drugs were mentioned in the English version but not in the Italian counterpart is (22), from *Dead Like Me*, although an analysis of further episodes of *Six Feet Under* (Bucaria, 2005) shows that references to drug use were indeed omitted.

(22) George: If I have one wish, it would be that the person sitting in car six, seat four would be detained by a security firm possession of narcotic substances, anything that might not get them on the train.

*Se potessi realizzare un solo desiderio vorrei che la persona che dovrebbe sedersi nella carrozza sei posto quattro venisse trattenuta e le fosse impedito di salire sul treno.*

[If I could have one wish, it would be that the person about to sit in car six, seat four would be detained and prevented from getting on the train.]

*(Dead Like Me)*

It should be noted that synchronization was not at stake here, since the speaker is off-screen at that moment. However, other similar comments on both light and heavy drugs in the same episode do not seem to have undergone any censoring, which once again seems to point to a lack of consistency in the treatment of this and other potentially disturbing elements.

## 2.5. Politically incorrect language

In the section on politically incorrect language, we include humorous comments involving disabled people and other minorities in a way that might be regarded as potentially disrespectful. (23) and (24) are two cases in point:

- (23) Karen:           He's like a special needs person that works at McDonald's.  
                           È un po' come quelle persone svantaggiate che lavorano da McDonald's.  
                           [He's like those disadvantaged people working at McDonald's.]  
                           (*Californication*)
- (24) Tony:            Old fucking Jew!  
                           Merdo so giudeo!  
                           [Shitty Jew!]  
                           (*The Sopranos*)

In the scene from *Californication* Hank is not wearing his pants when he goes to pick up his daughter for lunch, since he has accidentally left them at one of his lovers' house. His daughter (Madeleine Martin) asks him whether he is mentally insane, to which Karen makes the comment in (23). Although the phrase "special needs person" in English is a euphemism meant to be a politically correct expression to designate mentally challenged people, the remark is intended as an offense to Hank and his childish behaviour. The Italian version opts for the very vague *persone svantaggiate*, which does not exclusively designate mentally challenged people, and, in any case, not those who work at McDonald's in Italy. Perhaps a reference to other jobs typically offered to mentally disabled people in the country, such as parking lot attendants, would have better rendered the slightly irreverent comparison made by Karen.

Finally, (24) contains an affectionate insult with which Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) addresses one of his family's oldest partners. However, the word *giudeo* is hardly ever used in contemporary Italian to refer to people of Jewish background and it therefore sounds old-fashioned and unnatural, especially when paired with the adjective *merdo so*. As a consequence, although Tony's attitude is clearly playful, what is meant as a humorous comment sounds bizarre at best in Italian. Whether the use of this specific word was dictated simply by the necessity to match lip movements or by a conscious attempt at emotionally distancing the audience from a potentially offensive line is, as in a number of the cases discussed so far, only speculation.

### 3. Concluding remarks

An analysis of the pilot episodes of twelve recent US TV series dubbed into Italian showed a certain level of inconsistency in the censoring of swearwords and in the linguistic representation of controversial themes. Specifically, the most evident censorial intervention as far as swearing and blasphemy were concerned was found in series such as *Six Feet Under*, *Dead Like Me*, *Pushing Daisies* and *House MD*, whereas the number of swearwords was left almost intact in *Weeds* and *The Sopranos*. No specific patterns could be established that might explain the uneven rendering of examples of swearing in different series, despite the fact that hypotheses concerning the network or time slot in which a given TV series was aired were also considered. The deletion or toning down of a number of humorous comments revolving around potentially disturbing elements such as sexuality, death, religion, drugs and politically incorrect language was proved to negatively impact the successful rendering of the humorous content of the English version. In this case, too, no apparent patterns were found suggesting that one specific subject might spur censoring intervention more frequently than others. However, the lack of consistency in the translational choices even within the same series seems to indicate the absence of generalized guidelines and the existence of a certain level of arbitrariness influencing translational choices in Italy's contemporary dubbing industry.

As for similar controversial themes, these results confirm previous studies on the subject of manipulation and censorship in TV products dubbed into Italian (Bucaria, 2005, 2007 and 2008; Chiaro, 2007; Bianchi, 2008). However, it should be noted that these findings are not meant to suggest a demonizing attitude towards dubbing per se or to encourage its *a priori* rejection as an unreliable mode of AVT, since, in fact, censorial intervention has been found in subtitled fiction and non-fiction programmes as well (e.g. Antonini *et al.*, 2003). Rather, more studies seem to be needed in order to provide a deeper understanding of the reasons underlying certain translational choices in the Italian AVT industry in general, be it in dubbed, subtitled or even voiced-over TV products. Moreover, further attention should be devoted to the fact that translated audiovisual products do not exist in a vacuum but are meant to be put to the service of specific end-users (Bucaria and Chiaro, 2007), the viewers, who should therefore be enabled to enjoy them being fully aware of the changes and manipulation that they have undergone as a result of the translation process.

In light of the analysis presented here, it is necessary to further consider the differences and similarities between the two versions, such as the conditions in which the dubbed programmes are shown in Italy and the US in terms of airing times. It is also worth considering the fact that no Italian TV channel, whether terrestrial or cable, enjoys the creative freedom of HBO and other US cable channels:

(...) with no commercials to interrupt speech, no FCC to censor language, and an institutional status that places the channel somehow beyond the reach of censorial power and industrial regulation, HBO stakes its reputation on consciously violating codes policing the illicit (McCabe and Akass, 2007: 69).

It is therefore easy to see how precisely this mismatch between source and target culture scheduling might be partly responsible for some of the series' DNA alterations noted above, particularly in terms of theedulcoration of swearwords and other potentially disturbing elements.

Finally, the treatment that some of these series have undergone during the dubbing process might also be seen as indicative of other, larger cultural issues related to quality, translation and censorship that we only have time to hint at here, but that will hopefully spur further research in the field. The first one is the fact that the censoring of US series in Italy might imply that what constitutes quality television or good television in the United States (Cardwell, 2007) is not necessarily shared by Italian mainstream culture and the AVT distribution industry, which feel the need to manipulate TV contents before releasing them to the end users, to the point of hiding the very characteristics that make these series unique in their country of origin. This consideration in turn raises the question of whether it is actually possible to identify a set of shared features on which the evaluation of TV quality should be based (Cardwell, 2007), or whether in fact the quality assessment of any TV audiovisual text still remains very much ingrained in specific national contexts.

Secondly, a perhaps even broader question concerns the possibility that TV audiovisual texts translated into Italian from other languages might be subject to a different, stronger kind of manipulation than that performed on other types of texts. In fact, in light of the examples provided above one cannot help but wonder if the censoring of TV audiovisual products is more justifiable or more culturally accepted in Italy than the blatant manipulation of other cultural objects such as books or even certain types of films. One could claim that if the type of manipulation analyzed here were to be performed on a novel, for example, this would cause more indignant reactions on the grounds that the author's words or the spirit of the novel were heavily distorted. Is this because TV audiovisual texts are ultimately just products to sell and are not invested, in the eyes of foreign distributors, with any pretension of intellectual/artistic value? Be it in terms of the dichotomy 'written vs. spoken word' or the one concerning 'TV series vs. art film', one has the feeling that the discourse on translation and censorship, at least in the Italian context, could be enormously enriched by considering the status of a given text or text typology within the target culture, and the effects of the manipulation carried out upon it as studied in this paper.



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### **Arrested Development** (2003-2006)

USA, FOX

Created by Mitchell Hurwitz

Italian dubbed version:

*Arrested Development/Ti presento i miei...*

Dubbing performed by TECNOSOUND / VIDEO SOUND SERVICE

Italian dialogues by Flavio De Flavis,

Lorena Bertini, Simona Allodi, Elisa

Galletta, Paolo Turco, Guglielmo

Paternostro

Dubbing director: Roberto Del Giudice

### **House, MD** (2004 - present)

USA, FOX

Created by David Shore

Italian dubbed version:

*Dr. House - Medical Division*

Dubbing performed by VIDEO SOUND SERVICE

Italian dialogues by Adelisa Pitti Leoni, Anna

Rita Pasanisi, Emanuela Petrolati, Paolo Turco,

Roberta Pelliccioni.

Dubbing directors: Marco Mete, Roberto Del

Giudice, Isabella Pasanisi, Anna Rita Pasanisi

***Californication*** (2007 – present)

USA, Showtime  
Created by Tom Kapinos  
Italian dubbed version:  
*Californication*  
Dubbing performed by LaBiBi.it  
Italian dialogues by Daniela Nobili, Marco Bardella  
Dubbing director: Daniela Nobili

***Dead Like Me*** (2003-2004)

USA, Showtime  
Created by Bryan Fuller  
Italian dubbed version:  
*Dead Like Me*  
Dubbing performed by SEFIT-CDC  
Italian dialogues by Fabrizio Manfredi, Antonella Damigelli, Claudia Pittelli  
Dubbing director: Michele Gammino

***Dexter*** (2006 - present)

USA, Showtime  
Developed by James Manos Jr.  
italian dubbed version:  
*Dexter*  
Dubbing performed by VIDEO SOUND SERVICE  
Italian dialogues by Monica Di Fonzo, Gianfranco Amalfitano, Elisa Galletta  
Dubbing director: Teo Bellia

***Dirt*** (2007-2008)

USA, FX  
Created by Matthew Carnahan  
Italian dubbed version:  
*Dirt*  
Dubbing performed by DEA 5  
Italian dialogues by Marco Cortesi, Rodolfo Cappellini, Gabriella Filibeck (season 1)  
Dubbing director: Alida Milana

***Nip/Tuck*** (2003 - present)

USA, FX  
Created by Ryan Murphy  
Italian dubbed version:  
*Nip/Tuck*  
Dubbing performed by VIDEODELTA - Telecittà (TO)  
Italian dialogues by Elena Pollacino, Anna Lana.  
Dubbing director: Mario Brusa

***Pushing Daisies*** (2007 – present)

USA, ABC  
Created by Bryan Fuller  
Italian dubbed version:  
*Pushing Daisies*  
Dubbing performed by SEFIT-CDC  
Italian dialogues by Adelisa Pitti Leoni, Fabrizio Manfredi, Antonella Damigelli  
Dubbing director: Fabrizio Manfredi

***Six Feet Under*** (2001-2005)

USA, HBO  
Created by Alan Ball  
Italian dubbed version:  
*Six Feet Under*  
Dubbing performed by EDIT  
Italian dialogues by Luca Intoppa, Antonella Damigelli  
Dubbing director: Fabrizio Temperini.

***The Sopranos*** (1999-2007)

USA, HBO  
Created by David Chase  
Italian dubbed version:  
*I Soprano*  
Dubbing performed by LaBiBi.it  
Italian dialogues by Daniela Nobili, Gianni G. Galassi, Novella Marcucci, Giorgio Favretto, Lina Zargani (seasons 1-5)  
Dubbing director: Gianni G. Galassi, Daniela Nobili

***Entourage*** (2004 – present)

USA, HBO

Created by Doug Ellin

Italian dubbed version:

*Entourage*

Dubbing performed by STUDIO EMME

Italian dialogues by Alessandro Spadorcia,  
Lorenzo Macrì et al.

Dubbing director: Marco More, Pierluigi  
Astore

***Weeds*** (2005 – present)

USA, Showtime

Created by Jenji Kohan

Italian dubbed version:

*Weeds*

Dubbing performed by C.T.A. (season 1)

Italian dialogues by Donatella Luttazzi, Stefano  
Ramieri

Dubbing director: Pietro Tiberi (season 1)