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Audiovisual Texts and Subtitling in the Teaching of Pragmatics

Abstract

In this paper I analyze the potentialities inscribed in the use of audiovisual material – two different TV series, *Lost* and *Brothers & Sisters* – and subtitles (DVD subtitles and the fansubs produced by the two largest Italian fansubbing communities, i.e. Itasa and Subsfactory) in teaching the dynamics of (im)politeness rituals. Since unwritten politeness rules vary considerably across cultures, a TV series offers learners examples of situated language use, where all the semiotic codes contribute equally to communication. In the case of *Lost*, the setting and the theme of the series make the dialogues simple and essential, with people very often opting out from expected politeness rituals because of the urgency of the situation. These features are not a shortcoming but an advantage, as they facilitate understanding in a teaching context. In *Brothers and Sisters*, on the other hand, interactions are generally more relaxed, as they involve family members and friends in everyday situations, but because of a high level of intimacy or rivalry between family members, they often dispense with politeness.

In particular, I analyze the interactional style, the conversational behavior and politeness, or most often impoliteness, strategies used by the main protagonists of the two series in their pilot episode, showing how different subtitles can be used to favor the understanding and learning of pragmatic phenomena.

1 Introduction

The teaching of pragmatic aspects in a language classroom is often regarded as a final step to be acquired after having reached grammatical proficiency. This is only partly true, because pragmatic choices affect communication in its simplest and most basic forms. If, for example, learners have to ask for directions to reach a place, the request structure might be kept plain but it should comply with the behavioral rules of the target lingua-culture. As has been shown (Thomas 1983; Leech 2014), pragmatic failures, although gradable in nature, have farther-reaching consequences than grammatical mistakes. Awareness of what is acceptable, unmarked behavior in the target culture should be taught alongside formal and structural aspects, and not kept distinct from them and postponed to the more advanced levels of language learning.

Teaching how to use language in situation can best be done by referring to real or realistic situations, so audiovisual products may prove suitable to the task and entertaining at the same time. Clips or extracts have been shown to be preferable, because they reduce the cognitive effort (Kaiser 2011) and allow learners to concentrate on smaller stretches of discourse, which are complemented by information from the non-verbal codes. Audiovisual communication is multimodal, i.e. achieved through all the audio and visual codes (including subtitles), a feature that makes input more understandable: if something is not understood through the verbal code, it may be recovered through gestures,¹ movements, or music.

In what follows I would like to show how to exploit extracts from TV series, a genre that is very popular with young people and that contains suitable samples of face-to-face interactions. By choosing samples in which communication is linguistically easy, I will show how the unmarked rules of polite interaction² may be disregarded for different reasons. As Leech points out, after being relatively less studied, impoliteness has recently become more researched for its 'marked' nature and salience. So, even though unmarked linguistic behavior corresponds to interacting smoothly and cooperating, more often than is thought, lack of politeness or impoliteness crops up in discourse. There are in fact some activity types and discourse genres where impolite behavior is recurrent, e.g. political debates, for example during the Question Time at the British House of Commons, certain TV programs, etc. (Leech 2014: 219-220).

Interlingual subtitles represent an interesting didactic tool for various reasons (Vanderplank 1988, 1990; Bird/Williams 2002; Danan 2004): first of all they help learners verify their hypotheses by comparing the audio verbal with the visual verbal and checking if they understood correctly; secondly, they reinforce vocabulary retention, by creating a strong link between items in the L1 and in the L2; thirdly, and perhaps, most interestingly, they promote reflection on the mediation process and whether or not it alters the forces at play in the target lingua-culture: for example, if the same level of politeness or impoliteness is achieved in translation and if this is appropriate in the receiving culture.

2 Some Features of TV Series

The genre of TV fiction, although not totally remote from that of films, has had booming success over the last decade, but has also become distinct from cinema for its own specific narrative, semiotic and linguistic features (Quaglio 2009a), which largely depend on its broadcasting times and modality. The language used in TV fiction tends to be less homogeneous and more varied than that of films, although they are both planned beforehand. Its variety is due to the fact that each fictional television subgenre has

¹ This is true only in some cases, as gestures may also contradict words, thus creating ambiguity. Furthermore, since gestures are in most cases culture-specific, instructors may have to clarify this aspect for their learners.

² For a recent overview of politeness see Leech (2014).

different communicative aims and textual and dialogic features. Television genres accommodate

texts that are characterized by formal to highly formal registers with a tendency towards standard and/or neo-standard language (mainly in TV fiction) [that] can be found together with texts which show (sometimes excessive) tendencies towards sub-standard varieties and features. (De Rosa 2015: 15)

As Italian TV critic Aldo Grasso has recently stated, TV series have replaced the so-called classic novel in the “sentimental education” of adolescents and youngsters (Grasso 2011). He argues that there is no evident difference between the classic novel and this new narrative text, the main variations residing in the different medium and language that is used. The result is thus a hybrid product, both in content and style. As for content, TV series may be thematic, but more often they can hardly be defined as belonging to only one genre, so much so that a term that is often used to classify some of them is *dramedy*. Even medical or legal series (e.g. *House*, *Scrubs*, *Grey’s Anatomy* or *Law & Order*, *The Good Wife*) are mainly dramatic, but accommodate humorous elements (Bednarek 2010: 13-14).

The two main factors responsible for the differences between TV series and films are their broadcasting times and modality. Episodes last for approximately forty minutes, so dialogues have to be constructed with this time limit in mind as well as with twists and turns in the plot to keep the audience’s attention alive. Even though stories in TV series are typically completed in one episode, series develop over the years and create a certain habit of dependence for their regular watchers. Occasional viewers, who may not be so familiar with the minute details of the plot, can take advantage of recaps of past events in the lives of some of the characters in order to understand the narrative. To this end, TV series very often employ flashbacks and flash-forwards that explain episodes in the lives of the characters. Specific features of TV series also include more technical choices that affect editing and camera use. As Creeber (2004: 115) points out, close-ups are very often used to convey confidential conversation, whereas quickly edited scenes serve the purpose of meshing different storylines together.

The dialogues of TV series are a subtype of “scripted/constructed dialogue” (Bednarek 2010: 63), similar to film and dramatic dialogue, but with some specific features of their own, having to do with the above-described constraints and with genre limitations. The comparability of fictional (either film or television) dialogue with spontaneous conversation has been the object of debate, with more space granted until very recently to film products (Pavesi 2014). Specialized studies like Quaglio (2009a, 2009b) and Forchini (2012), both relying on Biber’s (1988) multidimensional corpus methodology, highlight rather similar uses and patterning between fictional and spontaneous conversation, especially in dealing with the interpersonal dimension, that is, for example, mirrored in the use of personal pronouns. Analyses of some specific features of fictional dialogue, e.g. vague language in Quaglio (2009b), show however that differences with spontaneous conversation may concern frequency but certainly go beyond it, as they intersect the need for comprehensibility of the show and its search for attractiveness. Studies that rely

on corpus methodology but that also advocate taking the conventions of audiovisual dialogues and genres into account, like Baños Piñero and Chaume (2009) and Baños Piñero (2013), arrive at somewhat different conclusions. Scriptwriters intentionally opt for features of spontaneous conversation that are recognized as such by the public, but struggle between the two opposite poles of creativity and standardization and tend to conform to the rules of synchronism in dubbed products, to the norms imposed by dubbing studios (e.g. standardization, self-censorship, patronage), and to the strong link between image and word (Chaume 2012; Baños Piñero 2013).

2.1 *Lost*

Lost is an American sci-fi/drama for television written by Damon Lindelof, J. J. Abrams and Jeffrey Lieber, produced and aired in the US by ABC since 2004. It is set on a mysterious tropical island after a plane crash. The survivors camp on the beach waiting to be rescued.

As soon as it was first broadcast, *Lost* became a trend-setting series, one that due to its plotline rich in mysteries and twists, and very innovative narrating techniques and montage established a new genre in the field of TV fiction, becoming a huge global success. The story is told in a heavily serialized manner and each single episode has a main storyline on the island and a secondary thread devoted to another time and place in the characters' life. These temporal and spatial manipulations are one of the most distinctive components of this TV program compared to any other show: not only are there flashbacks that portray what happened before the crash of Oceanic Flight 815, but there also flash-forwards, i.e. interjections of a scene representing an event expected, projected, or imagined to occur at a later time, and flash sideways, fragments in which characters live out alternative scenarios. This heavily influences the language that is used, most of the time reduced to essential communication, at times completely devoid of conventional ritualized expressions and phatic language, but also distinguished by catchphrases associated with the most important characters, which gradually become their 'trademark'. There are interesting differences among seasons, as, for example, in series one characters find themselves obliged to live together on an apparently deserted island after the plane crash, so they get to know each other and cooperate. In season five, when events turn gloomy and menacing, the characters become more aggressive and scheming. The exchanges are not only brisk and targeted at the solution of some incumbent problem, but also accommodate pent-up anger and violence.

Interestingly, in season one flashbacks that portray episodes from the characters' previous lives are used to shed light on the characters themselves, a strategy that provides essential information both on the character-character and on the director-audience axis. Furthermore, given the urgency of the situation and the sense of anguish the castaways perceive at the beginning of the series, dialogues are simple and essential and are often transactional rather than merely interactional, i.e. communicating a specific message rather than maintaining social relationships. This makes the pilot episode an interesting source of examples to discuss.

2.2 Brothers & Sisters

Brothers & Sisters is an American family drama TV series that premiered on ABC in 2006 and ended with its fifth season in 2011. The show centers on the Walker family and their life in Pasadena, California, especially focusing on the relationships among five siblings (interpreted by Calista Flockhart and Rachel Griffith, among others) and their mother (played by Emmy Award winner Sally Field), their love lives and business fortunes. For this reason, the situations that are shown on-screen are everyday and familiar, like the language that is used.

If *Lost* is characterized by reduced politeness rituals in the aftermath of a disastrous event, *Brothers & Sisters* presents a more familiar setting. The series has in fact a typical 'conversational' nature, as considerable space is allocated to social chitchat, in the form of small talk or conversational routines, but also to quarrels between siblings and parents. Both elements represent instrumental building blocks for learners who need to acquire pragmatic competence in the foreign language next to grammatical and lexical skills.

3 Film Language as a Model to Teach Features of Spontaneous Conversation

Recently, much has been written to endorse the use of film material to teach aspects of interactional dynamics and to foster multimodal awareness in the foreign language classroom.³ As the literature on the subject has shown, the advantages of the pedagogic exploitation of films in the foreign language classroom are various (Rodríguez Martín 2006): films, or audiovisual texts in general, help non-native speakers to develop more natural-sounding pronunciation; they can be used to introduce students to a vast range of linguistic varieties in context (Stoller 1995; Shawback/Terhune 2002), taking advantage of the communication of various semiotic codes at the same time (paralinguistic features, kinesics, oculosics, proxemics); they provide learners with information, both linguistic and factual, that they can strategically exploit again on other occasions; they are an excellent tool for the teaching of any structural (i.e., morphological, syntactic) or communicative aspect (i.e., semantic and pragmatic features of spoken interaction) (Massi/Merino 1996); they allow for the design of complete and varied activities that can be carried out in the language classroom (Stoller 1995; Canning-Wilson 2000).

3.1 Film Dialogue and Natural Language Conversation

Another recent strand of research that has contributed to widening the use of audiovisual material in language teaching has to do with the real or alleged 'authenticity' of film language. The planned and scripted nature of audiovisual dialogue, i.e. their "written-to-

³ See, *inter alia*, Stoller (1995), Massi and Merino (1996), Canning-Wilson (2000), Shawback and Terhune (2002), Kaiser (2011).

be-spoken-as-if-not-written” (Gregory/Carroll 1978: 42) nature, or “prefabricated orality” (Baños Piñero/Chaume 2009; Chaume 2012), has often prevented teachers from using it as a model for face-to-face conversation. Gregory and Carroll (1978) openly recognized that film dialogue is a peculiar register, in that it aims to sound natural, but is in fact meticulously planned to appear so. Several studies on scripted texts (see, *inter alia*, Baños Piñero/Chaume 2009; Baños Piñero 2013) have pointed out that scriptwriters select specific features of speech that are widely accepted and recognized as such by the audience. The language of audiovisual texts can thus be described as “a combination of features deriving from both oral and written texts”. This is because, on the one hand, it promotes creativity and spontaneity, while on the other it is ruled by a complex set of norms, i.e., the constraints of the media, the conventions of the genre, the stylistic rules dictated by television authorities.

Some recent corpus-based studies comparing screen dialogue using a small corpus of film transcripts and real life conversation in the British National Corpus (Rodríguez Martín/Moreno Jaén 2009; Rodríguez Martín 2010) have demonstrated that movies employ a wide range of conversational strategies and devices. Consequently, they can be very useful for raising awareness of key conversational processes among language learners. Another valuable aspect of employing audiovisual material as a resource is that it provides a wide assortment of sociolects or, more generally, speech that can be recognized on the basis of several sociolinguistic parameters, such as age, gender, social class, provenance, level of education, thus exposing learners to many of the varieties they will encounter in real life interactions in the L2.

The comparability of film language to naturally occurring language is still an open-ended argument,⁴ with few studies providing empirical data and validation of the feasibility of the operation, although many recommend using films in foreign language teaching (see, *inter alia*, Stoller 1995). Tatsuki and her coauthors (Tatsuki/Nishizawa 2005; Tatsuki/Kite 2006) also aimed at establishing if in the case of differences, these were significant, or might even be useful for learners. Results for compliments in films, for example, show similar syntactic patterns, responses and topics to those employed in natural conversation. The sometimes-wider repertoire of lexical choices in films is an advantage for learners, who are thus exposed to more varied vocabulary.

As Mark Kaiser (2011) convincingly contends when illustrating the potentialities of a huge project exploiting film clips to teach foreign languages at the University of Berkeley Language Center,⁵ the instances in which the watching of a clip is preferable to that of a whole film are many. Usually, students have difficulty in following and understanding a

⁴ For a complete review see Pavesi (2012).

⁵ A group of researchers at the Berkeley Language Center set out to compile an Internet-based database of film clips, i.e., the Library of Foreign Language Film Clips (LFLFC), which allows authorized instructors and students to access the clips, either from the classroom or from home. Clips are first cut from audiovisual texts and then variously tagged (e.g., linguistically and culturally; see Kaiser (2011) for more details), so that they can be retrieved according to the user’s interests and needs. The project has grown into a huge collaborative network that involves several institutions that have been granted authorization to access and share their materials (see also Bruti 2015).

whole audiovisual text. Maintaining concentration for so long might prove to be a real effort, especially when students do not understand a good percentage of the text and therefore get discouraged. With short extracts from a TV series, especially a pilot, which gradually leads the audience into the narrative, the shortcomings of seeing a decontextualized extract can be easily overcome, and the instructor can always explain the context of the scene, if need be. At the same time, the cognitive effort is reduced considerably and students can focus on one piece at a time and “explore the language of the clip and the various components of visual semiotics (dress, setting, gesture, facial expressions, color palette, etc.)” (Kaiser 2011: 234). Teachers may suggest ways of exploiting film material by getting their students to concentrate on information encoded in nonlinguistic channels (e.g., the technical aspects related to framing and editing and the nonverbal signals of communication expressed through kinesics and proxemics), as has been shown by Bruti (2015, 2016).

3.2 Subtitles as a Tool to Favor Language Learning

After establishing the feasibility of using film dialogue as a model for face-to-face conversation, in what follows I consider the potential applications of subtitles of different types before exemplifying a possible proposal for classroom activities.

Students may understand the dynamics of an interaction partly from what is said but also more intuitively from gestures, movements, music, shots, etc. Different audio and video combinations can also be exploited in order to draw attention to the multimodal dimension of meaning making, highlighting both linguistic and cultural aspects that are portrayed in the audiovisual text. For example, a silent first viewing is useful to focus attention on kinesics in general, whereas a second (and possibly a third) viewing with the original soundtrack may favor concentration on phonetics, prosody and semantics, thus easing comprehension. Watching the same scene with subtitles in the L1 helps confirming hypotheses.

The use of subtitles in the language class has long been debated. The oral verbal code and nonverbal codes are integrated by written subtitles, which represent an additional aid to understanding. Vanderplank (1988), for instance, contends that they are not a distraction or a source of laziness, but on the contrary help the learning process by providing learners with authentic, comprehensible input. They can be especially useful for the “hard of listening”, as listening activities often create a sense of insecurity and anxiety, which can be overcome through the use of subtitles. In addition, they also increase metalinguistic competence, favoring a constant comparison between L2 dialogues and L1 translation (Pavesi 2002).

Some criticism has been directed at subtitles⁶ because learners often concentrate too much on reading and do not pay enough attention to the dialogues. This shortcoming can be easily overcome if the teacher prepares some tasks that require learners to pay

⁶ See Vanderplank (2016) for an overview.

attention to the dialogues. However, it is true that at a certain point it will be necessary to break the habit of reading subtitles by removing the support.

From a linguistic point of view, due to their spatio-temporal limits, subtitles result in a simplification of the original texts. In the first stages of language learning the simplification in subtitles allows learners to concentrate on the semantics of the message and understand the referential meaning in its essential form. When competence is higher, learners can notice differences between L2 dialogues and their written translation in their L1, being able to elaborate more complex elements such as phatic signals, interpersonal and pragmatic meanings. Learners thus fill in the gaps in the written subtitles with elements that they infer from the other channels. As Pavesi claims (2002: 139), viewing a subtitled film is a kind of semiotic cloze task involving various codes and two languages.

4 Some Proposals for the Teaching of Pragmatic Aspects

It is generally true that when learners are not highly proficient in a language, in order for a viewing experience to be profitable, dialogues should be slow, in a medium register and with rather heavily reduced subtitles (Pavesi 2002: 140). For the reasons hinted at above, *Lost*, especially in its first season of airing, represents a useful case in point. For different reasons, *Brothers & Sisters* may also provide plenty of examples of people interacting in a familiar, everyday setting. In this case, the nature of personal relationships accounts for the fact that politeness rituals are sometimes disregarded.

As Leech (2014) observes, non-politeness can take various forms, that is either lack of politeness, corresponding to a zero value, or impoliteness, which instead entails some markers that convey a degree of face attack. To better explain the concept, Leech resorts to a distinction he drew in his 1983 text on pragmatics (Leech 1983: 10-11), elaborated by Thomas (1983: 99), i.e. that between pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic (im)politeness. The pragma-linguistic dimension concerns the linguistic nature of an utterance, the way it is verbalized, whereas the socio-pragmatic one refers to the social conditions placed on language use, to what is perceived as appropriate linguistic behavior.

4.1 Examples from *Lost*

In a previous research project, Zanotti and myself (Zanotti/Bruti 2013) presented the first results of a comparative analysis of the subtitles produced by professional and non-professional translators for *Lost*. Some extracts from the first episode of the pilot were used to assess reception of some specific elements in translation. In particular, we selected some situations and asked respondents (e.g. students in our university classes) questions concerning their translation in two different sets of subtitles, i.e. the professional subtitles for the DVD version and the subtitles composed by the fansubbers of the Italian Subs Addicted community (Itasa). In Italy there are two large communities of fansubs, Itasa and Subsfactory – sottotitoli per passione (cf. reference list), which,

although based on the voluntary and unpaid work of fans, are in strong competition with each other, especially to make subtitles available online with the shortest possible time lag from the release of the product in the United States. For the experiment, we chose the first episode of the pilot to minimize the impact of prior knowledge about the story, so that the respondents who had never seen an episode of the series and had never heard of *Lost* could have all the necessary elements to understand the circumstances of the communicative situation and evaluate the translation choices. In addition, both the language and the narrative in this episode are quite simple, so it could profitably be used to teach the pragmatics of interaction.

The pilot opens with the catastrophic images of a plane wreckage: Oceanic Air Flight 815 from Sydney to Los Angeles crashed on a tropical island. Its survivors, suddenly torn from their lives in the civilized world, try to survive on an apparently deserted island, thanks only to the things that were saved from the wreckage and some resources they find in their new habitat. The first part of the pilot focuses on the figure of Jack Shephard, a young neurosurgeon in Los Angeles who provides aid to several castaways, and on his plan to look for the missing part of the plane to recover the transceiver. Right from the start, *Lost* relies on flashbacks that describe some of the protagonists' past lives.

As has been hinted at above, the situation of emergency makes communication essential and rapid. Talk is chiefly not interactional but transactional, i.e. geared towards the resolution of problems, the satisfaction of primary needs and the like. In other words, although the audiovisual product is in certain respects very sophisticated due to its filming and narrative techniques, it is also suitable for non-expert learners because of the brevity and simplicity of the exchanges. In Leech's terms (2014: 219), most of the exchanges score a zero point on the axis of pragma-linguistic politeness, because most of the utterances contain bold imperatives, or are devoid of any indicator of politeness. From a socio-pragmatic viewpoint, which is a trade-off between costs, benefits, and the situation of utterance, most of the turns at talk are likely to be perceived as adequate in this predicament.

Subtitles can provide an additional resource, not so much to ease understanding, but to appraise if pragmatic functions are comparable in the original dialogues and in translation, as will be shown in the extracts below. For reasons of space, the subtitles by Subsfactory are not taken into consideration. After the crash, a wounded man is trapped under the wrecked fuselage and another man, a doctor, as will be understood shortly, helps him. The cry for help is reduced to a few words and the necessity to act immediately also forces the addressee to respond quickly.

Original dialogue	DVD subtitles	Itasa subtitles
REDSHIRT #2: Help! Help! Somebody help me! Help! Help! Ah, my leg! Ah! Ah!	La mia gamba! [My leg!]	Oh, la mia gamba! [Oh, my leg!]
JACK: Hey you, just give me a hand! You, come on! Come over here, give me a hand! On the count of three: One, two, three.	Ehi, venga qui. Mi dia una mano. [Ehi, please come here. Give me a hand.]	Ehi, vieni qui, dammi una mano! [Ehi, come here, give me a hand!]

Fig. 1: Example 1 (*Lost* S01E01)⁷

In Italian, since the request is performed through an imperative, it is necessary to choose an address pronoun encoded in verbal morphology (for a discussion of the translation of address from English into Italian see, *inter alia*, Pavesi 1996 and Bruti 2013). The choice of the form depends on whether the informal or formal second person is selected as appropriate to the situation (*Lei*, i.e. the formal choice, in the DVD subtitles, and *tu*, the informal one, in Itasa fansubs). In a nutshell, if interaction among strangers would normally require the polite form *Lei*, it is highly likely that in a situation of heightened tension and emergency a request for help would be couched in a more direct and involved way, using the address pronoun *tu*. It is thus interesting to draw the learners' attention to the fact that the fansubbers have opted for this involved choice, differently from the professional translators, who made a more normative choice in the DVD subtitles. Let us discuss some more examples. In the situation in example 2, a pregnant woman is asking a man for help. The way he moves and the kind of questions he asks suggest that he is a doctor. Again, the situation is one of necessity, as the pregnant woman needs assistance, so, presumably, the contingency of the situation allows for the use of direct, quick utterances.

Original dialogue	DVD subtitles	Itasa subtitles
CLAIRE: Help me, please. I'm having, I'm having contractions.	La prego, mi aiuti. Ho le contrazioni! [Please, help me. I'm having contractions.]	Ti prego, aiutami! Sto avendo le contrazioni! [Please, help me! I'm having contractions.]
JACK: How many months pregnant are you?	-Di quanti mesi sei incinta? -Soltanto otto mesi.	-A che mese sei? -Sono solo all'ottavo mese.
CLAIRE: I'm, I'm nearly eight months.	[How many months pregnant are you? Only eight months.]	[Which month are you in? I'm only in the eighth month.]
JACK: [to Claire] How far apart are they coming?	-Ogni quanto si verificano? -Non so, ne ho appena avute alcune!	-Quanto tempo tra una contrazione e l'altra?
CLAIRE: I don't know, a-a few just happened.	[How often do they occur? I don't know, I just had some.]	-Non lo so, ne ho appena avute alcune! [How long between a contraction and the next? I don't know, I just had some!]

Fig. 2: Example 2 (*Lost* S01E01)

In the DVD subtitles the relationship between Jack, the doctor, and Claire, the pregnant woman, is portrayed as asymmetrical, with the slightly older and more 'powerful' speaker addressing the younger one with a vicinity pronoun and receiving instead a courtesy

⁷ For both subtitles a reference translation is provided within square brackets.

address form. Again, interestingly, in the Itasa subtitles the relationship is represented as perfectly symmetrical, because the frantic and critical situation reduces social distance. The emergency of the circumstances is largely confirmed by other signs in the visual and aural non-verbal codes, e.g. frenzied movements, tight facial expressions, hysterical cries.

Other aspects that might be observed in class are related to the degree of ‘specialization’ in the doctor’s questions. The explicit information that this young man’s name is Jack and that he is a doctor is not yet available to the audience, but some inferences are invited by his prompt intervention and by the language he uses, e.g. “How many months pregnant...”, “How far apart are they coming?”. The two translations have chosen different approaches: a more formal way of asking these health-related questions in the DVD subtitles, and a slightly more colloquial one, more typical of an off-hand and casual conversational style in the Itasa fansubs.

Similar observations can be made for the exchange in example 3, where the doctor reaches a man who is trying to revive a woman and comments on the position of her head. In this scene the doctor questions the young man’s skills in treating a woman with serious breathing problems, suggesting that the position of her head is not correct.

Original dialogue	DVD subtitles	Itasa subtitles
JACK: Stop! Her head’s not tilted far back enough. You’re blowing air into her stomach.	Fermo! La testa non è abbastanza indietro. Le soffi nello stomaco. [Stop! The head is not back enough. You’re blowing air into the stomach.]	Fermo! La testa non e’ abbastanza inclinata. Stai soffiando aria nello stomaco. [Stop! The head is not inclined enough. You’re blowing air into the stomach.]
BOONE: You sure? BOONE: That’s exactly what I was doing. I’m a lifeguard. I’m licensed.	Sicuro? E’ proprio quello che stavo facendo. Sono un bagnino. Ho la licenza. [Sure? It is exactly what I was doing. I’m a lifeguard. I have the license.]	Sicuro? E’ proprio quello che stavo facendo io. Sono un bagnino. Ho il brevetto. [Sure? It is exactly what I was doing. I’m a lifeguard. I have the license.]
JACK: Yeah, well, you need to seriously think about giving that license back.	Forse dovresti rinunciare a quella licenza. [Maybe you should give that license up.]	Si’, beh, dovresti davvero chiederti se non E’ il caso di restituirlo, quel brevetto. [Yes, well, you really ought to ask yourself if it shouldn’t be given back, that license.]

Fig. 3: Example 3 (*Lost* S01E01)

In this case, the translation in the professional subtitles does not exploit the choice of a more precise, granularly defined verb such as “tilted” and opts for “la testa non è abbastanza indietro”, whereas in the fansubs the more specific adjective “inclinata” has been employed. Likewise, there is a more detectable attempt at rendering the conversational tone of Jack’s turn in the fansubs than in the professional subtitles. Since Jack is being hostile and suggests that Boone is not fully qualified to be a lifeguard and should give his license back, he somehow prefaces his remark by using discourse markers and hesitators, e.g. “yeah” and “well”. The only hesitation that is present in the professional subtitles is the adverb “forse”, whereas the Itasa fansubbers introduced other elements,

such as “sì” and “beh” as discourse markers, and a structure that is typical of spoken speech, that is a right dislocation (“è il caso di restituirlo, quel brevetto”).

Finally, example 4 below is still taken from the first minutes of the episode and involves the doctor, the pregnant woman and a man that the doctor left in charge of the woman. The doctor returns to check if they are well. In this case, again, the interaction is rapid, smooth, and informal, features that have been preserved in translation.

Original dialogue	DVD subtitles	Itasa subtitles
JACK: [to Claire] You okay?	-Tutto bene?	- Stai bene?
CLAIRE: Yeah.	-Sì. [Everything all right? Yes.]	- Sì', sì'. [Are you ok? Yes, yes]
JACK: [to Hurley] You? Stay with her.	E tu? [And you?]	Tu? [You?]
HURLEY: Dude, I'm not going anywhere.	-Resta con lei. -E chi si muove? [Stay with her. And who is going to move?]	- Rimani con lei. -Coso... dove vuoi che vada? [Stay with her. Mate...where should I go?]

Fig. 4: Example 4 (*Lost* S01E01)⁸

A rather crucial element, though, is missing from the professional DVD subtitles. In Hurley’s third utterance in this episode (and in the whole series), he employs an element that will soon be identified as a typical idiolectal trait in his speech, i.e. the vocative “dude”. As emerged in Bruti and Zanotti (2013: 131, 135), Itasa fansubbers always render this catchphrase as “coso” throughout the seasons. This translating solution is a generic address form that shares the typical colloquial feature of vague language and an unusual morphological ending, as the base *cos-* does not take the masculine suffix *-o* (Channell 1994; Overstreet 2005; Cutting 2007). The decision not to reproduce this element may appear negligible at first sight, but is instead relevant when considering the role it plays in identifying Hurley and the easy-going way he has to establish rapport with people.

4.2 Examples from *Brothers & Sisters*

Brothers & Sisters, as briefly mentioned in 2.2 above, shows the eventful everyday lives of the Walker siblings and their relatives and friends. For this series, the subtitles available are the professional interlinguistic subtitles in Italian for the DVD version and the amateur subtitles in Italian produced by the Itasa community fansubbers. In this case the competing community, Subsfactory, did not provide their own fansubs, as they were probably not interested in the product.

⁸ Sometimes turns and subtitles do not correspond. When they do not, subtitles appear in their original onscreen segmentation.

Original dialogue	DVD subtitles	Itasa subtitles
KITTY: I'm not the person you think I am. That's what you people can't seem to understand. I am not a bitch! I am not aggressively plotting to make our mother feel bad.	Non sono la persona che credete. Perché non riuscite a capirlo? Non sono una strega. Non sto complottando per far sentire in colpa la mamma. [I am not the person you think I am. Why can't you understand it? I'm not a witch. I'm not plotting to make mum feel guilty.]	Non sono la persona che pensate io sia. E questo e' quello che voi sembrate di non riuscire a capire Non sono una puttana. Non sto tramando con determinazione di far sentir male nostra madre. [I'm not the person you think I am. And this is what you seem not to be able to understand. I'm not a whore. I'm not willingly plotting to make our mother feel bad.]
SARAH: Then why are you staying in a hotel?	Allora perché stai in albergo? [Why are you staying at a hotel?]	Allora perche' starai in un hotel? [Why will you be staying at a hotel?]
KITTY: Because, Sarah, the show is putting me up and it's going to be, like, a gorgeous room.	Perché paga l'emittente ed è un albergo di lusso, Sarah. [Because the TV channel is going to pay and it is a luxury hotel, Sarah.]	Perche', Sarah, lo show mi fornira' l'alloggio, e sara' tipo una stanza favolosa. [Because, Sarah, the TV show is going to provide the accommodation and it will be like a fabulous room.]
SARAH: Then, call Mom and tell her.	Allora chiama la mamma e diglielo. [Then call mum and tell her.]	Allora chiama la mamma, e diglielo. [Then call mum, and tell her.]
KITTY: No, Sarah, you call Mom and tell her that.	Puoi dirglielo tu. [You can tell her.]	Sai cosa, Sarah, chiami tu la mamma e glielo dici. [You know what, Sarah, you call mum and tell her.]
SARAH: I talk to Mom every day. You guys have hardly spoken in two years.	Noi ci sentiamo ogni giorno, voi due non vi parlate da due anni. [We talk to each other every day, you two have not been talking for two years.]	Parlo con la mamma ogni giorno, voi ragazze in due anni vi siete parlate a malapena. [I talk to mum every day, you girls have barely been talking for two years.]
PAIGE: ... peanut butter... Stop it, Cooper.	- Dammelo! - Smettila, Cooper! [Give it to me! Stop it, Cooper!]	Smettila Cooper! [Stop it Cooper!]
SARAH: Joe, could you take care of Heckle and Jeckle, just for a second?	Joe, ti dispiace occuparti di Cip e Ciop? [Joe, do you mind taking care of Cip and Ciop?]	Joe, potresti badare a Michael e Jackie giusto per un secondo? [Joe, could you look after Michael and Jackie, just for a second?]
JOE: Yeah, sure.	Certo. [Sure.]	Si'. Sicuro. [Yes. Sure.]

Fig. 5: Example 5 (*Brothers & Sisters* S01E01)

The extract above contains the opening of the series in which two sisters, Sarah and Kitty, are having a phone conversation. Kitty is about to return home after being away for a long time and, most of all, not talking to their mother. It is quite typical for an episode to start *in medias res*, that is in the middle of a conversation. In this example as well as elsewhere in the show, the formulaic rituals of greeting in the opening sequence are dispensed with. This is especially useful to show that at the beginning of an interaction

behavioral rules can sometimes be ignored. This happens partly because people are very close and can thus economize on the use of phatic and polite material, partly because the temporal limits of an episode of a TV series make it necessary to spend showing time on scenes that push the plot forward. As a consequence, anything that can be imagined, deduced, or contextually recovered is omitted.

The exchange in example 5 is also interesting to get students to reflect on which strategies are preferentially adopted in professional or amateur subtitling. At the beginning, Kitty justifies her behavior and explains that she is not hostile towards her mother, as their siblings seem to think. She says "I'm not the person you think I am [...] I'm not a bitch." The overall force of her utterance is rendered in both DVD subtitles and fansubs, but the term that she uses to describe what her siblings think of her, 'bitch', is translated in misleading ways. It is used to suggest that she has been nasty to her mother on purpose, so both "strega" (literally 'witch') and "puttana" ('whore') seem inadequate, the former because it is unnatural in spontaneous Italian, the latter because it is offensive in the wrong way. Among the translating options of "bitch", "stronza" would have been appropriate in this context.

In the remainder of the extract, the fansubs appear to be closely modeled on the source text and are generally much longer than the professional subtitles. There are in fact some examples of calques of the original and some misunderstandings. When for example Sarah says "I talk to Mom every day. You guys have hardly spoken in two years", the attempt at translating the colloquial form 'you guys' in the fansubs results in an awkward solution: "Parlo con la mamma ogni giorno, voi ragazze in due anni vi siete parlate a malapena." The address expression 'you guys', very typical in colloquial American English, is applicable to everybody irrespective of gender, so Sarah is referring to her sister Kitty and their mother. In the fansubs the expression is translated as if it were a feminine form of 'guys', but the word 'ragazze' to refer to mother and daughter does not work and may generate confusion, suggesting reference to another sister. On the other hand, the fansubs attempt to preserve the conversational flavor that characterizes the original dialogue. So when Kitty explains that she prefers to stay at a hotel, "because [...] the show is putting me up and it's going to be, like, a gorgeous room", in the DVD subtitles the discourse marker 'like' is omitted, whereas it is preserved in the fansubs with the equivalent approximating expression "tipo".

Finally, towards the end, Sarah asks her husband to take care of their children so that she can continue to talk with her sister. Instead of referring to her kids by their names, Paige and Cooper, she humorously calls them Heckle and Jeckle, who are two identical anthropomorphic magpies in an animated cartoon created in the late 1940s by Paul Terry and then released through 20th Century Fox. The two birds are identical apart from their voices and wittily get rid of a series of enemies. In the DVD subtitles they become Cip and Ciop, the names of two Disney characters, the squirrels Chip and Dale, in the Italian adaptation. They have been chosen because they are a more famous set of twins, but similarly provocative and witty. In the Itasa fansubs the names of the two

children surprisingly become Michael and Jackie. The fansubbers either did not understand the names in the original or simply did not investigate further into who Heckle and Jeckle might be. The repercussions of this incongruence are not serious because this is the first episode in the series, so the next time the two children appear the audience might well have forgotten about their names.

In terms of politeness, or lack of it, the conversation between Sarah and Kitty cannot be described as charged with offensiveness as the degree of face attack is quite reduced: the two sisters employ various directive acts, but do not add any aggressive charges. Confirmation that it is to be regarded as lack of politeness (but not impoliteness) is to be found in the fact that addressees do not construct the sender's behavior as intentionally face-attacking. Intimacy makes it possible to communicate directly and bluntly, without 'cushioning' one's utterances pragmatically.

Example 6 provides an interesting case of a quick father-son interaction. After the initial reciprocal greeting, William Walker takes on a leading role, one that exploits both status and role, and performs three directive speech acts. In the first one an inclusive 'we' is used to apparently share responsibility, but the intended meaning is obviously that William thinks it is necessary to talk, whereas Justin would prefer not to. What follows is a peremptory order, which leaves the addressee no space for negotiation, as is in fact confirmed by the fact that no reply follows. Authority within the family allows the father not to soften his order with hedges or mitigators. Again, in line with Leech (2014), the socio-pragmatic acceptability of an utterance needs to be evaluated on the basis of all these interacting factors, status, role, intimacy, etc.

Some aspects that are interesting in translation concern vocatives and the deontic implications of William's first utterance. As is well known, in English the repertoire of address expressions is very rich (see for a comprehensive description Formentelli 2014) and partly makes up for the presence of one address pronoun. When translating into Italian, a suitable pronoun form needs to be chosen but a vocative is hardly ever necessary. In this familiar relationship, a reciprocal 'tu' pronoun is the only possible choice, but in Italian neither "figliolo" nor "ragazzo" would be used in spontaneous talk. The only address form that would sound natural in this context would be the son's name, Justin. One final remark on the translation of the semi-modal verb "need to", a deontic modal which is less strong than "must" and more neutral than "have to" in that it expresses an objective compulsion that is not influenced by the will of the speaker. The translation in the Itasa fansubs does not allow for this interpretation because it represents the fact as a necessity felt by the speaker and hearer, differently from the 'vague' "dovere", which is instead compatible with several readings.

Original dialogue	DVD subtitles	Itasa subtitles
WILLIAM: Hey, son. JUSTIN: Hey, Dad.	- Ehi, figliolo. - Ciao, papà. [Hey, son. Hi, dad.]	Ehi ragazzo! Ehi, papà'... [Hey, boy! Hey, dad...]
WILLIAM: We need to talk about work, get you back on track. Come to my office tomorrow, noon. And get some coffee before you embarrass yourself.	Dobbiamo parlare di lavoro e di come rimetterti in sesto. [We need to talk about work and how to get you back on track.] Passa dal mio ufficio domani a mezzogiorno. [Call at my office tomorrow at noon.] E prendi un caffè, prima di renderti ridicolo. [And have a coffee, before you make a fool of yourself.]	Abbiamo bisogno di parlare di lavoro. Riportarti sui binari. [We need to talk about work. Get you back on track.] Vieni nel mio ufficio domani a mezzogiorno. [Come to my office tomorrow at noon.] E prendi del caffè prima di metterti in imbarazzo da solo. [And have some coffee before you embarrass yourself.]

Fig. 6: Example 6 (*Brothers & Sisters* S01E01)

The examples discussed above can be employed to show students directive moves, but the difference between directiveness and face attack needs to be explained by making reference to evident impolite and aggressive behavior. In example 7 below the tension between Nora and Kitty reaches a climax and Nora openly threatens Kitty's face.

Original dialogue	DVD subtitles	Itasa subtitles
WILLIAM: Hey.		
NORA: Hey.		
KITTY: Oh.		
NORA: Oh, that's right! Oh!	Proprio così: "Oh". [Exactly. "Oh".]	Oh, va bene oh... [Oh, ok. Oh!]
WILLIAM: Now, stop avoiding each other and talk.	Piantatela di evitarvi e parlate l'una con l'altra. [Stop avoiding each other and talk.]	Smettiamola di evitarci a vicenda e parliamo. [Let's stop avoiding each other and let's talk.]
KITTY: Ok.		Ok.
NORA: So... Isn't this nice? Here we are all. It's been so long. Oh! I should've put these napkins out!	Non è fantastico? Siamo tutti qui riuniti. È passato un secolo. Avrei dovuto mettere fuori i tovaglioli. [Isn't it fantastic? We are all here together. A century has gone by. I should have put the napkins out.]	Allora. Non e' carino? Eccoci tutti qua. E' da cosi' tanto... Oh! Avrei dovuto mettere fuori questi tovaglioli. [Well then. Isn't it nice? Here we are, all together. Oh! I should have put these napkins out.]
WILLIAM: Nora!	- Nora. - Mamma, lo sai... [Nora. Mum, you know it...]	Nora! [Nora!]
KITTY: Mom, you know...		Mamma, sai...

Original dialogue	DVD subtitles	Itasa subtitles
WILLIAM: Hello? Hold on a second.	Pronto. Aspetta un momento. [Hello. Hang on a minute]	Pronto? Rimani in linea un secondo. [Hello? Hold on a second.]
KITTY: We probably have a lot to say each other, right?	Abbiamo molto da dirci, giusto? [We have a lot to say to each other, haven't we?]	Probabilmente abbiamo molto da dirci, vero? [Probably we have a lot to say to each other, haven't we?]
NORA: You know what, Kitty, we really don't. Really, we don't.	No, Kitty, non è così. Davvero, non è così. [No, Kitty, we don't. Truly, we don't.]	Sai cosa, Kitty? In realta' no. Davvero. No. [You know what, Kitty? Really, we don't. Truly, no.]
KITTY: You don't want to talk? Really? What kind of a relationship is that?	Non vuoi parlare? Dici sul serio? Che razza di rapporto è? [You don't want to talk? Are you serious? What sort of relationship is this?]	Non vuoi parlare. Davvero... Che razza di relazione e' questa? [You don't want to talk. Really... What sort of relationship is this?]
NORA: It's the only kind of a relationship we can have right now. Kitty, your father is watching us and it is so important to him. Could we hug or something? Thank you.	È il solo tipo di rapporto che possiamo avere. Tuo padre ci sta guardando e ci tiene tanto. Ti dispiacerebbe... abbracciarmi? Grazie. [It's the only kind of relationship that we can have. Your father is watching us and he really cares about it. Would you mind hugging me? Thanks.]	Beh, e' l'unico genere di relazione che possiamo avere al momento. Kitty, tuo padre ci sta guardando, ed e' cosi' importante per lui... Potremmo... Abbracciarci o qualcosa di simile? Grazie. [Well, it's the only kind of relationship that we can have at the moment. Kitty, your father is watching us and it is so important for him. We could... hug or something similar? Thanks.]
WILLIAM: What the hell you doing calling my home? You out of your mind?	Come ti è venuto in mente di chiamarmi a casa? Sei fuori di testa? [What came over you to call me at home? Are you crazy?]	Che diavolo vuoi fare, chiamando a casa mia? Sei fuori di testa? [What the hell do you want to do, calling me at home? Are you out of your mind?]

Fig. 7: Example 7 (Brothers & Sisters S01E01)⁹

William, who is well aware of the difficult relationship between mother and daughter, tries to push them towards each other, but cannot follow the uptake of his suggestion because he receives an embarrassing phone call and quits the room. Kitty tries to build rapport by tentatively suggesting that she and Nora have much to talk about. Nora's reply, although nothing in the linguistic texture is in itself offensive, is biting and leaves no room

⁹ See footnote 8.

for negotiation, as she denies having anything to discuss with Kitty. Among the possible negative responses to Kitty's proposal, Nora chooses the most provocative and confrontational, for she threatens Kitty's face blatantly without any attempt at downgrading the force of her utterance. Kitty tries to counter-argue, but the only cooperative sign she gets is a proposal to feign some solidarity in front of William (which would result in a feigned politeness display). Overt display of impoliteness in English conversation, unless in fights between enemies, is normally infrequent, but extremely salient when it occurs. In this case the dialogue is not linguistically aggressive (for example no aggravated language is used; Leech 2014: 229-230), but Nora means to hurt her daughter. In Leech's theory of politeness it is mainly the Maxim of Agreement that is violated (Leech 2014: 221, 226), as Nora rejects her daughter's request to talk.

A comparison with the subtitles in Italian might be interesting to evaluate what would count as an equally adversarial move in Italian spontaneous conversation and if the translation is thus pragmatically acceptable. In Nora's utterance everything contributes to increase strength: first the suspensive phrasal structure "you know what", which leaves some room for positive expectations only to strike more harshly immediately afterwards, and then the insisted repetition of both the intensifying adverb "really" and the negative verb "don't". The DVD subtitles downplay the force with a negative yet not particularly antagonistic utterance "No, Kitty, non è così," reinforced by the adverb "davvero" and a repetition: a dilatory structure that creates false expectations would have worked well in Italian too. Itasa fansubbers have in this case retained this suspension element (i.e. "Sai cosa, Kitty?"), showing they have understood its crucial role in increasing tension.

5 Conclusions

The examples illustrated above show how audiovisual clips from TV series might be easily employed in the language classroom to increase awareness of some pragmatic features of conversation and teach the dynamics of face-to-face interaction. Since the selected material is neither lexically nor syntactically complex, it could be used to teach the nature of interaction to learners with an intermediate knowledge of English (e.g. B1/B2 level of the Common European Framework). Activities based on viewing and listening and then comparing the spoken dialogues with the subtitles can complement syllabus activities or be developed as a short, independent module. Finally, the same material could also be exploited in a translation class, as a first, analytical phase preceding translation tasks proper.

I have shown how the multifaceted notion of (im)politeness needs to be contextually specified according to a whole series of parameters, such as the status and role of the interactants, their intimacy and the ease or tension of the situation of utterance, etc. Most often the situation of utterance defines and regulates politeness rituals, for example by dictating to abide by the expected rules of behavior in formal contexts or allowing for a breaching of the rules in cases of danger or emergency. In order to be able to evaluate what counts as (im)polite behavior, however, it is necessary to distinguish between the

two distinct facets of (im)politeness, the pragma-linguistic and the socio-pragmatic one. Teaching (im)politeness formulae out of context could be misleading, as an expression can only be evaluated in the context in which it is employed, and by taking all socio-linguistic variables into account.

Afterwards I suggested a comparison of the illocutionary and pragmatic strength in the original dialogues with that in two different types of interlingual subtitles to reflect on the complexities of rendering pragmatic meaning. The comparison of two different types of subtitles shows different strategies at work in the translation process, usually a more 'normative' translation (but not always a pragmatically convincing one) in the professional subtitles, and an example of a source-text oriented translation, richer in pragmatic meaning in the fansubs (although sometimes imprecise). Intralinguistic subtitles have not been used in this proposal but there are interesting activities in which they could be employed, e.g. to identify and fix lexical items in the original dialogue and also to observe the paraphrasing and summarizing techniques that are used to reduce the content of the dialogues to make it fit the reduced space of the subtitles.

Reference to the concomitants of speech, e.g. kinesic and proxemic elements, and to the technical features of telecinematic communication, e.g. camera movements, types of shots, etc., was only cursory but these aspects would deserve a more thorough investigation. In linguistically complex interactions, in fact, what cannot be understood through the audio and visual verbal channels is often grasped through facial expressions and gestures. Finally, more awareness of technical aspects is something that enhances the audience's viewing experience.

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