Dubbing Camp: *Le ragazze del Pandora's Box* vs *Stage Mother* (2020)

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"What is this? Retro night?"
(*Stage Mother*, 2020)

1. Gender is as gender does

Released in 2020, *Stage Mother*, directed by Thom Fitzgerald, tells the story of Maybelline (Jacki Weaver), a middle-aged choir mistress of a conservative church in Texas. When her son Rickie dies, Maybelline inherits a drag bar in the Castro district of San Francisco, which he owned and had been running with Nathan, his partner, for eight years. Despite the initial shock, Maybelline agrees to take over the reins of the venue and save it from bankruptcy, much to the angry amazement of her homophobic husband, who had totally estranged their son.

The film has been defined in *Rotten Tomatoes* reviews as "dated and formulaic" (Taylor 2020) and conjuring "feelings of *déjà vu*" (Shapiro 2020) as it reproposes many issues about drag queens that were at the centre of film experimentations in the 1980s and '90s. Film and Queer Studies were then in their heyday, finding evidence of their theories about gender in films such as *Victor Victoria* (Blake Edwards, 1982) and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994). As stated by Hall and Jagose (2012: xvii), "a new — or at least newly visible — paradigm for thinking about sexuality […] emerged

simultaneously across academic and activist contexts […] constituting a broad and unmethodical critique of normative models of sex, gender, and sexuality".

Rather than showing a want of intellectual rigour, the allegedly unsystematic approach hinted at a widespread desire to subvert stereotypes, first and foremost those concerning language. According to Cameron and Kulick, "language was important in those debates, because the lingo that had been identified as "the language of homosexuality" was regarded by many activists and writers as "politically retrograde and undesirable" (Cameron and Kulick, 2003: 77). The idea of a language-defined subculture theorised by Hayes (1976), which assumes that gays are a homogeneous community with a common system of values and a common jargon, was criticised as showing a view of language modelled on mainstream culture. Barrett (1997), for example, argued that gay communities are *homo-genius* rather than *homogeneous*, while their attempts at standing against tradition contradicts genetic/generative inevitability and discloses, instead, a linguistics of contact (*ibid.*: 191; see also Harvey 1998: 297).

The titles of books and articles that appeared in those decades (Henton 1989; Cameron 1995; Barrett 1997; Hall and Livia 1997; Zwicky 1997, to name but a few) also parodied previous theories based on phonetic and pragmatic features of gayspeak. In "Two Lavender Issues", Arnold Zwicky (1997: 21) claimed that the linguistic approach had often been unscientific: it verged on the anecdotal and personal and was based on "unexamined folk theories" rather than on the use of "the analytical tools of the trade." In particular, Zwicky criticised phonetic categorisations used to explain straight-gay difference in the use of language: phonetic elements identified by linguists to support the idea of "the voice" of homosexual people, from *falsetto* to wide pitch range, breathiness, lengthening of fricative sounds like /s/, /z/ and affrication of plosives /t/ and /d/ (see also Fuss 1991: 218) were insufficient to encompass the great variability of speech realizations among homosexual and heterosexual people alike.

The pragmatic approach, likewise, failed to demonstrate the presence of discursive practices that are unquestionably LGBT. Findings such as those of Hayes (1976), showing that homosexuals use euphemism and ambiguous language in the secret setting, in-group slang in the social setting and politically

correct language in the radical activist setting, might have been valid in the ’70s, when LGBT people felt the need to stress the sense of a community to fight for their rights (Filmer 2021: 204), but they no longer reflected the cultural and social practices of the 1990s. Zwicky, in particular, refuted the pragmatic traits associated with gayspeak (which I have tried to schematise in Table 1) on the ground that these are not properties of speech: irony, reversal, double/triple vision, etc. are not necessarily manifestations of transgender but “the common coin of postmodern discourse” (Zwicky 1997: 28). Leaving aside easy generalisations, these categories are rather indicative of cultural mechanisms of modelling, identification, avoidance, and enforcement in gender perception. In conclusion, “There is great variability within both the gay and the straight populations on matters of behaviour in general, and speech and language in particular.” (*ibid*.: 26).

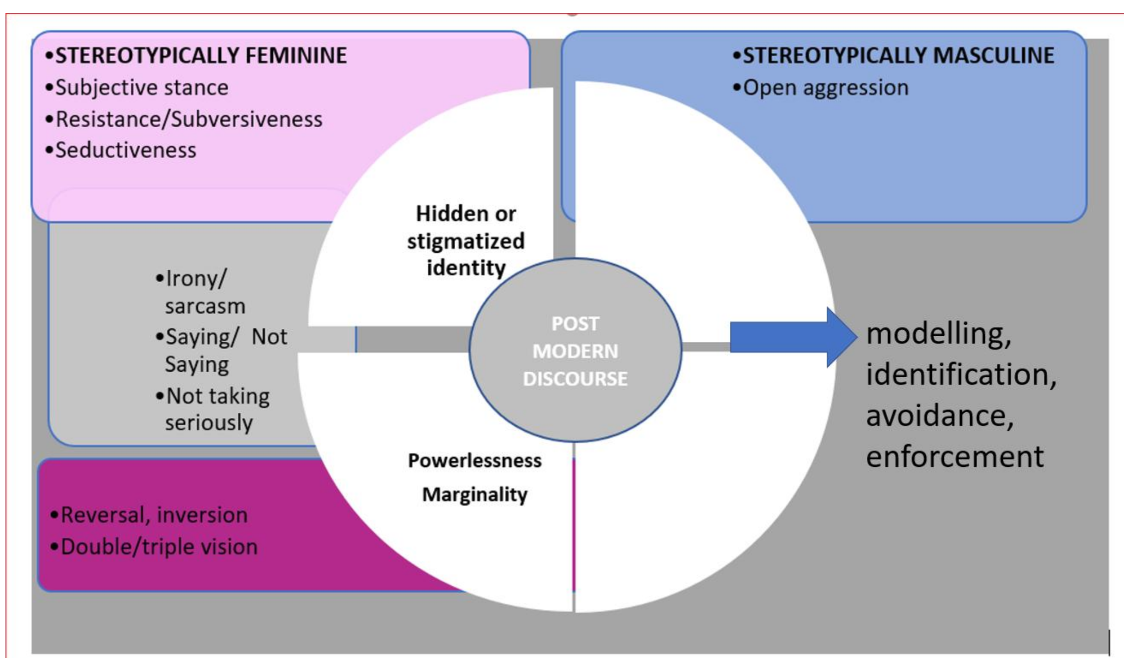

Table 1. Schematisation of the pragmatic traits conventionally associated with gayspeak (based on Zwicky 1997: 28).

Those debates shifted the attention to how gender identities are materialised *through* language, claiming that “‘Feminine’ and ‘masculine’ are not what we are, nor traits we have, but effects we produce by way of particular things we do” (Cameron & Kulick 1995: 49). Performativity theories expanded by Hillis Miller (2007), Jacques Derrida (1984; 1986) and Judith Butler (1990), underlined the idea that “As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a

performance that is repeated" (Butler 1999/1990: 179). This drive, which was originally coupled with a militant component — "the assumption of one's identity as a positive thing, something to be yelled in the streets, rather than hidden and whispered about behind closed doors" (Stanley 1974/2006: 54, quoted in Ranzato 2012: 372) — would persist as the awareness of "a nexus between language and sexuality." (Filmer 2021: 205). As Miller (2017: 26; my emphasis) remarks, queerness "*is* to a certain extent linguistically generated, even though that language may express the social forces lying behind it".

2. Camp as a metadiscourse on film dialogue and dubbing

The emphasis on self-presentation (Booth, quoted in Harvey 1998: 304) becomes particularly manifest in what is known as camp. From the 1960s onwards, camp has received different interpretations, the main divide being whether it is considered as political or apolitical, separable or inseparable from queerness. In *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (1994), Moe Meyer labelled as "Pop Camp" Sontag's (1964) view of camp as a disengaged mode of sensibility and re-affirmed its specificity as an unmitigated expression of "the total body of queer identity performance practices" (Meyer 1994: 6) of which speech, along with costume, gestures and posture, represents a constitutive element.

It is not surprising that studies investigating the pragmatics of gayspeak have often been conducted through film, a medium in which dialogue – along with costume, gestures, posture – is central to characterisation considered as the performance of identity (Kozloff 2000). Harvey (1998), for example, while recognising the gap between social language practices and fictional representations of camp talk, contends that cultural and stereotypical values can invest them both. According to Ranzato, camp talk in films is one of the most interesting expressions of the idiolect of a speech community: "even in the most naturalistic and politically correct examples, homosexuals on screen are often recognisable by a marked way of speaking often bordering on what is popularly known as camp" (Ranzato 2012: 371).

Of course, film dialogue can embody a more generalised idea of camp as "love of the unnatural" (Sontag 1964: 1). Hayes (1976/2006) observed that films can

“exaggerate the various stereotyped roles that women play in general society, for instance, “Mimicking the tone, diction rhetoric, and speech mannerisms of the camp heroines of the 30s and 40s”. In her study on *Hollywood Androgyny*, Bell-Metereau (1985: 4) highlighted the “campy glamor that marks the drag queen” unlike, for example, cinematic attempts to represent transvestites, who do not want to “imitate a woman of power and prestige” but ordinary women as, for instance, in Billy Wilder’s *Some Like It Hot*. According to Harvey (1998: 299), “emphasis and hyperbole contribute to camp’s construction of the theatricalized woman”.

Theatricality or Being-as-Playing-a-Role (Sontag 1964: 5; Benshoff and Griffin 2004: 125) is considered one of the distinct traits of camp, which in cinematic terms can be identified as “acting within acting” (Hayes 1976/2006: 71: Ranzato 2012: 372). “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman’” (Sontag 1964: 5). Harvey reports Mark Booth’s study on vocal delivery, the “camp quality of voice” which emphasises inappropriate words, “rising painfully to a climax, to be followed by a series of swift cadences – a sort of rollercoaster effect” (Harvey 1998: 304). He concludes that camp talk is a way of speaking “in capital letters and italics” (*ibid*.), an acknowledgment of the “written”, literary quality of camp. In fact, among the many binary oppositions denied by camp, there is also the one spoken/written (*ibid*.: 304). According to Derrida (1987: 211), this denial “of any significant difference between speech and writing” is a “fundamental gesture in the edifice of deconstructive thought”. Parallels can therefore be drawn between camp talk and film dialogue — traditionally defined as the “speaking of what is written to be spoken as if not written” (Gregory 1967: 191) — as well as between camp talk and all the modes by which audiovisual translation enacts a hybridization of writing and orality (Chaume 2001; Pavesi 2005; Baños-Piñero and Chaume 2009).

Drawing on this idea, I will try to argue that, just as in film camp can build up — through costume, gesture and postures — a metadiscourse on represented visibility, it may also weave, through the dialogues and songs, a metadiscourse on represented orality (Chaume 2001; Baños-Piñero and Chaume 2009). This metadiscourse is all pervasive in *Stage Mother*. Not only in the self-reflective use

of dialogue as “acting within acting”, but also in the exploration of its potential. Significantly, the film calques the title, setting and motives of the homonymous film directed by Charles Brabin, dated 1933, which somehow epitomises freedom from censorship enjoyed by film dialogue during the period known as “Pre-Code Hollywood”, between the introduction of sound film in 1927 and the enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1934. Like its antecedent, also the 2020 version of *Stage Mother* displays freedom of dialogue to a great extent. Moreover, both films make a creed of the coming out process, mainly intended as the courage of verbally articulating one’s way of being, no matter if it clashes with society’s conventions and moral censorship. While Kitty makes a point of her absolute recklessness as a stage woman, the drag queens at the Pandora’s Box try to affirm their transgender identities in front of the parents that have disowned them. It is also possible to see parallels between Kitty and Maybelline, both wrestling with stereotypical representations of the bad mother: the former as the hyperbolic embodiment of “female fatherhood”, the latter as the castrating mother of homosexual fiction (Legman 1968/2007: 466) who, after facing a reality check, goes through a radical transformation of her moral world.

The metadiscourse on orality involves, even more cogently, the issue of revoicing. During the numbers performed at the Pandora’s Box in the opening scenes lip-synching is stressed, parodied, and finally overtly criticised: “Your lip-synching sucks”, says at one point Nathan, Rickey’s partner, to old-school drag queen Dusty Muffin. Real singing is presented as incommensurably superior to lip-synching and actually becomes the gay club’s key of success when Maybelline encourages the girls to perform with their own voices:

> (0:30:31 – 0:30:39)
>
> Maybelline: I want you all to sing.
> Joan: Like sing-sing? Really sing?
> M.: I've heard y'all humming along to the music here.

The thematization of lip-synching leads the viewers to reflect on any form of revoicing, including the interlinguistic dubbing they are experiencing while watching the film. Moreover, by showing the gaps and incongruities of dubbing, the film generates cross-references between trans-identity and trans-lation. As Douglas Robinson (2019) argues, trans-identity implies a going through, a

crossing of borders that entails not only shifting gender identities but equally shifting linguistic practices.

> *Translingual address* is a term for *transitional intersubjectivity*, the hermeneutical movement of a *subject-in-transit*. It implies empathic exposure to and experience of at least two cultures—such as cisnormative and transgender, binary and nonbinary, […] and the resulting ability to shift attitudinally, perspectivally, in moving from one to the other. (Robinson 2019: xi)

“Transitional intersubjectivity” makes apparent the textual nature of the problem as conceived by Derrida (1986) in his study on Genet, sexuality being part and parcel of any communicative act and implying a coupling with otherness (Hite 2017: 23). “Just like transgender”, Robinson (2019: xiv) claims, translation “is an instance of continuity in discontinuity and a poietic social practice” which “is neither homolingual nor heterolingual but translingual, a subjectivity-in-trans/it between cultures commonly constructed as incommeasurable.” Dubbing is indeed a translation mode that, more than others, shares with transgenderism this continuity in discontinuity, physically displaying the seams and joints of the process. Even in the best dubbing performances, gaps between languages (and subjectivities) may open up, showing a disagreement between the voice and the face, especially the mouth. In the film, poor lip-synchronization during the drag queens’ performances is emphasised by the camera angles (American shots and close-ups) as well as by the grotesque effects obtained with lip markers. Now what appears as a general representation of transitional identity through visual devices becomes meaningful also from the perspective of dubbing, suggesting connections between the performance of gender “through clothes, make-up, hair-style, and speech” and “the performance of texts in translation” (Rose 2021: 52).

3. Untranslatable, so to say

The previous remarks will allow me to shift my attention to the dubbed version of *Stage Mother — Le ragazze del Pandora’s Box*, scripted by Emiliana Luini, directed by Mario Cordova, and featuring outstanding voice talents like Lorenza Biella (Jackie Weaver) and Marco Mete (Jackie Beat) — with a focus on the translation of camp talk. It can first be noticed that the variety of voices displayed

in the ST is effectively reproduced in the TT, complying with the diversified representation of gay characters, who have different personalities, backgrounds, and speech behaviours, as well as with diaphasic variation in a broader sense. The Italian dubbed edition presents a wide range of pitches and prosodic traits, along a cline from masculinity to femininity and back, independently from the characters' homosexuality or heterosexuality, thus suggesting a fluid idea of gender: not only does each character have a distinct voice, but the same character can change his/her voice according to context. Even Maybelline, who is unquestionably "straight", when she sees her friend Sienna (Lucy Liu) being beaten by a man who wants to "have it rough", turns her usually high-pitched voice into a frightening baritone. The same when she's angry because of her husband's lack of sensibility, as he refuses to go to his transgender son's funeral and tries to convince his wife to do the same: the way she pronounces the sentence "Bevette, hurry up, or I'm going to miss my flight" marks a clear change of attitude from accommodating buoyance to the determination to take a stance against homophobic bigotry. Unfortunately, however, this aspect has not always been caught in the translation of the dialogues, or has deliberately been mitigated, as can be observed in Jeb's reply to Maybelline's statement "You know where I'm going":

Example 1) (0:06:22 – 0:06:24)

Source text	Dubbed text	Back translation
<u>You</u> weren't gonna <u>ask me</u>?	Non doveva<u>mo</u> <u>parlarne</u>?	Shouldn't we have talked about it?

The choice of a verb used for fair discussion and of inclusive "we" in the Italian translation makes Jeb Metcalf sound like a much more compromising person than the chauvinist homophobe of the original version. The discourse of power between husband and wife that underlies the ST is therefore partly overlooked in favour of a more nuanced, idealised view of the relationship.

Although "camp" is defined by Susan Sontag as an apolitical "mode of sensibility" (1964: 1), it is equally important to consider the divergent interpretation given by Moe Meyer (1994: 2), who claims that camp "gains its political validity as an

ontological critique". It is therefore relevant to see how the translators coped with the challenging, provocative camp talk enacted in the film, verifying whether it was subjected to evaluation processes (Harvey 1998: 296) or, more overtly, to censorship. In the analysis, I tried to distinguish between cases in which the translation reflects concrete lexical limitations in the Italian language, a lack of "home-grown" labels for the category (Harvey 1998: 310) and those that reveal "euphemizing strategies" to avoid culturally and pragmatically unacceptable terms, for example, a deliberate attempt at mitigating strong language with sexual and religious innuendo or the representation of homophobic male chauvinism.

Ranzato (2012: 375) points out that "gay, transgender, coming out, drag queen, are now words recognisable by most Italian people, but they are just about the only words of the homosexual jargon to have entered mainstream language whereas in the English language Legman counted 146 terms as early as in 1941." Rather than a matter of number, the insufficiency is significant if we consider the lack of equivalence for terms used with positive connotations and, more generally, the lack of a "transnational gay culture whereby terminology, customs, styles and practices are interchangeable and necessarily translatable" (Filmer 2021: 223). A frequent case in the film are the words "drag", and all the compound expressions that contain it, and the word "queen". In the Italian version, "drag" remains unvaried, a loanword is used, while only the other term is translated: for instance, "drag mother" and "drag sister" become "mamma drag" and "sorella drag". Also "queen" is not translated.

Example 2) (00:26:51 – 00:27:03)

Source text	Dubbed version
I was Rickey's drag mother. A drag mother shows a younger queen the ropes. Teaches her the rules of etiquette and helps bring out the queen from within.	Ero la mamma drag di Rickey. Una mamma drag mostra alle queen più giovani come si fa. Insegna le regole dell'etichetta e le aiuta a tirare fuori la queen che hanno dentro.

Another issue of alleged untranslatability is represented by the songs. The soundtrack mainly consists of famous lyrics of the 20th century, which are first dubbed then (fictionally) performed by the characters themselves. Understandably, being most of the songs worldwide known, we have (with one

single exception that will be seen later) no dubbing or subtitling of the texts. Even the subtitles for the hearing-impaired only state “canzone triste” (“sad song”) or “canzone pop” (“pop song”). However unavoidable for aesthetic reasons, the absence of a translation entails a big loss, since songs play in the film an important intradiegetic function on many levels. For example, in the opening scene the disowned Rickey Peedia overdoses while performing Taylor Dayne’s *Love Will Lead You Back*, while Bonnie Tyler’s *Total Eclipse of the Heart* — a song associated both with gay liberation and vampirism, as it was rescripted for the musical *Tanz der Vampire* (Polanski 1997) — will mark the accomplishment of his mother’s mourning process and appropriation of and identification with her dead son. And it is also through a song, *Finally* by CeCe Peniston, that Joan (Rickey’s drag sister)’s mother will reach a complete acceptance of her son’s transgenderism. More generally, as suggested by Asimakoulas (2012: 48) with reference to representations of transgenderism in videoclips, “the sung text may anchor the interpretations of moving image”. The only lyric which is translated in the open captions is *Everything’s Beautiful to Me*, written by Jason Michael MacIssac and originally performed by Cast. Although the song metaphorically laments the sufferings caused by homophobic prejudice, it actually reaffirms the classical principle according to which “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, thus connecting beauty and goodness and setting the theme of homosexuality in a wider moral and aesthetic perspective.

While anchoring complex emotions to the visuals, songs generate laughter, a reaction that, as Vallorani (2015: 65) remarks, often comes into play in films that enact transgenderism, “from subtle camp humour to kitsch exaggeration”. In *Stage Mother*, much of the irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humour of camp (Babuscio 2004: 122) is conveyed through the puns contained in the songs, as for example in this text written by Jason Michael MacIssac and originally performed by Village People:

(0:09:51 – 0:10.02)

Oh, baby, it's so hard
It's so hard
So hard to handle
It feels so good,
it feels quite hot.

Puns and wordplays, in Derrida's view, reveal deep mechanisms at work within language and question logocentrism (Miller 2017: 60-67). They are signs of "liminal lexicality" and "contradictory signals in speech" (Zwicki 1997: 26). In the example above, liminality is also signalled by the context in which the song is performed: during Rickey's drag funeral, with Dusty Muffin officiating as a priest and the choir of drag queens performing, which makes of the scene an interesting example of the Bakhtinian Carnivalesque associated with transgenderism (Vallorani 2015). This component is often lost in the dubbed version, not only in the songs but also when puns used in the dialogues contain culture-specific references; see, for example, the (untranslatable, so to say) wordplay Harry Potter/hairy potter (min. 1:07:36).

4. Dubbing Camp: *Le ragazze del Pandora's Box* vs. *Stage Mother*

After looking at issues of virtual untranslatability, I will now focus on the translational choices. To this purpose, I will start from the pragmatic traits of stereotyped gay camp talk identified by Harvey (1998) and synthesised by Ranzato (2012: 373). These are:

- the preoccupation with sexual activity and a tragicomic awareness of the ephemeral nature of sexual desire;
- the ironic, feigned adherence to principles of decency;
- girl talk;
- ambivalent solidarity (feigning support while in fact attacking);
- the inversion of gender-specific terms;
- the practice of renaming that includes the adoption of male names marked as queer;
- the frequent use of French. A humorous nod to sophistication and cosmopolitanism.

I will therefore analyse conventional traits of homosexual camp talk and how they have been rendered, or overlooked, in the Italian dubbed version. In actual social settings these features strongly depend on context. Interestingly for this study, Barrett (1997: 192-6) identifies a marked use of language in the specific context of gay bars, where "bar queen speech" builds up a sense of identity and solidarity. However, the "prefabricated orality" (Baños-Piñero and Chaume 2009) of film presents a higher fluidity with regard to diaphasic variation: although the

gayspeak used by the drag queens is more marked in the scenes set at the Pandora's Box, also in other settings, such as the characters' private houses or the streets in the Castro district of San Francisco, jokes and humour with sexual innuendo are all-pervasive. The gags performed both at the drag bar and in other situations of communal life are often forms of banter, "rallies" of erotic puns "where one pun stimulates punning repartee" (Blake 2007: 71). The first show opens with such banter, setting humour in the "acting within acting" paradigm, a sort of *mise-en abyme* of the whole narrative framework. As Legman argues:

> Anyone who has seen professional music-hall and nightclub comedians 'working' – as, earlier, in vaudeville and burlesque – for example the late Lenny Bruce, whose specialty was the purposely shocking and obscene, will understand the obvious *need* that the performer has for the audience, whose presence and response (that shriving laughter!) are a precondition of the joke-teller's inspiration, the same mechanism whereby a bird soars on rising currents of air. (Legman 1986/2007: 35)

However, it is important to note that this kind of stand-up comedy is represented as a form of humour that no longer works. Stereotypical banter, performed in front of a sparse audience of bored, homosexual couples, replicates (drags) a show belonging to a time in which homosexuality was ghettoised. The rather pathetic repartee, with Dusty Muffin performing both roles (example 3), nonetheless raises mixed feelings in the viewers, who are forced to divide their judgment between acknowledgment of the number's bad taste and solidarity for the ageing drag queen, which neutralises the obscenities in the lines. The banter is interesting from a linguistic point of view, as it contains erotic puns that represent a challenge for the translator.

Example 3) 0:01:48 – 0:02:03

Source text	Dubbed text	Back translation
I'm Dusty Muffin. And I gotta warn you, this muffin has nuts, you know, in case you're allergic. Leave it, it's beaver. Oh, what, honey?	Sono Dusty Muffin. E vi avverto: questo muffin ha due noccioline. Nel caso foste allergici. Lasciala stare, è una patata. Uh, che c'è?	I'm Dusty Muffin. And I gotta warn you, this muffin has two nuts, you know, in case you're allergic. Leave it, it's a potato.

You’re straight? Yeah, guess what? So is spaghetti until you get it hot and wet.	Sei etero letto? Certo, ma lo sono anche gli spaghetti, quando non sono caldi e bagnati.	Oh, what’s the matter? You’re bed-hetero? Yeah, guess what? So are spaghetti when they’re not hot and wet.

In the first part, even though in English different popular terms deriving from food and the natural world (names of plants, fruits, animals) are used for women’s (“muffin”, “beaver”) and men’s (“nuts”) genitalia, the allusion is quite clear. In the Italian translation, “due” (“two”) added to “noccioline” (“nuts”) makes the reference obvious and so does “patata” for “beaver”. Although the epanalepsis “leave… beaver” cannot be reproduced, by recalling the idiomatic expression “hot potato” the translation also renders male fear of women’s genitalia (Legman 2007: 118; see also Filmer 2021: 215-217). In the second part, by contrast, the lack of an Italian equivalent for “straight” with the meaning of “heterosexual” leads the translators to invent a cryptic neologism, “etero letto”, in which the metonymical noun which stands for sexual activity (“letto” = “bed”) does not remind us at all of the shape of spaghetti (and hence of male erection), so that the pun makes no sense. A better translation could have been, for example, “Sei tutto d’un pezzo?” (“Are you all of one piece?”) or “Sei un duro?” (“Are you a tough guy?”), although the hint at heterosexuality would in either case have been lost.

The “f-word” has generally been translated:

Example 4) 0:08:48 – 0:08:58

Source text	Dubbed version
Rickey Metcalf, or as we know her Rickey Peedia, was a big, fucking, flaming comet.	Rickey Metcalf, o, come la chiamavamo noi, Rickey Peedia, era una grande, cazzo di fiammeggiante cometa.

Yet, in the translation it loses its aesthetic force, due to the difficulty of reproducing the alliteration (maybe the cliché equivalent “fottuta” would have worked better in this case). Besides, the sentence in the film is meant as a poetic statement: Zwicky mentions “flaming queen” as a stereotypical expression used in camp talk (Zwicky 1997: 27). Hence, the example shows that translations may

sometimes use taboo words that sound more offensive than the ones voiced in the original text (De Marco 2009: 193).

More generally, however, the translator has resorted to euphemising strategies. In fact, although swearing is a pragmatic rather than a semantic matter (Jay and Janschewitz 2008), it is possible to distinguish some semantic categories that are perceived as more or less sensitive in the target culture. Jay (2009) identifies among them sexual references, profane or blasphemous, scatological and disgusting objects. The disruptive effect of swearing in *Stage Mother* is mainly generated by the coupling of these categories, especially sex with religion, body functions and food, associations that put in language "children's interest in physical and sexual activity" (Harvey 1998: 313), thus confirming Freud's theory of the Polymorphous Perverse.

Since swearing is a manifestation of culture (Sagarin 1968), expressions for sexual devices or practices containing references to religious objects and rituals pose big problems in the Italian context. In fact, the dubbed version presents several blasphemous expressions which are either left untranslated or subtly censored. The "Glory hole" (later described as something "like a confessional", but actually a hole in a wall that enables people to have sex with unknown partners), for example, remains in English in the dubbed version. The "trans-tabernacle", an expression sarcastically used by Nathan to ridicule Maybelline's wish to transpose her skills from a church to a drag choir, has clearly undergone a distancing process between the profane and sacred: the hyphenated compound, which could have effectively been translated as "il trans tabernacolo" or "il tabernacolo trans", also in compliance with lip-synchronization, has been split into a syndetic paratactic construction. The conjunction "and", along with the third-person plural possessive pronoun "their", keeps the profane and the sacred at safety distance.

Example 5) 0:30:21 – 0:30:24

Source text	Dubbed version	Back translation
The <u>trans-tabernacle</u>?	<u>I trans e il loro tabernacolo</u>?	Transgender (people) and their tabernacle?

Bawdy and scatological jokes have also ostensibly undergone censorship in the Italian dubbed version, showing that, as Sontag (1964) argues throughout her essay, taste is closely connected with sensibility. In particular, the dubbed version of *Stage Mother* censors the "Food-Dirtying" theme. According to Legman (1968/2007: 13-14), the purpose of dirty jokes is "to absorb and control, even to slough off, by means of jocular presentation and laughter, the great anxiety that both teller and listener feel in connection with certain culturally connected themes", among which homosexuality is one of the most fearful.

Example 6) 0:02:04 – 0:02:08

Source text	Dubbed version	Back translation
She got fired from the sperm bank <u>for drinking on the job</u>!	È stata licenziata dalla banca del seme <u>per aver rubato le provette</u>.	She got fired from the sperm bank for stealing the test tubes.

In the following example, interpretation has intervened even more heavily:

Example 7) 0:32:35 – 0:32:38

Source text	Dubbed version	Back translation
Maybelline said to bring dessert, so <u>I come packing fudge</u>.	Maybelline ci aveva chiesto un dolce, così <u>ho deciso di stuprare del fudge</u>.	Maybelline said to bring dessert, so I decided to rape some fudge.

The slang expression "packing fudge" conceals a strong reference to feces during homosexual intercourse (see definition on www.urbandictionary.com). While overtly diverting the element of disgust from food to the semantic field of violence, the Italian translation changes the speaker's intentions. Moreover, the joke is anything but funny and, being so explicit, leaves no way out for the listener. As stated by Legman (1968/2007: 13),

> The telling of dirty jokes, like the whispering of bawdy words to strange women in the street or by telephone, or the chalking of genital monosyllables on walls, serves in its simplest form – as shown by Freud – as a sort of vocal and inescapable sexual relationship with other persons of the desired sex. It is for this reason that listeners not wanting such relationships will agree to listen to dirty jokes only with the proviso '… If they're *clever*.' 'Clever' means that all taboo words and graphic descriptions will be avoided in the telling,

> thus allowing the listener either to accept or (by not laughing or 'not understanding') to refuse to accept, the intimacy of any particular *double entendre*. Jokes not conforming to this rule are the opposite of clever: they are 'stupid'.

On the other hand, the translation highlights a very important feature of strong language. When it is "unavoidably clear", and "lacking in indirection", it may become a form of "verbal rape, as opposed to verbal seduction" (*ibid.*). The idea is also maintained by Robinson (2019: 86), who defines verbal rape as "earfuck" or "impotent rape". It can be argued that in dubbing the element of prevarication that is inherent to any form of translation (Basile, 2018: 34; cit. in Robinson xxiv) becomes a gesture of the translator whose illocutionary force is conveyed by the voice actor. Even more lucidly than in other forms of translation, AVT questions the idea of reciprocity of the ST and TT, embodying what Basile calls genderfuck or equivalencefuck (Basile, 2018: 34; cit. in Robinson xxiv). Beyond mere evaluation, the analysis of dubbing may certainly also consider this cultural and pragmatic aspect of translated orality. Dubbing may well epitomise the "fetish" of equivalence, the "seductive promise of absolute presence and reciprocity" which "lurks behind the intimate 'fuck' of translation" (Basile 2018: 34) concealing what is ultimately an act of "appropriative violence" (Callon and Latour 1981 quoted in Robinson 2019: xviii).

The overt reference to sexual violence in the translation of "packing fudge" overlooks another important aspect of camp talk detected by Harvey (1998): the "feigned adherence to decency". Since bringing the dessert when you are invited to a dinner with friends is a perfectly acceptable custom, the idea of rape associated with it is completely out of place and makes Joan's blushing and timid giggling inconsequential. We have a similar pragmatic behaviour in the following dialogue, in which Joan's softened, subdued tone in describing to Maybelline the sexual activities s/he used to perform with her son feigns adherence to decency, also by using "hypercorrect pronunciation while uttering obscenities" (Barrat in Cameron and Kulick 2003: 99; quoted in Filmer 2021: 215): (0:47:00 – 047:10) "Rickey and I were a lot alike. We used to... (chuckles) ... blow sailors together back in the day".

Undeniably, camp talk forces complicity. According to Harvey (2004/1998: 356), it “exaggerates (and thereby renders susceptible to irony) the speaker’s own investment in the propositional content of his speech, and helps to take the addressee – willingly or not – into his confidence.” Repetitions and orality discourse markers aimed at involving the addressee (including question tags) are frequent in what Harvey defines as “girl talk”, as we can see in this dialogue between Maybelline and Rickey’s drag sister Cherry:

Example 8) 0:45:10 – 0:45:31

<table>
<tr>
<td>Maybelline: Hey, where’s Joan tonight?
Cherry: Joan’s not feeling her best tonight.
M.: Oh. Poor thing.
Ch.: Yeah. Now, let’s see if we can get you some action tonight.
M.: Hey, it’s a business dinner.
Ch.: This one’s good, huh?
M.: Oh, I don’t think so. Not red.
Ch.: If it looks good on me, it could look good on you, huh?</td>
<td>Maybelline: E Joan, dov’è finita?
Cherry: Joan non è in ottima forma stasera.
M.: Oh, povera cara.
Ch.: Già. Ora vediamo se riusciamo a darti un tocco di verve.
M.: Cherry, è una banale cena di lavoro.
Ch.: Questo è bello, no?
M.: No, non è indicato. Il rosso no.
Ch.: Se sta bene a me, sta bene a te, ah ah.</td>
</tr>
</table>

The exchange is presented as a woman-to-woman conversation, where lines “are performative acts that seek to affirm identity aesthetically and linguistically” (Dore and Zarrelli 2018: 70). The dubbed version mainly reveals choices due to lip-sync constraints. Although grammatically different, most of them also effectively reproduce the traits of orality. However, as highlighted by Pavesi (2005: 53), the overuse of vocatives is a typical phenomenon of Italian dubbing: in the example, instead of using the first name “Cherry” the translator could have rendered “Hey” with an Italian interjection conveying slight reproof, such as “Ma dai” (“Come on”).

“Ambivalent solidarity” (feigning support while in fact attacking) or “stylized cattiness” (Crisp 1968, quoted in Venuti 2004: 350) is another trait of camp talk, though, significantly, in the film it is a pragmatic strategy used by both hetero and homosexual characters. This dialogue, for example, involves both.

Example 9) 0:15:42 – 00:15:50

Sienna: Well, dessert will be better. It's my specialty. Shall I serve it? Nathan: Yeah. Maybelline: Yeah. S.: So bitchy.	Sienna: Il dolce è più buono, è la mia specialità. Lo volete ora? Nathan: Sì. Maybelline: Sì. S.: Che carini. (Back transl.: "How nice of you")

Insults (Murray 1979) call into the debate Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness.

> In Brown and Levinson's terms, camp can often be seen to involve threats to an addressee's positive face-wants by indicating that the speaker does not care about the addressee's positive self-image, hence, the insults, ridicule, put-downs etc. [This kind of remarks constitute] a clear threat to the addressee's positive face-wants by casting aspersions on his behaviour. Yet it is overloaded with the ironies of ambivalent solidarity: first, the speaker could just as easily address the remark to himself (he, too, is on the cruising ground); second, the notion of 'getting into bad ways' is one which both addressor and addressee know belongs to the moral code of the dominant culture. Through such a comment, this code is thus being mocked for the benefit of both addressor and addressee. (Harvey 1998: 303)

The dubbing generally shows awareness of ambivalent solidarity in camp talk, although the relation between good/bad intentions and negative/positive face are less balanced than in the original version. Sometimes the translation tends to stress the rudeness of jibes by making it very explicit, as in the following example:

Example 10) 0:33:50 – 0:34:10

Sienna: Oh, you know, I did some fashion back in my more naive times. Cherry: Well, honey, if you can sew, I need everything that I own let out. Tequila: You're gonna need a lot of extra fabric with that one. S.: So catty. Ch.: You tried it.	Sienna: Beh, mi sono occupata di moda, ai tempi in cui ero più spensierata. Cherry: Allora, cara, se sai cucire, avrei bisogno che mi allarghi tutti i vestiti. Tequila: Ti servirà parecchio tessuto extra per farlo. S.: Quanta cattiveria… (Back transl.: "So much wickedness") Ch.: Infatti, sei pessima. (Back transl.: "That's it, you're very bad.")

In other dialogues, by contrast, the translation omits the negative term, thus turning the dysphemism into a euphemism: the adjective that threatens positive-

face is replaced by a positive-face term, though loaded with irony. In the final scene, for example, “All right, bitches, get dressed!” becomes “Ok, belle, preparatevi! The playful insult is therefore only implied, the bad word remains unvoiced, the invective uttered with irony (Bruti 2013: 19) is changed into a compliment ironically paid. On the one hand, this reinforcement reflects the crucial role played by positive politeness in the actual context of gay bars. As argued by Barrett (1997: 195): “The presence of a variety of positive politeness strategies as the main indexical markers of bar queen speech suggests that language may serve as a means of producing a unified social identity among gay men from divergent backgrounds.” On the other hand, the omission of the face-threatening component in the dubbed version partly neutralises the mocking of the moral code, triggering the opposite process: compliance with the linguistic behaviour of the dominant culture. It can be remarked that the translation invokes, more often than the original one, “the spectre of a dominant ideology” (Meyer, quoted in Harvey 1998: 306), thus preventing the transgressive component of camp talk to turn into action.

The use of “bitches” is also an interesting example of the “inversion of gender-specific terms” (*ibid.*: 299). This practice has widely been explored by scholars to question gender boundaries and stress reversibility between opposites (male/female, black/white, negative, positive), as an alternative to “politically correct” gender-neutral pronouns or nouns used by LGBT people, neologisms such as Ze/Zir and hir / hirself /zirself, Bois and grrrls (see, for example, Robinson 2019: 133). However, this interchangeability is treated in the film dialogues with lightness, the dilemma is relativised. When Maybelline asks (0:36:49 – 0:36:56) “Do all of those boys at the club...? Do I call 'em boys or girls?”, Sienna replies that “it's kind of a time-of-day issue”, thus interpreting the question in terms of mere diaphasic variation.

Similarly, we notice in the film that the problem of renaming is felt differently by different generations: Dusty, who belongs to the older generation of drag queens, feels the need to affirm her transgender identity by claiming her right to be renamed (0:26:44 – 0:26:51 “Hey, I'm Dusty. Or Roger, if you prefer it, but I prefer Dusty”) while Joan’s reply in the following dialogue shows that being transgender,

along with the choice of having a girl's name, should simply be accepted as a matter of fact:

> 0:27:15 – 0:27:20
>
> Joan: I'm Joan.
> Maybelline: You have a boy name?
> J.: Just Joan.
> M.: Nice to meet you, Joan.

This can also show a generational reading of queer camp. As remarked by Moe Meyer: "If the term queer is indeed based within imagined generational difference, then I would suggest that it signifies nothing more than a potentially destructive, divisive, and ageist manoeuvre that, in the end, serves to interrupt the continuity of political struggle through an ahistoricizing turn" (Meyer 1984: 2).

Renaming is in any case presented as inseparable from the theatrical performance of camp queerness. On stage, becoming a drag queen means changing not only the gender but also the name assigned at birth. Most of the performers at the Pandora's Box have ironic, flamboyant double names. The translation sometimes takes the sexual innuendo into account through a literal rendering of the first names, while the translation of surnames is sacrificed to plausibility in relation to the American context: "Clitoris Leechman", for example, becomes in the dubbed version "Clitoride Leechman". Hence, both the meaning of "leech" and the intertextual reference to the American actress Cloris Leachman are lost by the Italian audience.

The last trait of camp talk listed by Ranzato (2012: 373) is "The frequent use of French. A humorous nod to sophistication and cosmopolitanism". The word "camp" itself derives from the French *camper*, meaning "to pose" (Bergman 1993). As highlighted by Hall and Livia (1997: 196-7) code-switching can be a marked choice of gay speech. Although rarely used in the dialogues of *Stage Mother*, the switching is not accounted for in the translation: Dusty Muffin's use of French to explain the role played by a drag mother (example 2), for instance, goes unnoticed in the dubbed version, since "etiquette" has been Italianised for the sake of rhythm and phonetic proximity to the word "etichetta". Yet, the

importance of code-switching in camp talk is underlined in the closing credits of the film, namely in the refrain of the song by Ruth Wallis *Queer Things* (1956):

> His Hair is curly as can be
> He uses curlers just like me
> When I find lipstick on his tie
> He says there's no other woman so it must be a guy
>
> Oh No
> *Quelle tragedie*
> Queer things are happening to me.

In a sense, the cabaret-like, Kurt Weill-style song and its veneer of cosmopolitanism grafted onto American provincialism, winds up the whole story: a Texan choir mistress facing the gay underworld of Castro in San Francisco. Ruth Wallis' song, which of course remains untranslated in the Italian edition, corroborates the humorous key of the film but also the close relationship between comedy and tragedy, the horrors of a heteronormative society that it tries to laugh off stage. Most of all, the film teaches that "to laugh at sexually-oriented humour, you need to suspend moral judgment" (Blake 2007: 43). As Maybelline says (0:37:10 – 0:37:17), "I can handle a gay bar. All my life I've watched rodeos and livestock shows, so a gay bar's nothing."

Sontag (1964: 2) wrote: "I am strongly drawn to camp, and almost as strongly offended by it." Audiovisual translation probably actualises this double drive. Even leaving aside censorship, as a post-production process deferred in terms of time, language, culture, and place, it is very difficult for dubbing to maintain the delicate balance of innocence and corruption, the "proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve" (*ibid.*: 8) that is at the core of camp.

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