

An Audiovisual Topos: The 'Butler' Character

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Abstract

The butler or housekeeper character speaking the upper-crust variety of British English to match that of his/her masters has been a common topos in films and TV shows, and one which does not always accord with reality: even if the employees of upper class families are usually expected by audiences to speak with flawless received pronunciation, other renditions of this character type, probably more adherent to the code of realism, show how their authors have sometimes opted for portrayals in nonstandard brushstrokes.

This article focuses on the linguistic representation and relative translations into Italian of the 'butler' character as portrayed in a significant number of films and TV series from the 1930s (and more precisely from *Trouble in Paradise*, Ernst Lubitsch, 1932) to nowadays (the *Gotham* series, Bruno Heller, 2014-2019). Through memorable and lesser-known depictions that span the history of cinema and television, the analysis of original and translated dialogue exchanges explores and questions the aura of fixedness and immutability that this character projects by highlighting meaningful shifts in its representation and testifying to the narrative importance of this fictional type, often the catalyst of social tensions, comedic virtuosités or dramatic plot twists.

Key-words: upper-crust English, stock characters, dubbing, stereotypes, style-shifting.

1. Introduction: the topic, the objectives and the corpus

Memorable and lesser-known depictions of stock characters that span the history of cinema and television have familiarised audiences with recurrent and apparently immutable 'types'. This article sets out to investigate, through the analysis of original and translated dialogue exchanges, whether the aura of fixedness and immutability

that one of these character types, 'the butler', projects is only apparent. It also investigates whether meaningful differences in its linguistic representation and in the relative dubbing translations into Italian may indeed testify to more nuanced character constructions.

In order to do this, I have analysed a corpus of 34 films and TV shows, and will reflect on the most significant characters through a sample of dialogue exchanges from audiovisual texts from each decade, starting from the early period of sound cinema, 1932, to 2017, with the aim of exploring any shifts in character representation that may surface either in the original or in the Italian dubbed dialogue. The goal is to offer a qualitative evaluation of the function that the butler's dialogue performs in significant depictions.

Most of the material, grouped by decade and reported in the Appendix, has been viewed (unless otherwise stated) on original DVDs containing (unless otherwise stated) the Italian dubbed track. The qualitative analysis of this material has been carried out by organising it into broad categories which highlight the most prominent feature or function of the character in the respective audiovisual texts. The first objective was to find out how many of these characters fit in the butler 'mould' and how many deviated from the recognised stock figure as it is ingrained in public consciousness, exploring other solutions. The second goal of the analysis was to detect the function of these deviations, whether they express themselves in linguistic as well as in narrative terms. The broad categorisations, devised on the basis of this material and not *in abstracto*, are useful to detect and describe the function of these types in the respective texts. Categories can, of course, overlap (that is, the butler may have different features and functions), they are not meant to be exhaustive and the list will be undoubtedly enriched by future quantitative analyses.

Before illustrating the fictional types, in the next section I will provide some basic information on this stock figure and its real-world counterpart.

2. The butler: type and stereotype

The narrative importance of this fictional type, often the catalyst of social tensions, comedic virtuositities and dramatic plot twists, is well-known to audiences. As I discussed elsewhere (Ranzato

2018: 222-223), for example, the butler or housekeeper character speaking the upper-crust variety of British English to match that of his/her masters has been a common topos in films and TV shows, and one which does not always accord with reality. However, other renditions of this character type, arguably more adherent to the code of realism, show deviations from the standard, also in linguistic terms. After all, in the 1960s “if you had a cockney accent you were going to play the butler”, as actor Michael Caine, himself the impersonator of a popular butler, stated in an interview (in Thorpe, 2017). If this was once the reality, or perhaps the British audiences’ perception of reality, today we would perhaps more readily associate this character’s voice to the impeccable Received Pronunciation (RP) of butlers of the like of Carson in *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015) or Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* (1993).

Cinema, as well as other narrative forms, largely relies on fixed schemata and stereotypes (Schweinitz and Schleussner 2011: xii) both in its verbal and visual composition. Stereotypes which are “coordinated with the dispositions, expectations, and desires of a wide audience” (p. xii). In the 1930s, when stereotype was “discovered” by film theorists – as Schweinitz and Schleussner go on to state – stereotype was simplistically assessed as the “opposite of positive critical terms such as ‘artistic’, ‘creative’, ‘nuanced’, ‘true’, ‘individual’, or ‘original’” (p. xiii). In today’s terms, on the other hand:

the trends toward filmic – or more generally speaking, audiovisual – stereotypization and conventionalized patterns of (visually or narratively) reduced complexity have assumed such quality, quantity, momentum, and ubiquity, with corresponding schemata having taken over our imaginary worlds to such an extent, that the idea of creating films untouched by such factors seems truly anachronistic (Schweinitz and Schleussner 2011: xiii).

The larger definition of stock characters on the other hand includes much more positive connotations with respect to stereotypes. They consist of a set of what could be termed formulaic features such as habits, mannerisms, types of speech, dress codes and so on, which, according to Quantz (2015: 37) are “typically associated with certain positions or identities”: “Stock characters may be a little more than stereotypes or can be more complex and nuanced and sophisticated representations of recognisable characters” (p. 37).

Very little has been written, even in film studies, on generally positive or ‘neutral’ stock characters. According to Loukides and Fuller (1990:3), research in the film literature has focused especially on characters in terms of offensive stereotyping and very little on stock figures such as, among others, “the snobbish butler”. And not only does very little research exist on this recurrent fictional figure, but also, I would add, very few insights on the rather mysterious factual one. In other words, undoubtedly because of the style of life most of us ordinary people lead, little is known of the butler in real life, of the way he is supposed to behave and speak. What we know of butlers derives from interviews to those professionals or people who knew them and on impressionistic views based on popular perception¹.

One of the first questions to investigate is to what extent such a fixed character is based on ‘reality’. And whether the reality of, say, Edwardian England (*Downton Abbey*’s reality) has any correspondence to today’s high-end domestic service.

I concluded that the scattered notions that are available do point in the direction of the received image of the butler. In his book *Excellence – The Empirical 5 Golden Pillars of Life in Service* (2020), conceived for a readership of butlers and hospitality professionals, Gary Williams Esq, principal of The British Butler Institute, informs us for example that “having a clear quality voice will change your life” (no page) and that it is important to understand the difference between being friendly and being too familiar (pp. 30-1). He provides examples on how to deliver “the right experience” to each guest, such as the following (p.16):

We had a guest who told me how she loved butterflies, so I went to a local market on the way home, which I knew sold small glass butterflies, and I put one on her breakfast tray the next morning. I included a note with details of the name of the butterfly, how long it lives, where it travels, what it eats, and which country it is found in.

All details that certainly resonate with the personal image of the

¹ The bonus material contained in some DVDs can sometimes provide a precious paratext. The DVD of *Gosford Park*, for example, includes excerpts of interviews to old butlers and maids who served as counsellors for Altman’s film and who had been in service in the 1930s, at the time when the story is set.

butler that we have created as members of film and TV audiences. More importantly to our ends are Williams's notes on "Voice" (p. 39):

The way we communicate through our voice is vitally important to our personal and professional lives.

One of the important steps to self-confidence is to speak up and project your voice effortlessly in a clear and relaxed manner [...]. Improve your articulation and pronunciation, and learn a good array of words and phrases for every situation.

These words seem to have been lifted out of the screenplay of *The Remains of the Day*: "I read these books, any books, to develop my command and knowledge of the English language. I read to further my education", says butler Mr Stevens at a pivotal moment in the film. Real butler Gary Williams himself speaks with a Received Pronunciation (RP)².

As to the nationality of the typical butler, according to *Polo & Tweed*, a luxury domestic service recruitment specialist based in London, British staff are considered to be the best in the world (<https://poloandtweed.com/>) and modern butlers:

often have a business-like mind and (are) able to run the properties and affairs of the clients with precision and care. [...] Today men (and women) of all backgrounds are seeking new employment opportunities and the thought of service is no longer a dirty word. In fact, the art of service is something that the very highest calibre of Butlers pride themselves on.

The options that this recruitment agency provides are four: a) British Butler ("British or English butlers are considered the original or quintessential butler"); b) Modern Multi-National Butler ("heavily influenced by the traditional background of a British Butler, but will bring a multi-national background and cultural influence to their job"); c) Female Butler ("female butler may be culturally appropriate (as in the Middle East) or it might just be a personal preference"); d) Butler with House Manager/Estate Manager Skills ("typically favoured by the smaller residents who don't require a

² See clip in the Butler School section of his official website <https://www.britishbutlerinstitute.com/butler-school/>.

fleet of staff, but expect the Butler to be able to handle a multitude of additional duties each day”).

Verifying whether original authors and Italian dubbing adapters have always tuned in to the perceived image of the butler or have also explored other solutions is one of the aims of this study.

3. Various declinations of the butler

The most significant examples from the corpus are analysed in the following sub-sections according to their adherence or deviations from what has come to be regarded as the ‘traditional’ butler, and to the most prominent feature or function of the character in the respective audiovisual texts.

3.1. The traditional butler

The traditional butler that audiences are accustomed to expect from screen renditions speaks in a controlled manner and uses RP (for example in *Rebecca* – *La prima moglie*, 1940) or its American counterpart (as in *The Big Sleep* – *Il grande sonno*, 1946). He is invariably, in all the examples in the corpus, translated into standard Italian and uses the *voi* (second person plural), less frequently the *lei* (third person singular) forms of address. He is sometimes a British person in an American milieu (as for example in *Family Affair* – *Tre nipoti e un maggiordomo*, 1966-1971). Even if he does have an RP accent, he can sometimes, although rarely, display mainstream RP (Wells 1992), that is RP with a touch of regional accent, like the butler in *Maurice* (1987), and, while still sounding traditional, he may look different, for example he may even be a robot.

Cogman, the butler-robot in *Transformers – The Last Knight* (*Transformers – l'ultimo cavaliere*, 2017) speaks in an RP voice but there are frequent emotional shifts in his tone, which define his personality. This is particularly evident when this robotic alien makes use of a declamatory style (recognisable by the use of rhotic /r/s) to recruit one of the main characters, implying – by the pomposity of this type of speech – that their mission is a legendary one³.

³ I acknowledge Cassandra Fusco who selected this example for the website *Dialects in Audiovisuals* by Ranzato et al.: <https://dialectsinav.wixsite.com/home>

Although the traditional butler can quietly deliver jokes and in fact often provokes laughter in his⁴ own distinguished manner (see for example *Arthur – Arturo*, 1981), he is not in principle a comic figure, except for a few memorable renditions, some of which will be illustrated in the following subsection.

3.2. The comic butler

The whacky butler in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) speaks too little for us to be able to assess his linguistic persona, but the blind butler played by Alec Guinness in *Murder by Death* (*Invito a cena con delitto*, 1976) is quite loquacious. As the title suggests, the film is entirely based on nonsensical wordplays and to the butler in particular we owe such immortal exchanges as the following virtuoso dialogue, in which two guests, newly arrived in a mysterious house, are being shown to their room:

1)

Murder by Death (1976)

Original dialogue	Italian adaptation	Back translation
Dora: You are? Jamessir: Bensonmum. Dora: Thank you, Benson. Jamessir: No, no, no, no, my name is Bensonmum.	Dora: Lei si chiama? Jamessignora: Jamessignora. Dora: Grazie, James. Jamessignora: No, no, no, no. James=signora, il nome è Jamessignora.	Dora: Your name is? Jamesmum: Jamesmum. Dora: Thank you, James. Jamesmum: No, no, no, no, Jamesmum, the name is Jamesmum.
Dick: Bensonmum? Jamessir: Yes, sir. James-sir Bensonmum.	Dick: Jamessignora? Jamessignora: Bensignore. Jamessignora Bensignore.	Dick: Jamesmum? Jamesmum: Bensir. Jamesmum Bensir.
Dick: Jamessir? Jamessir: Yes, sir. Dick: Jamessir Bensonmum? Jamessir: Yes, sir. Dick: How odd.	Dick: Bensignore? Jamessignora: Sissignore. Dick: Jamessignora Bensignore? Jamessignora: Sissignore. Dick: Oh signore.	Dick: Bensir? Jamesmum: Yes, sir. Dick: Jamesmum Bensir? Jamesmum: Yes, sir. Dick: Oh Lord.

⁴ Although butlers in films and TV can be female, the possessive pronoun “his” is generally preferred in this article as all the examples are of male butlers.

Jamessir: My father's name, sir.	Jamessign.: Era il nome di mio padre.	Jamesmum: It was my father's name.
Dick: What is your father's name?	Dick: Qual era il nome di suo padre?	Dick: Which was your father's name?
Jamessir: Howodd. Howodd. Howodd Bensonmum.	Jamessignora: Ossignore. Ossignore Jamessignora.	Jamesmum: Ohlord. Ohlord Jamesmum.
Dick: Your father was Howodd Bensonmum?	Dick: Si chiamava Ossignore Jamessignora?	Dick: Your father was called Ohlord Jamesmum?

The almost literal translation into Italian inverts some of the components in order to find the most humorous sound combinations and successfully reproduces the nonsensical exchange which is delivered by all actors with hilarious rapidity. The original dialogue had the advantage of playing with homophones: the surname Bensonmum follows the way it is usually transcribed in script and subtitles, but it would probably better be written as Bensonma'm as it obviously plays with this deferential term of address. In the same way, Jamessir's father was probably called Howard, which Howodd may resemble when pronounced in the clipped, posh way of traditional butlers. All the same the Italian dialogue is probably even more weirdly amusing in its absurdity, as the lack of alliterations makes it sound, if possible, more surreal than the original. The traditional appearance and traditional accent of the butler in this case add to the humour of the film which is in fact a parody of the typical stock characters of murder films, all traditional but all portrayed with a quirky twist.

Although this legendary BBC series was never dubbed into Italian, it is impossible not to quote the comic butler that Rowan Atkinson plays in *Blackadder (the Third)*, in which the title character serves no less than George the Fourth. His linguistic bravado is perhaps best expressed in the episode ("Ink and Incapability") in which he maliciously mocks the proud Samuel Johnson and his great achievement, the first dictionary of the English language:

2)

Blackadder the Third (1987)

Johnson: Here is, sir, the very cornerstone of English scholarship. This book, sir, contains every word in our beloved language.

Blackadder: Every single one, sir?

Johnson: Every single word, sir!

Blackadder: Oh well, in that case, sir, I hope you will not object if I also offer the Doctor my most enthusiastic contrafribbularities.

Johnson: What?

Blackadder: Contrafribbularities, sir? It is a common word down our way.

Johnson: Damn!

Blackadder: Oh, I'm sorry, sir. I'm anaspeptic, phrasmotric, even compunctious to have caused you such pericombobulation.

The rally of neologisms is meant to humiliate Doctor Johnson who has just boasted of having included every single English word in his dictionary. It is pertinent to remember that Rowan Atkinson would also voice another famous comic butler, Zazu, in the Disney film *The Lion King* (*Il re leone*, 1994), dubbed into Italian using an overly formal lexicon and a highfaluting tone of voice, which are meant to convey the image of the typical British butler (though in this case it is a hornbill).

3.3. The European butler

One of Ernst Lubitsch's most exquisite sophisticated comedies, *Trouble in Paradise* (*Mancia competente*, 1932), features an Italian-accented butler (when the action is set in Venice) and a French-accented one (when the scene switches to Paris). The latter often finds himself perplexed by his master's and mistress's eccentricities. After one particularly confusing exchange, in which the lady orders him to do exactly the opposite of what the master has just demanded, he just hums a few notes as a sign of disapproval. The adaptation has the butler say, in perfectly standard Italian, with no foreign accent, the words "È il trionfo dell'indecisione" (It's the triumph of indecision), an explicitation of his state of mind. I wanted to mention this apparently minor addition, because it is the example of a practice of 'filling in the gaps', often favoured by Italian adapters, especially when handling European (notably French) films which value silences and indistinct sounds (see Ranzato 2020 for comments on this topic).

Probably the most famous butler of European descent is the German-accented Max in Billy Wilder's masterpiece *Sunset Boulevard* (*Viale del tramonto*, 1950). No attempt has been made

to recreate his foreign accent (foreign with respect to the other American characters) in the Italian adaptation, but a specific prosodic strategy was coherently followed to convey this character's voice in the whole film. Max in Italian has a particularly ominous, even lugubrious tone of voice, a trait which does not belong to the original butler, who simply sounds non-American and whose grimness lies in his expression and demeanour.

3.4. The Cockney Butler

The Cockney butler responds to another topos, the one Michael Caine refers to in subsection 2: "if you had a Cockney accent you were going to play the butler", which probably does not mean that butlers usually had Cockney accents, but that actors with a nonstandard accent were not going to get large speaking parts⁵. This is not quite true, however, of the Cockney butler featured in this category – especially thanks to Michael Caine.

Unlike his Batman movies predecessors (Michael Gough in Tim Burton's and Joel Schumacher's contributions to the saga, for example), Michael Caine does not play the role of Alfred Pennyworth (Bruce Wayne/Batman's butler) with an RP voice but using his iconic London accent, in the *Dark Knight* trilogy directed by Christopher Nolan. Caine's butler, linguistically represented as a more down-to-earth Cockney character, is also more outspoken and less deferential to his master than Alfred is usually portrayed. Dubbed by Dario Penne, the character in the Italian version speaks the same polished standard Italian as Gary Oldman's Dracula and Anthony Hopkins's Hannibal Lecter, to name two of the actor's other impersonations. The aural result is that the characters of Alfred Pennyworth and Bruce Wayne, 'servant' and master, are linguistic peers in the Italian version.

The same can more or less be said of the dubbing of Winston, the dog butler in *Garfield: A Tail of Two Kitties* (*Garfield 2*, 2006), a variation on 'the rich and the poor' and the 'reversal of roles' narrative themes, in which a happy-go-lucky, lovable, but quite coarse American kitty switches places with an aristocratic British

⁵ Part of the information contained in this subsection is included in Ranzato 2019: 242-244.

kitten in England. Winston in the film speaks in a formal register but with the Cockney accent of the London-raised Bob Hoskins. Interestingly, the character is thus contrasted with two regional and social types in the original film: the 'rich' British Prince XII, played by Tim Curry, and the 'poor' American Garfield, played by Bill Murray. In the Italian version, only the formal register is in (albeit not sharp) contrast with the more informal voice of Garfield, played with verve by the multi-skilled showman Fiorello.

The actor who impersonates a butler with the most marked London accent is, however, Sean Pertwee in the *Gotham* TV series (Bruno Heller, 2014-2019), a variation on the Batman theme. As regards the dubbing adaptation, not only does the Italian Alfred of this series lose his regional accent, but the adapters missed the opportunity to characterise his distinctively informal speech. Note, for example, the translation of the following exchanges (from season 1): "You all right?", "Tutto a posto" (Everything all right); "Absolutely untold piles of the bloody things", "Ah sì, un numero incalcolabile, pile e pile di carte" (Ah, yes, an incalculable number, piles and piles of paper); "You're gonna be forking out serious dosh for that, I'll tell you", "Il conto sarà piuttosto salato, lo sa?" (The bill will be quite expensive, do you know that?); "Cool your boots, Master Bruce, let's all just take a breath, shall we?", "Calmiamoci ora, prendiamoci tutti una bella pausa, d'accordo?" (Let's calm down, let's all take a beautiful pause, all right?); "Right, well, you know, do try and eat a bit, won't you?", "Beh, sa, cerchi di mangiare un po', se può" (Well, you know, try to eat a little, if you can), where Alfred's slang expressions, hesitations and fillers are not matched in Italian by an equal degree of informality.

Alfred's original dialogue is characterised by marked t-glottalisations as well as by showing an Estuary predilection for tag questions (Mugglestone 2003: 284). My back translation conveys only partially the definite shift to formality implemented in the dubbing. In addition, Alfred's affectionate "Do try and eat a bit, won't you?" loses its paternal overtones in the target version. Finally, the Italian recourse to the *lei* form of address means, in pragmatic terms, that this version of the butler is deferential to his master in a way that the original is very far from being. The overall translation strategy has led to the portrayal of an overpolite, (almost) conventional butler,

the very opposite of actor Sean Pertwee's characterisation which stresses the intimacy existing between the two characters. It may very well be that Pertwee's Albert was also influenced by Michael Caine's portrayal of the same character, a far cry from the stiff and emotionally guarded butler types we are usually accustomed to.

3.5. The butler as a catalyst of social tensions

This type of butler in the corpus is a character who finds himself at odds – consciously or unconsciously – with the social milieu which surrounds him. Whether he speaks in spotless RP or in a local/regional accent, at a certain point in the story, he is thrown into an alien environment, from a linguistic point of view as well. Generally, in these films the butler is not only a key character but the protagonist, with his name or capacity often appearing in the title.

Ruggles of Red Gap (*Il maggiordomo*), Leo McCarey's 1935 gem with Charles Laughton in the role of the butler, relies on at least two recurrent filmic themes: that of the British character in an American milieu (Ranzato 2018) and the familiar 'reversal of roles' theme present in various narrative, not only filmic, contexts. The story sees a nouveau riche American who 'wins' a British butler at poker. The latter is comprehensibly reluctant to leave England for America but finds in the new world a completely new life: hailed as 'the captain', he becomes a successful man who, by the end of the film, though continuing to speak like a snob, intends to open his own restaurant, thus joining the ranks of the people in trade he undoubtedly used to abhor just as much as his British master did. The film was very successful in the USA and less so in Britain. In the interesting 'paratext' of the official 2015 DVD (which only contains, unfortunately, the Italian television 1980s redubbing of the film and not the original dubbing track), actor and director Simon Callow expands on the greatness of Charles Laughton and on this role in particular:

He was a very exceptional image of a butler for an American audience. [...] He doesn't quite seem to express what we, in England certainly, think of as a butler. And this is most surprising as he came from a family of hoteliers [...]. It's interesting that Laughton, who very much rejected the

English class system, he hated the English class system and he hated the feeling that he, as both a Yorkshire man and as coming from trade, so to speak, was somehow inferior within the social structure and again one of the reasons he was so drawn to going to America.

Laughton's butler is quite exceptional within our corpus also because he is one of the few butlers (mostly belonging to the category illustrated in this subsection) who are absolute protagonists of the picture. Although many of the other characters I have analysed are important or even key characters of the respective films or TV shows, Ruggles acts as the main one on whom the whole action fully revolves. During the film he recites Lincoln's Gettysburg Address by heart ("all men are created equal") and towards the end of the story he makes a toast with his former master:

3)

Ruggles of Red Gap (1935)

Earl: Well, here's to London.

Ruggles: Here's to the Anglo-American Grill, milord.

Equal as he feels he is, he is still addressing his former master as 'milord'. It would have been interesting to see how this exchange, and the whole film, were translated in the 1930s, a time when culture-specific references, especially one as exotic as an Anglo-American Grill, were usually localised, replaced or omitted. The redubbing loans the cultural reference and, very unsubtly, omits the 'milord': "Direi di brindare all'Anglo-American Grill" (I'd say we drink to the Anglo-American Grill).

Another butler in a main role is again in a film of the 1930s, *My Man Godfrey* (*L'impareggiabile Godfrey*, 1936) and once again in a reversal-of-roles story of sorts. In this case, Godfrey is an upper-crust socialite just like the people he mingles with, although nobody knows this at the beginning of the film when he is believed to be a beggar and is hired as a butler.

In another, more meaningful case from a linguistic point of view, the title character from the film *The Admirable Crichton* (*L'incomparabile Crichton*, Lewis Gilbert, 1957) is introduced as a

conservative butler with the most traditionalist views, opposed to his much more liberally-minded master:

4)

The Admirable Crichton (1957)

Crichton: The suffragettes are again giving trouble my Lord. One threw a big stone through a window at number 10 last evening.

Master: Go on. Any casualties?

Crichton: An under-footman – a broken nose. No one of any consequence was hurt. The prime minister was dining out.

Master: Ah, pity. What do you mean: no one of any consequence? How do you know the under-footman wasn't just as good a fellow as the Prime Minister?

Crichton: My Lord, I beg you to lower your voice. If any of the other servants should hear you.

Master: Now we've had this discussion before, Crichton. Today I intend to prove my point [...]. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. All for one and one for all.

Crichton: That was the French, my Lord.

The film, based on a celebrated play by J.M. Barrie, is a social statement: after a shipwreck, the whole master's family and the butler land on a deserted island and there they can experiment the reversal of roles that the master with 'French ideas' had long aspired to. On the island they all become equals and even pay homage to their old butler Crichton, although this is, quite pessimistically, only for a limited period of time. These changes of situation are linguistically signalled by a nuanced but distinctive style-shifting: Crichton switches his RP for a more relaxed, generically south-eastern accent and addresses his new 'peers' on the island quite informally. In the dubbing, the shift is not perceptible and the informality sounds more contrived. The term of address Crichton uses with his old master, for example, is 'Daddy', translated with a less natural 'zietto' (an endearing but rarely used term for 'uncle').

In a decidedly more dramatic atmosphere, but still focusing on style-shifting, the most sophisticated example in the corpus is represented by Joseph Losey's masterpiece, *The Servant* (*Il servo*, 1963; screenplay by Harold Pinter), a film in which, again, the butler

is the main character and in which, again, a reversal of roles takes place. It is a morbid tale which sees the master – a lazy but ‘decent’ young man – slowly spiralling down into debauchery. *The Servant* explores power inequities and the dysfunctional relationship between Tony and Hugo, master and servant, providing a portrait of upper class versus working class roles. Dirk Bogarde’s wonderful interpretation in the title role has his butler, Hugo Barrett, style-shift in and out of his native Manchester accent. His way of speaking is thus significantly different when he uses RP to his upper-class employer in the first part of the story, and when he reverts to a more informal way of speaking as he gradually gains the upper hand in the relationship and when he speaks to his young Essex-accented lover Sarah. In the Italian adaptation all accents are, as customarily, flattened out. However, the translation often, quite ingeniously, conveys the subtle power play between master, servant and a female intruder in the relationship, either the working-class Sarah or, as in the following excerpt, Tony’s girlfriend, the snobbish Susan:

5)
The Servant (1963)

Original dialogue	Italian adaptation	Back translation
Hugo: Would you like to taste the wine, sir? Tony: Thank you. Susan: What ducky gloves. Tony: Barrett’s idea. I like it.	Hugo: Vuole assaggiare il vino, signore? Tony: Grazie. Susan: Perché sta usando i guanti? Tony: È un’idea di Barrett. A me piace.	Hugo: Would you like to taste the wine, sir? Tony: Thank you. Susan: Why are you using gloves? Tony: It’s Barrett’s idea. I like it.
Hugo: It’s Italian, Miss. They’re used in Italy. Susan Stewart: Who by? Tony: (<i>tastes the wine</i>) Excellent. Hugo: Just a Beaujolais, sir, but a good bottler. Susan: A good what? Tony: Bottler. (<i>Susan chuckles</i>)	Hugo: Non è mia. Vengono usati in Italia. Susan: E da chi? Tony: (<i>assaggia il vino</i>) Eccellente. Hugo: È solo un Beaujolais, ma ben embouteillé. Susan: Ben cosa? Tony: Imbottigliato. (<i>Susan ridacchia</i>)	Hugo: It’s not mine. They are used in Italy. Susan Stewart: And who by? Tony: (<i>tastes the wine</i>) Excellent. Hugo: It’s just a Beaujolais, but well embouteillé. Susan: Well what? Tony: Bottled. (<i>Susan chuckles</i>)

The Italian lines perfectly convey Susan's derisive elitism by having her snigger at Hugo's use of a sophisticated French word, *embouteillé* (bottled), which was not in the original dialogue. Hugo's original reference to "a good bottler", apart from creating lip-synch problems if literally translated, would have sounded awkward, and other solutions, as for example "una buona casa" (a good wine grower) would not have had the same import: someone striving for elegance mocked by someone born elegant⁶.

Theoretically, *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015) should appear in the 'traditional butler' subsection, thanks to its champion, Carson, described by Sandrelli (2016: 216) as someone "straddling the separation between upstairs and downstairs", sharing the most conservative characters' distrust of novelty and disapproving of all changes. However, I placed the popular TV series in this subsection because the RP-speaker Jim Carson is often contrasted, and not only linguistically, with another key character, the Yorkshire-speaker Thomas Barrow, who at one point replaces Carson as the butler of Downton Abbey. That this not so closeted gay character with a nonstandard accent should replace Carson, the quintessential butler, appears to be the 'liberal' outcome that was not achieved in films from earlier times such as *The Admirable Crichton*.

This section devoted to social commentary is also the right place to mention Stevens, the butler from *The Remains of the Day* (*Quel che resta del giorno*, 1993). Referring to the novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, to which the film is substantially faithful, Tung (1997) states that:

Discourse and language contribute significantly to Stevens' self-subjugation in *The Remains of the Day*. Stevens in many ways appears a representation of the colonial or postcolonial subject. His utilization of upper-class English, for example, exemplifies one form of assimilation and acculturation, since in order to perform his job, he must acquire the language of those he serves. In addition, by obscuring class markers of language, the butler's required use of upper-class English heightens the transparency of service; that is, by using diction, pronunciation, and speech rhythms similar to that of his

⁶ A similar atmosphere of alcoholic indulgence permeates the much more recent *Bernard and Doris* (*Bernard & Doris – Complici amici*, 2007), a TV film based on the life of the socialite heiress Doris Duke and her Irish butler.

upper-class employers he creates an illusory appearance of likeness with them, and this illusory appearance prevents his employers from having to confront potentially troubling difference.

Of the many significant elements in the filmic adaptation, I would like to mention the insightful relationship that Stevens entertains with his father William, who is interestingly employed in the same house as under-butler to his son. On his death bed, Mr Stevens senior lets go of his evidently constrained RP and slips into a more colloquial, nonstandard (south-eastern) English. He also utters a few significant words such as: "Love went out when I found her carrying on" (referring to his wife, Stevens's mother). This phrase was aptly translated as "*Scoprii che era una donna leggera*" (I found out that she was a loose woman), which correctly interprets the slang meaning of 'carrying on', a euphemistic way to refer to sexual infidelity. His death bed speech is concluded by Mr Stevens senior on an emotionally charged nonstandard note, unacknowledged in translation: "I hope I've been a good father to you. I tried me best." (the latter sentence translated into the standard Italian "*Ho fatto del mio meglio*", I have done my best.)

Conclusions

The films and television shows from the corpus were organised in broad categories according to their adherence or deviations from what has come to be regarded as the 'traditional' butler, and to the most prominent feature or function of the character in the respective audiovisual texts. The most significant examples from each type were illustrated in an effort to determine to what extent this character construction steadily relies on recurring tropes, both in the original and in the dubbed versions.

It was probably too much to expect a higher degree of linguistic inventiveness from a character (and a real-life counterpart) who is after all generally recognised for his control over every aspect of his profession, including language. It is not surprising that the moments of linguistic creativity come from the comic butlers: the contrast with the usually constrained speech associated with the character unleashes the authors' creativity in the conception of humorous situations.

From a diachronic point of view, no relevant shift in the linguistic representation of the butler and especially in the respective translations has been detected: this type, in its basic features, has remained indeed immutable, with the few 'eccentric' examples playing as variations on a well-known theme. Most butlers speak RP (or the equivalent North American variant) with very few traces of regionality or a foreign accent. When they do style-shift in and out of a nonstandard accent (*The Admirable Crichton*; *The Servant*; *The Remains of the Day*), the switch to an informal code is not recorded in the Italian translations. The dubbed Italian dialogue consistently translates all address forms with the formal *voi* or *lei* even in more informal occasions. Speech disparity is not even recorded in cases when two butlers (*Downton Abbey*) are overtly juxtaposed also through their accents.

Among the butlers with a nonstandard accent, the one I termed 'the Cockney butler' stands in a category of its own, thanks especially to the Batman films by Christopher Nolan, in which the butler is played by London actor Michael Caine, who may have influenced other epigoni. All the butlers in this category are characterised by a more intimate relationship with their master and by a consequently less deferential behaviour. Given that the Cockney accent is so important in conveying the character's warmth, the standardising Italian translation appears in this case a particularly unsuitable device.

It is in the 'European' and especially in the 'comic' butler respective categories that the most interesting solutions for the Italian adaptation for dubbing have been found, with one example (*Murder by Death*) of considerable creativity.

It is, however, the section which sees the butler as the catalyst of social tensions that fully showcases the great linguistic and narrative potential that this character possesses by highlighting his peculiarity: the butler character is generally a man from the working class who shares the views, the mind frame and often even the language of the upper classes. Nonstandard accents and style-shifting are used in these films when the gist of the story aims to make a social commentary and reflect on class power struggles. In the Italian dubbings, the shifts to informality (and back) are generally not perceivable and an overall tendency has been detected in the translations, which renders even the more unconventional butlers closer to the traditional, 'received' image of this stock figure. One of the examples (*The Servant*), however, points in the direction of a more careful handling of the

nuanced exchanges by having recourse to less literal and more creative renditions of the original lines. A felicitous solution, because these are the narratives which are most rewarding for the researcher and most engaging for the thinking audience.

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APPENDIX

List of viewed films and television series

Title	Director/Creator	Year
1) <i>Trouble in Paradise</i>	Ernst Lubitsch	1932
2) <i>Ruggles of Red Gap</i>	Leo McCarey	1935
3) <i>My Man Godfrey</i>	Gregory La Cava	1936
4) <i>Rebecca</i>	Alfred Hitchcock	1940
5) <i>Here Comes Mr. Jordan</i>	Alexander Hall	1941
6) <i>The Big Sleep</i>	Howard Hawks	1946
7) <i>The Farmer's Daughter</i>	H.C. Potter	1947
8) <i>Sunset Boulevard</i>	Billy Wilder	1950
9) <i>The Admirable Crichton</i>	Lewis Gilbert	1957
10) <i>The Grass is Greener</i>	Stanley Donen	1960
11) <i>The Servant</i>	Joseph Losey	1963
12) <i>Family Affair</i> (TV)	E.L. Hartmann & D. Feddersen	1966-1971 (YouTube)
13) <i>The Aristocats</i>	Wolfgang Reitherman	1970
14) <i>The Rocky Horror Picture Show</i>	Jim Sharman	1975
15) <i>Murder by Death</i>	Robert Moore	1976
16) <i>Arthur</i>	Steve Gordon	1981
17) <i>Maurice</i>	James Ivory	1987
18) <i>Blackadder the Third</i> (TV) (no dub.)	Richard Curtis & Ben Elton	1987
19) <i>The Simpsons</i> (TV)	Matt Goering	1989 -in production
20) <i>Jeeves and Wooster</i> (TV) (no dub.)	Clive Exton	1990-1993
21) <i>Batman Returns</i>	Tim Burton	1992
22) <i>The Remains of the Day</i>	James Ivory	1993
23) <i>The Lion King</i>	Roger Allers & Rob Minkoff	1994
24) <i>Batman & Robin</i>	Joel Schumacher	1997
25) <i>Gosford Park</i>	Robert Altman	2001
26) <i>Batman Begins</i>	Christopher Nolan	2005
27) <i>Garfield 2</i>	Tim Hill	2006
28) <i>Bernard and Doris</i> (TV)	Bob Balaban	2007 (Sky)
29) <i>The Dark Knight</i>	Christopher Nolan	2008

30) <i>Downton Abbey</i> (TV)	Julian Fellowes	2010-2015
31) <i>The Dark Knight Rises</i>	Christopher Nolan	2012
32) <i>Gotham</i> (TV)	Bruno Heller	2014-2019 (Netflix)
33) <i>Batman v Superman</i>	Zack Snyder	2016
34) <i>Transformers: The Last Knight</i>	Michael Bay	2017
