Linguistic Representations of Homosexual Identity in *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Rocketman* across English and Italian Linguacultures

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Abstract
Based on the life of Freddie Mercury, *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Singer and Fletcher 2018) is a popular cinematic product that received little critical acclaim on its release; however, it became the biggest grossing music biopic of all time. *Rocketman* (Fletcher 2019), an impressionistic portrayal of Elton John's rise to fame was released in its wake. Both are among the most widely debated films to emerge in recent years. Paradigmatic of the modern biopic, they recount the lives of iconic rock stars who struggle with fame, identity, and most crucially, their sexuality in seventies and eighties Britain. From a cross-cultural perspective, conveying the narratives of a more or less explicit homosexuality set in a specific spatio-temporal context to a mainstream international audience presents complex translational implications. Focusing on Anglo/Italian contexts, Ranzato (2012: 382) has argued, "the language of homosexuals has long remained in Italy the language of a ghetto and even today the relatively poor lexicon available is an objective obstacle even for the most unprejudiced translator". This study, therefore, aims to investigate the ways in which the linguistic representations of homosexuality have been negotiated across time and space comparing the source language and dubbed versions of *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Rocketman* to ascertain whether those obstacles have been overcome and if so, how.

Key-words: homosexual identity, dubbing, biopics, cross-cultural pragmatics, sociolinguistics, film studies.

1. Introduction

Comparisons between *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Rocketman* are inevitable. Paradigmatic of the modern biopic, they recount the lives of iconic rock stars (respectively Freddie Mercury and Elton John) as they struggle to come to terms with fame, identity, and crucially, their sexuality. Against a backdrop of socio-cultural

Textus 1-2021, pp. 203-227
ISSN 1824-3967

upheaval, the narratives unfold during the seventies and eighties, an era in which homosexual acts had barely been decriminalised in the UK[1]. Conveying these narratives of a more or less explicit homosexuality embedded in a specific (British) spatio-temporal context to a mainstream international audience presents challenges from a cross-cultural perspective. This contribution sheds light on the issues at stake by examining the ways in which the linguistic representations of homosexuality in *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Rocketman* are negotiated comparing the source language and Italian dubbed versions. The article begins with a theoretical reflection on the nexus between homosexuality, language, and translation. Current perspectives on dubbing as audiovisual translation are then discussed and a sample survey of paratextual data drawn from online sources introduces the analysis that follows. Adopting methods based on Toury's (1995/2012) Descriptive Translation Studies, "critical points" (Munday 2012) in translational decision-making are examined through a series of examples extracted from both films. An interview with the dubbing adapter of *Rocketman* provides the practitioner's perspective regarding the translation of lexical items denoting homosexuals discussed in the analysis. The contribution closes with concluding remarks on the outcomes of the study.

2. Homosexuality and language

Academic enquiry into language and sexuality has flourished in recent years with the proliferation of LGBTQ debates (Cameron and Kulick 2003; Milani 2017), yet the first studies into the relationship between verbal expression and sexual identity date back to the early twentieth century. Four phases of research on the perception of homosexuality have been identified (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 75); the phase between the seventies to the early nineties is the period in which *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Rocketman* are set and therefore the phase that most interests us here. During the seventies when the Gay Liberation Movement gathered pace, homosexuality was framed as an oppressed minority. Therefore, fighting for gay rights entailed

[1] The Sexual Offences Act of 1967 legalised homosexual acts that were consensual, in private and between men over the age of 21. By way of comparison, homosexuality was legalised in Italy in 1889 (Barilli 1999).

constructing homosexual identity as a homogeneous community. This led to the assumption that a "gay language" existed that was common to all (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 77). While the construct of "gayspeak" as characterising a monolithic speech community is clearly problematic, the conviction that a meaningful nexus between language and sexuality exists is in itself highly significant (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 78). For the purpose of this study, two key linguistic concepts can be identified: the first is best defined as "camp"; the second refers to forms of labelling[2] LGBTQ people. "Camp" is conceived as an aesthetic sensibility (Sontag 1964) and a communication style (Harvey 1998, 2000). Evident in the discursive construction of Freddie Mercury in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, camp talk is characterised by a set of linguistic resources used to construct particular gay identities that could be summarised in these four forms:

1. Paradox: juxtaposition, incongruities, mixing of register and references to high and low culture;
2. Inversion of grammatical gender markers, rhetorical routines, or value systems;
3. Luderism: linguistic playfulness, double entendres, play on words;
4. Parody: aristocratic mannerisms, stereotype of Femininity, vocatives such as "My Dear", use of French to signify high culture.
(Harvey 1998)

Within the second paradigm, locutions denoting LGBTQ people perform two functions: self-definition and external attribution (Orrù 2014: 56). However, the connotative meanings intrinsic to some terms can be ideologically and pragmatically challenging, especially when LGBTQ subjects use dysphemistic labels to refer to themselves. Set in an era before the dawning of political correctness (see Cameron 1995), examples of homosexual dysphemism in common usage during the seventies and eighties reverberate throughout the source text (ST) dialogue in *Rocketman*. Since then, terms such as "queer" and "queen" have been re-appropriated by the LGBTQ community. However, an analogous process within the Italian linguacultural

[2] Baker (2006: 122) refers to labelling as "any discursive process that involves using a lexical item, term or phrase to identify a person, place, group, event or any other key element in a narrative".

appears to be less evident, thus problematising the translatability of terminology related to homosexuals within the context of a mainstream cultural product such as a film. The following section offers some theoretical considerations on translational issues connected to language and homosexuality.

2.1. Globalising gay

The translation of texts with homosexual content is fraught with linguacultural, ideological and political implications (Baker 1992: 24; Harvey 1998, 2000; Ranzato 2012, 2019; Baer 2018: 42). This study is based on the premise that the loanword "gay" is not merely a lexical item that travels across linguistic boundaries but is a construct related to cultural translation and identity politics:

> […] 'gay' is commonly seen as self-evidently describing people who engage in same-sex practices anywhere in the world. Against the historical backdrop of late modernity, this identity category travels through a variety of acts of interlingual and cultural translation. To make critical sense of these translational dynamics, it is urgent to interrogate 'gay' as a sign representing not a self-evident category, but a situated construct, entrenched in a series of conceptualizations of identity, community, and liberation that originate from specific U.S. political histories. (Bassi 2014: 299)

Bassi's observation is particularly relevant if we consider the global impact of audiovisual products, many of which are produced in the US and then distributed internationally. It is here that audiovisual translation plays a decisive role in the transfer of cultural, social and sexual models. Through dubbing and subtitling, representations of social groups and religious minorities have enormous potential for distortion: they can either trigger processes of cultural contamination through the transfer of words and images from one linguacultural system to another, or be refracted to suit target culture norms and values, possibly perpetuating offensive stereotypes (Díaz Cintas 2009: 8-9; Filmer 2012). This is of pivotal importance in the specific case. The following section moves on to consider the impact of dubbing on the target text (TT) representation of gay characters when meaning transfer takes place from English to Italian.

2.2. Dubbing gay identity

Fictional representations of speech play a fundamental role in the construction of character development and narrative (Harvey 1998: 298). When films are marketed to foreign audiences the dialogues are subtitled or dubbed, depending on the target culture preference. Although the division between "dubbing" and "subtitling" countries has become blurred in recent years (Ranzato and Zanotti 2018: 2-3), traditionally, dubbing is the Italian predilection. Dubbing is a form of interlingual translation, yet the translational act "is virtually always referred to as 'adaptation'" (Di Giovanni 2018: 161). Dialogue adapters aspire to recreate the ST's fictitious naturalness, or "prefabricated orality" (Chaume 2004: 168). The language variety adopted by Italian screen translators has also been referred to as "dubbese" (Antonini 2009), due to the fact that the dub sometimes resorts to formulaic translational routines (Pavesi 2005: 48). Nevertheless, dubbing's multisemiotic affordances can convey rich, albeit sometimes conflicting meanings through prosodic features. As Bosseaux (2015: 69) notes: "A dubbed voice changes pitch, articulation, class, regional context, colloquialisms, individual turns of phrase, timbre, educational levels and other suggestions of cultural positions and capabilities". Research on dubbing so-called "gayspeak" in the Italian context, however, tends to focus on lexical issues. Sandrelli's (2016) corpus-based study compares the frequency and translation of terms referring to sexual orientation and sexual practices in three drama series, *Queer as Folk* (UK and US versions) and *The L Word*. She notes the "flattening of nuances" (2016: 141), limited range, and reduced pool of translation alternatives, much in line with Ranzato's (2012) earlier qualitative diachronic study. Sandrelli (2016: 142) concludes that "The Italian dubbed versions missed a chance to promote a change in the deeply rooted stereotypes on homosexuality that are still held by a large proportion of the population". While this is true, it could also be argued that such programmes would only appeal to a niche audience of predominantly gay viewers and would never reach the mainstream in any case. If societal perceptions of Otherness are to be challenged, it is more likely to happen in nuanced ways with popular audiovisual products such as the films analysed here. The next section delves into the question of reception with an overview

of online reviews of *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Rocketman* from both linguacultural perspectives.

3. Paratexts and epitextual data: What the papers say

Some aspects of audience reception (see Di Giovanni 2018) can be understood from epitextual data drawn from online newspapers, blogs and websites, which yield important insights on how the films were received in their respective socio-linguacultural contexts. What follows is a selection of representative data that focus on the question of homosexual representation in *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Rocketman*.

On a global level, a form of LGBTQ censoring induced China and Russia to cut scenes from both films that portrayed physical intimacy between men (Bell and Allen 2019; D'Amico 2018). Elton John (John 2019) commented: "Some studios wanted to tone down the sex and drugs so the film would get a PG-13 rating. But I just haven't led a PG-13 rated life". In fact, The British Board for Film Censorship cited drug misuse, sex, and "very strong language", in particular the "homophobic terms" as the reasons why *Rocketman* was restricted to over 15s. In the USA the film was restricted to over 17s (Geisinger 2019), perhaps illustrating the zeitgeist of Trump's America. By contrast, the depiction of "gay sex" did not appear to be an issue for the Italian Board of film censors; the film remained uncut in Italy and received a "T" rating[3], thus disproving the commonly held belief that Anglophone countries are more tolerant than Italy on societal issues. *Bohemian Rhapsody* was classified as unrestricted in Italy and the UK; sex is never explicit, there are few overt linguistic references to homosexuality, and there is very little swearing.

However, British film reviewers were hard on *Bohemian Rhapsody* for representing Mercury's life as a morality tale (Hitt 2018; Kumar 2018). As *The Guardian* reviewer puts it, "It's a film that seems to view the fact that Mercury was gay as little short of a tragedy" (Rose 2018). By contrast, *Rocketman* was praised for its portrayal of Elton John's sexuality (Bradshaw 2019; Kermode 2019).

[3] A "T" Rating stands for "Tutti", meaning it is unrestricted and suitable for everyone.

In the Italian context, *Bohemian Rhapsody*'s dubbing director, Marco Guadagno, won an award for "best overall dubbing" at the "Voci nell'ombra" festival (2019). Nevertheless, just like English-speaking countries, Italian critics saw *Bohemian Rhapsody* as only partially successful (Caprara 2018) with a somewhat moralistic tone (Cruccu 2018). Before turning to the analysis, what follows is a brief outline of the methodological framework.

4. Methodology

The analysis employs a descriptive translation studies framework to compare ST and TT (Toury 1995/2012), focusing on "critical points" (Munday 2012: 3) in translational decision-making. These are "those points in a text that require interpretation and, in some cases, substantive intervention from the translator" (Munday 2012: 42), and occur where the translator, or in this case the dialogue adapter either consciously or unconsciously demonstrates evaluative attitudes to the text s/he is translating. Put simply, critical points might be considered "locations in discourse where major cultural differences are signalled" (Agar 1994: 232). A word on methodological caveats: during the research process it emerged that *Bohemian Rhapsody* offers more examples of lexis and stretches of dialogue relevant to the research questions dealt with here compared to *Rocketman*. However, forms of non-verbal communication were abundant in both films; meaning making resources such as gaze, gesture, movement, and dress code also construct specific discourses on homosexuality that may or may not be linked to the verbal expression. A multimodal analysis of these elements would undoubtedly enhance the linguistic data presented here, but goes beyond the scope of this paper. What follows are the analyses of selected examples from both films, focusing on the translation of camp, terms of self-definition, and external attribution.

5. The case of *Bohemian Rhapsody*: From Paki to camp repartee

The opening line in *Bohemian Rhapsody* is key to the film's representation of Mercury's identity struggles, which are not exclusively related to sexuality. The year is 1970. Freddie is working at Heathrow airport as a baggage handler. While grabbing the cases

as they come off the plane, he is distracted for a second and his co-worker bellows:

Example 1) (00:04:00-00:04:06)

Character	Source text	Target text	Back translation
Luggage handler	Oi, Paki! You missed one!	E quello, pachi?	*And that one, Paki?*
Freddie	I am not from Pakistan	Non sono pachistano	*I'm not Pakistani*

This short, yet meaningful exchange frames several of the themes dealt with in the film. Firstly, the question of accent. The luggage handler speaks with a broad cockney accent, while Malek's Freddie speaks with exaggeratedly Etonian diction. By contrast, the dubbing actors' voices have no distinctive diastratic features or regional variation. Meaning is therefore lost, as it is evident in the ST that the traditional social order has been subverted: power is in the hands of the cockney worker, while Mercury is derided, despite his public-school accent and education. This reversal is due to ethnicity, not to social class. The racial slur "paki" is imbued with meanings related to the period in which "paki bashing" was a horrific social phenomenon in the newly "multi-ethnic" cities of the UK (Horobin 1972). From a translational perspective, the question is whether the deeply offensive connotations of the term "paki" can be relayed into Italian, a linguaculture which has little historical connection with Pakistanis, even less with the racial issues rife in seventies Britain that spawned the violent, nationalist skinhead movement. Although the disparaging term is relayed into the TT, and occurs twice more at different points in the film (00:11:50 and 1:38:02), its pragmatic force is weakened because it has little cultural resonance for the Italian audience. Beyond semantics, cross-cultural pragmatics, and sociolinguistic factors such as accent, further meaning-making resources can be found in the affordances of voice prosody (Bosseux 2015: 69). An example is in the dialogue above: the ST affirmative intonation has been replaced by an interrogative in the TT, thus transforming the utterance and its pragmatic function. In the ST, the cockney accent, the prosodic features and the interjection "Oi"

render the utterance a strong reproof. The TT combination of a neutral accent with an interrogative intonation creates a completely different set of meanings that eliminate the racial overtones and aggressive stance. From this opening scene that provides the socio-cultural and historical backdrop, the following example highlights translational dilemmas pertaining to the language of homosexuality, and specifically, the lemma "gay".

5.1. Historically semanticising "gay"

In the film's diegesis, Freddie pursues his career as a singer, joining forces with May, Taylor, and Deacon to form Queen. Success comes quickly after a series of gigs and tours. Approximately halfway through the film, the first linguistic reference to Mercury's sexuality is made. Freddie confesses to Mary that he is uncertain of his sexual orientation. Mary, on the other hand, has no doubts:

Example 2) (00:54:26-00:54:38)

Character	**Source text**	**Target text**	**Back translation**
Freddie	I've been thinking about this for some time now. I think I'm bisexual	C'ho pensato a lungo…credo di essere bisessuale	*I've thought about this for a long time... I think I'm bisexual*
Mary	Freddie, you're gay	Freddie, sei gay	*Freddie…you're gay*

Considering the spatial-temporal world in which the narrative is situated, the term "gay" in both source and TT has strong socio-political connotations. It could be argued that within London's more progressive societal spheres the expression would have been circulating by the early seventies, the period in which this scene is set, considering that the "Gay liberation Front" emerged in the UK in 1971. In the Italian context, Zappettini (2010: 4-6) notes that while the organ of the *Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano*, the periodical "FUORI!", was produced between 1972-82, the term "gay" was not in usage at that time. Barilli (1999: 49) also affirms that

in the seventies and eighties "gay" was not employed as a synonym of homosexual; its association with the gay rights movement would have given militant Marxist overtones to what is today considered a neutral lexeme. The non-profit organisation "Arcigay" was founded in 1985, and could signal the beginning of its mainstreaming.

From a dubbing perspective, the obvious solution was to use the loanword "gay": Mary's lips are fully visible as she utters the word therefore lip-synchrony might have been a constraining issue (Pavesi 2005: 13). Yet, the term "gay" in the Italian dub produces translation effects and diachronic dissonance. While De Mauro (1979) registers "gay" as entering the Italian lexicon in the late 1960s, Trifone (private correspondence 26 June 2020)[4], on the other hand, suggests the loanword first appeared in dictionaries in the late seventies:

> Mi sembra significativo, in questa direzione, che il VI volume (FIO-GRAU) del *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* fondato da Salvatore Battaglia non lo registri, visto che il volume è stato pubblicato appunto nel 1970[5].

The term can also be found later in the *Vocabolario della lingua italiana* (Zingarelli 1983) with the following definition:

> "euf. Omosessuale, spec. consapevole, lieto, fiero della propria condizione sessuale"[6] (Trifone, private correspondence)

The ideological implications of this dictionary definition are manifold, but for our purposes here, it sufficiently confirms that in the past (if not now) the word "gay" was viewed as a euphemism in Italy, and therefore a more palatable term than "homosexual".

5.2. Anglophone gay slang

The dress code and persona Mercury had adopted by the early eighties evoked the gay subculture of North America and Great

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[4] Many thanks to Professor Trifone for his invaluable help and expertise.

[5] "I think it is significant to note in this regard that the VI Volume of (FIO-GRAU) del *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* founded by Salvatore Battaglia does not register the term, given that the volume was in fact published in 1970" (my translation).

[6] [*euphemism*. Homosexual, esp. aware, glad, and proud of one's sexual condition].

Britain in that historical period. In sharp contrast with the gender-fluid looks of the previous decade, the image projected by the singer and represented in the film as an externalisation of his sexual identity corresponds to the gay identity category known as "clone". According to the *OED* this denotes:

> 3. *slang* (originally *U.S.*). A homosexual man who adopts a particular type of stereotypically macho appearance and style of dress. Now chiefly *historical*.

There are several references to the evolution of Mercury's (visual) identity in the dialogue. For example, while Freddie is showing Roger Taylor around his new flat, he asks "what do you think?" [che ne pensi?], but Taylor responds "gayer?" [più gay?] referring to Mercury's moustache (00:57). During the party scene, in which the star's homosexuality seems all but openly declared, his friendship with Paul Prentice is noted by the other members of the band. The character of Brian May observes "You're starting to look like each other. You're supposed to be in a rock band Freddie, not *The Village People* [Cominciate a somigliarvi… guarda che sei in una rock band, Freddie, non i *Village People* 01:01:30-01:01:41]. An openly gay precursor to the boyband, *The Village People* were an American pop group who were hugely successful in the late seventies and eighties with a string of disco hits. In anglophone popular culture they are legendary for their mainstreaming of gay iconography. As their fame is international, the cultural reference was surely understood by the Italian audience. The following examples are evidence of the construction of Freddie's camp communication style. The band are about to start rehearsing but Freddie is late. He enters the room, unnoticed at first. Brian May turns round, sees Freddie, and exclaims:

Example 3) (1:07:16-1:07)

Character	**Source text**	**target text**	**Back translation**
Brian	Unusual to see you without your *clone*	È curioso vederti senza il tuo *clone*	*It's strange to see you without your clone.*
Freddie	Unusual to see you being so *bitchy*	È curioso vederti così *acido*	*It's strange to see you so acidic*

The example contains two important elements. Firstly, as explained above, the term "clone" is recognised as homosexual slang of the eighties and therefore has an assigned meaning within the anglophone gay community and beyond. Perhaps due to the proliferation of openly gay pop stars during that era, the term was sufficiently mainstream to be used by May. The translation equivalent, the obvious cognate *clone* retains the literal meaning of identical but is unlikely to have transmitted to the Italian audience the nuances of gay identity. The second point to note is the camp overtone. The disparaging adjective "bitchy" is typically ascribed to females and would therefore fall into the (verbal) domain of campness (see section 2). It has been translated with the term *acido*, which retains the semantic meaning of malicious, but fails to convey the camp discourse style that serves here as an identity marker. Perhaps the Italian dialogue would have sounded camper if the feminine adjective, *acida*, had been used.

5.3. Camping it up

Here we focus on insults. While being chauffeured home after a rehearsal, Mercury's manager, John Reid, suggests that he should leave Queen and go solo. Prenter had planted the idea in Reid's head. Mercury explodes and orders his manager to get out of the car.

Example 4) (01:13:43-01:14:01)

Character	**Source text**	**target text**	**Back translation**
Freddie	Get out, you treacherous pissflap	Scendi, traditore di merda	*Get out, you shitty traitor*

The linguistic and scatological transformations from the ST to the TT exemplify what Pavesi (2005: 48) has identified as translation routines. The offensive lexeme "pissflap" encapsulates homosexual aversion to the female sexual organ and is preceded by the adjective "treacherous". In the TT, the adjective becomes the noun "traditore" and is post-modified by the routine scatological insult "di merda" (Scatasta 2002:100). The translation, therefore, lacks the camp

undertones and irony present in the original dialogue. It has been posited that queerness as a verbal identity marker is "materialized through the co-occurrence of linguistically incongruous and socially contradictory forms and registers, for example hypercorrect pronunciation while uttering obscenities" (Barratt in Cameron and Kulick 2003: 99). Freddie Mercury's voice has been described as "distinctively clipped and faintly camp" (Jones 2011: 7). It is precisely the juxtaposition of vulgar language with an upper-class accent that suffuses the ST exclamation with camp. The impoverished TT is further neutralised by the standard Italian diction that conveys none of the source text nuances.

Prosodic features such as intonation are also crucial meaning making devices, which can get lost in dubbing. The following example illustrates the point. Freddie and the other members of Queen are at a press conference to publicise the release of a new album. The journalists, however, are only interested in hounding Mercury regarding his sexuality. One female journalist is particularly insistent. In response to her unrelenting questions, the character of Freddie asks:

Example 5) (01:20-01:46)

Character	**Source text**	**Target text**	**Back translation**
Freddie	What's your name, dear?	Come ti chiami, cara?	*What's your name, dear?*
Shelley	Shelley Stern	Shelley Stern	*Shelley Stern*
Freddie	Shelley…	Shelley…	*Shelley…*
Shelley	Yes?	Sì?	*Yes?*
Freddie	That thing between your legs, dear, does it bite?	La cosa che hai in mezzo le gambe morde.	*The thing that you have between your legs bites.*

Here, it is not the translation of words that misses the point, but the prosodic delivery. The ST repartee ends with an interrogative: upward intonation and the vocative "dear" contrast with the offensive nature of the insult to form the perfectly camp "art of the put-down" (see Section 2). In the TT, the dubbed version transforms what was pragmatically intended as an ironic question

into a brusque affirmation. The example demonstrates how Freddie Mercury's character uses denigration of the female genitalia by referring to "that thing between your legs" and asking if it "bites", thereby externalising the homosexual abhorrence of women's sexuality in order to defend himself against the prying onslaught of the journalist. Freddie's mellifluous intonation renders the vulgar interrogative all the more pungent and adds humour to the otherwise insulting question. In the TT, this is completely neutralised by the dubbing actor's flat intonation. These are just some of the examples where the TT renderings seem to misinterpret or simply ignore the importance of certain meaning-making elements such as prosodic features and camp signifiers. Unsurprisingly, in the TT the overtly camp and gay repartee of Mercury is flattened.

In the final example, the band are rehearsing for Live Aid. During the rehearsal, Mercury's voice falters badly. He has been diagnosed with AIDS but the group are unaware. He exclaims, "My voice is shit" and then comments:

Example 6) (1:46:20-1:46:35)

Character	**Source text**	**Target text**	**Back translation**
Freddie	My throat feels like a vulture's crotch.	Ho la gola come il culo di un avvoltoio	*I've got a voice like a vulture's arse*
Freddie	Give me a chance to get my bitchy little vocal cords in order	Ora, fammi mettere a posto quelle troiette delle mie corde vocali	*Now, give me a chance to put those little whores of my vocal chords in order*

The utterances illustrate further evidence of camp talk and reveal interesting translational shifts in the TT. In the first, the ST simile "my throat feels like a vulture's crotch" creates a bizarre yet vivid image to convey the character's horror at losing his vocal ability. It employs another vulgarism for the female genitalia, "crotch". The TT simile on the other hand is not gender specific but uses an equally vulgar term for anus. Although the TT matches the ST for crudeness and humour, the elimination of what might be construed

as typically camp, i.e., using coarse expressions for female genitalia in ironic, humorous, or even offensive utterances, notably dilutes the impact of the simile (cf. Ranzato 2012). On the other hand, the second example demonstrates a clever transposition. The adjective "bitchy", which is attributed to vocal cords, is an instance of camp personification. In the TT the attributional phrase uses the diminutive form of the noun "troia" (whore), which is equally camp and therefore an effective substitution.

The next section moves on to focus on the dialogues from *Rocketman* in which samples of homosexual labelling are analysed.

6. The case of *Rocketman*: Sociolects and dialects in denoting homosexuality

In *Rocketman*, manifestations of camp repartee are minimal. Visually, however, the reproductions of Elton John's lavish stage costumes fall within what has been theorised as "camp aestheticism" (Sontag 1964: 2). These, along with other semiotic codes, such as gaze and gesture create textual meaning. The ST dialogue for the character of Elton John contains few camp discourse markers and is delivered in a standard London accent. As the singer was involved in the production of the film, it can be assumed that the linguistic portrayal is realistic. Here, then, our attention shifts from camp to the attributive terms used to denote homosexuals. The first example, as with *Bohemian Rhapsody*, indicates the crisis point in the diegisis regarding Elton John's sexuality and is before he became famous. Bernie and Elton are having a drink with two members of the group that Elton plays keyboards with, one of whom is gay. When Bernie announces that Elton has a girlfriend, the gay singer looks at Elton in arch disbelief and says:

Example 7) (00:34:35-00:34:37)

Character	**Source text**	**Target text**	**Back translation**
Singer	And what about the fact that you're a fag?	E basta con il fatto che tu sei finocchio?	*And is that it with the fact that you're a fag?*
Bernie	What?	Che?	*What?*
Singer	Your little friend is a homosexual.	Il tuo caro amico è omosessuale.	*Your dear friend is a homosexual.*

The singer is American, hence the use of the US slang term, "fag". It is considered offensive[7], although it has been partially re-appropriated by the American gay community and is still in use today. Although the speaker is homosexual, he uses the derogatory term to define Elton, thereby automatically self-identifying with the label. The TT translates "fag" with the dysphemistic term "finocchio" [literally fennel], a dated term for "gay", thus making it a suitable translational decision in this context[8].

Bernie's disbelief or perhaps incomprehension is highlighted by the exclamation "What?". The explication, "your little friend is a *homosexual*" reflects the period: at the beginning of the seventies before the explosion of identity politics, "homosexual" would have been the most neutral denotative option available. However, it harbours negative connotations due to its origins as a clinical diagnosis of what at that time were perceived as behavioural aberrations rather than a legitimate sexual identity (Smith *et al* 2018). We can see, then, in this short stretch of dialogue the juxtaposition of the relatively unmarked term "homosexual" with an insult in both ST ("fag") and TT ("finocchio"), without resorting to the anachronistic "gay". In this sense, compared to *Bohemian Rhapsody*'s self-realisation moment (see Section 5.2), the dialogue in *Rocketman* seems more faithful to the era in which it is set.

In contrast to the American homophobic insult in example 1, the following example is a British idiom uttered in the sociolect of London cockney. Elton's long-time manager/music publisher, Dick James, expresses his anger towards John Reid, who was also Elton John's lover at the time, when he announces that James is fired.

Example 8) (1:01:33-1:01:58)

Character	**Source text**	**Target text**	**Back translation**
Dick James	You fuckin' poofter	Brutto stronzo di un finocchio	*Ugly shitty Poof*

[7] Cf. https://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/2017/8/02/21-words-queer-community-has-reclaimed-and-some-we-havent#media-gallery-media-6.

[8] See Filmer (2012) for a discussion of the term and its relationship to the Anglo-American "fag". See also Dell'Orto (http://www.giovannidallorto.com/cultura/checcabolario/checcabolario.html).

The ST homophobic slur is a natural-sounding locution of the period, and particularly convincing with the cockney accent. It is rendered in standard Italian in the TT with the scatological translational routine "Brutto stronzo di", which can pre-modify a number of outgroups (Polselli 2007: 171) plus the same dysphemistic term as in the previous example, "finocchio". Therefore, two completely different terms, "poofter" and "fag", from diverse sociolects are translated with the same insult in Italian. Although Italian regional dialects offer a rich variety of homosexual dysphemism[9], the dub resorts to the same term twice, thus flattening the TT, where on this occasion other options could have been exploited. "Ricchione", for instance is another dated Italian homophobic insult that has connotations of the effeminate, like "poofter", and it is recognised on a national level thus avoiding any obvious regional connections.

6.1. Self-definition and dysphemism

In the following example, a catalogue of dysphemistic terms issue forth from the character of Elton John while he attempts to break the news to his mother that he is homosexual.

Example 9) (1:10:39-1:11:30)

Character	**Source text**	**Target Text**	**Back translation**
Elton	Me and John, we… well the thing is… I'm a homosexual. A poofter. A fairy. A queen…say something!	John e io, noi… allora…io sono, sono un omosessuale. Un finocchio. Un invertito. Una checca… Di' qualcosa!	*John and I, well, I'm, I'm a homosexual. A [fennel] poofter. An invert. A queen. Say something!*
Elton's mother	For God's sake, I know that…known for years.	Santo Dio, lo so già da molti anni.	*For God's sake, I've known that for years.*

[9] For etymologies and regional variations of at least eleven disparaging terms for homosexual, see http://www.giovannidallorto. com/ cultura /checcabolario/gay. html.

The scene is symbolic: it is the linguistic externalisation of the internal conflicts felt by Elton John's persona regarding his homosexuality. The tensions between societal labelling practices and self-image see him striving to find the right term to define himself: seething, he articulates a string of homophobic dysphemisms that are also intended to shock his middle-class suburban mother. The film's dialogue is faithful to the fact that "gay" was not a mainstream lexical option to denote homosexual at that time in Britain.

The translation of the offensive expressions needs to be pragmatic rather than literal, as each linguaculture has its own repertoire of societal taboos and ways (or not) of expressing them (Allan and Burridge 2006). The dialogue adapter who worked on the dubbing, Valerio Piccolo[10] argues that the point is to render the emotional crescendo ("restituire il crescendo emotivo"). The terms do not necessarily correspond to the ST meanings but their choices were probably constrained by lip synchronisation. On the diachronic aspect, Piccolo observes:

> Se fosse stato ambientato in tempi odierni, avrei avuto più difficoltà a trovare i termini corrispondenti. Mi ha aiutato il fatto che è ambientato nel passato. In quei tempi esistevano più parole, finocchio e checca sono oggi datate ma nel contesto rendono lo stesso registro dell'originale. Non si può arrivare alla perfetta corrispondenza[11].

In the final example we come full circle, returning to the question of the term "gay".

6.2. Glad to be gay

The sample comes towards the end of the film during the group therapy session as Elton recounts of his failed marriage.

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[10] Valerio Piccolo was contacted via email and kindly agreed to be interviewed via telephone.

[11] "If [the film] had been set in contemporary society, it would have been more difficult to find corresponding terms. It was helpful that it was set in the past. In those days there were more terms; "finocchio" and "checca" sound dated but in that context they render the same register as the original. You can't ever achieve perfect correspondence" (my translation).

Example 10) (1:35:21-1:35:33)

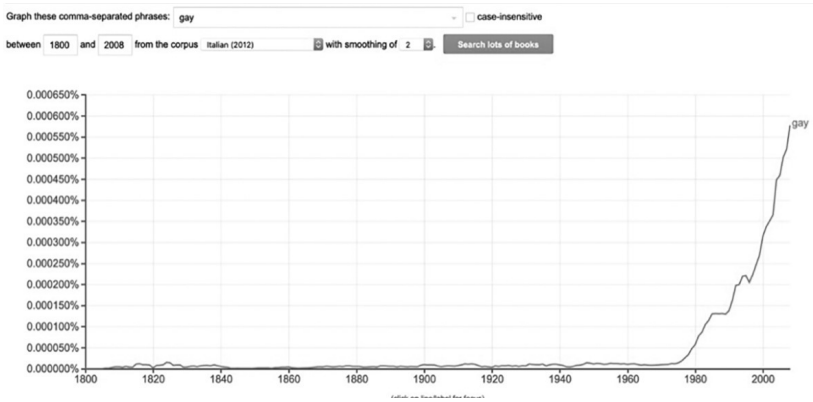
Character	Source text	Target Text	Back translation
Nurse	Did being married make you happy?	Ti rendeva felice il matrimonio?	*Did marriage make you happy?*
Elton	No, not really. I'm gay.	No, non direi. Sono gay.	*No, I wouldn't say so. I'm gay.*

While the film's diegesis is not always chronologically linear, it is likely that the scenes of Elton John in therapy would have been set between 1984, when John cancelled a concert due to psychological stress and 1990 when he went into rehab for substance abuse, alcoholism, and other addictions. The use of language here reflects the era – John no longer refers to himself as a homosexual, a poof, a fairy, but as gay. The translation reflects this. Dialogue adapter Valerio Piccolo confirms that he was totally aware of the implications of his translational choice and felt that "gay" by the late eighties and nineties was sufficiently in usage in Italy to maintain the ST lexeme. However, there is little concrete evidence of the progressive use of the term "gay" in Italy beyond dictionary entries (see section 3). In order to shed light on this question, information gathered from scholars on the "Italian Studies" mailing list[12] offered further insight, for example, the *Google Ngram*[13] below. *Google Ngrams* allow for the examination of cultural change as reflected in the frequency of terms appearing in books (Younes and Ulf-Dietrich 2019). They are particularly useful in linguistic research in publications since 1800 (ibid.). The *Ngram* below illustrates the rise in frequency of the term in Italian books from 1980 onwards and shows that presence of the loanword "gay" grew exponentially in Italian texts around the beginning of the new Millennium. This seems to give us a clear indication that the mainstreaming of the term in Italy was considerably later than its appearance in Italian language dictionaries.

[12] Many thanks to colleagues who responded to me on the Italian Studies mailing list, in particular Giovanni Iamartino, Carlo Caruso, Charlotte Ross, Luca Malici, Beatrice Sica, and Andrea Viviani. A special thanks to Professor Robert Gordon, Cambridge University, who produced the Ngram in response to my question.

[13] *Google Books Ngram Viewer* is an online search engine that charts the frequencies of any set of comma-delimited search strings using a yearly count of grams found in sources printed between 1500 and 2012.

FIGURE 1
The use of the term "gay" in Italian texts in Google books from 1800-2012.



7. Concluding remarks

This contribution explored the linguistic representations of homosexuality in the mainstream biopics *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Rocketman.* The study compared the English source and Italian target language versions in order to scrutinise the ways in which the representation of homosexual discourse and lexicon of a specific historical period and geographical space was negotiated for a wide socio-cultural audience of another era and linguacultural environment. The biopics narrate the lives of world-famous pop stars, Freddie Mercury and Elton John, who also happen to be homosexual. Even though their sexuality was undoubtedly critical to the construction of their personas and a source of their inner conflict in a period when being gay was tantamount to being a social pariah, neither film delve into these aspects in any depth. Although the films yielded less linguistic data than might have been expected, relevant patterns can still be envisaged.

Firstly, as a multimodal text, it is significant to note that Fletcher's unequivocal visual representation of homosexuality in *Rocketman* was tacitly accepted into the target culture; *Rocketman* was deemed a film suitable for all in Italy, whereas in Anglophone contexts it was restricted to an adult audience. If we consider Italy as a visual

culture in which "images can become a tool of [...] appropriation of people [and] sexuality" (Giuliani 2018, 13), accepting quite explicit scenes of homosexual desire in a popular cultural product could be construed as a noteworthy development. In this sense, the *zeitgeist* appears to have shifted slightly since Ranzato (2012: 382) stated that Italy has "opened up to homosexual themes much more slowly than the Anglosaxon world".

From the data examined, what the study highlights is not so much the lack of gay lexicon that previous research identified but what could be described as reduced camp sensibility in the dub. For example, the TT solutions for the more vulgar yet intrinsically camp expressions like "pissflaps" and "crotch" ignore the references to the female genitalia, which would distinguish them as singular to a particular gay community. The second grey area, though not exclusive to gay themes, is attention to the meaning-making potential of voice prosody. Further research including in-depth interviews with dubbing professionals would shed more light on these issues and promote increased collaboration between audiovisual translation scholars and practitioners. Such collaborations would foster heightened awareness to socio-cultural "critical points" in the creation of dubbed dialogues.

Nevertheless, the films analysed contain culturemes that no amount of intervention on the part of the translator could resolve: a clone is a clone by any other name and the fact that the iconic gay style adopted in eighties Anglophone contexts was never a part of homosexual culture in Italy does not mean that Italian homosexual lexicon is 'lacking' in some way. It means exactly what Bassi (2014) maintains: there is no transnational gay culture whereby terminology, customs, styles and practices are interchangeable and necessarily translatable. This highlights the need for a multilingual study to compare approaches to the linguistic representation of gay themes in audiovisual products.

Ranzato (2019) has emphasised the importance of raising awareness of gender issues, sexuality, and difference of any kind within a given society when training future dialogue adapters and translators. This will provide them with the epistemological tools necessary to handle the meaning transfer of ideologically and culturally sensitive material from one linguacultural context to another. And thereby lies the future of intercultural communication.

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