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Film Translation Practices in the Silent Film World

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Abstract

This article explores the work and modus operandi of film translators in the late silent era, with a particular focus on the Italian context. By drawing on contemporary periodicals, censorship records, production documents, and other archival materials, the study delves into the intricate and multifaceted nature of the silent film translator's craft, which extended well beyond the translation of on-screen text. It seeks to provide evidence supporting the view that silent film translation was indeed "a holistic process" (O'Sullivan & Cornu, 2019a, p. 16), encompassing not only the translation of title cards but also other transformative practices, ranging from film re-editing to more extensive reworkings. Charlie Chaplin's Mutual comedies serve as a case study to explore film translation practices in the silent film world. The analysis reveals that, in Italy, these films were more than simply translated – they were re-functioned and transformed by appropriation.

Key words: silent cinema, silent film translation, Charlie Chaplin, Guglielmo Giannini, re-editing, intertitles, title cards, archival research.

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The Translation of Films in the Silent Era

According to Miriam Hansen, the notion of film as a universal language was a "powerful staple in Hollywood's mythology about itself" (Hansen, 1984, p. 100). Since their language was primarily visual, early motion pictures fostered the perception of film as a universal medium, and the absence of spoken dialogue likely contributed to this view. Many early theorists and commentators consistently promoted the notion that cinema was fundamentally a visual art form and praised cinema as a genuinely international medium (Musser, 1991, p. 402). Still, the frequent unintelligibility of early motion pictures demonstrated that film was not an Esperanto, and Hollywood studios soon had to confront the challenges posed by "the limitations of the universality of film language" (Gleeson-White, 2024, p. 155). As Abé Mark Nornes has noted, the "rhetoric of universalism" that characterised the silent film culture hid "quite a complicated situation" (2007, p. 91). The notion of cinema as a universally understandable medium that could transcend language barriers masked a more complex reality, for "a vast array of translation practices" (Dwyer, 2005, p. 301) was necessary to make silent films comprehensible to diverse audiences around the globe. The perceived universality of silent films was, in fact, the outcome of substantial efforts to bridge language gaps and required a considerable amount of work behind the scenes.

It has been noted that "[t]ranslated films could be textually very different from their originals" (O'Sullivan & Cornu, 2019b, p. 10). This means that the translated version of a film could undergo substantial changes not only in the language and content of title cards, but also in terms of length, scene presentation and structure, or even the overall narrative. As a result, the experience of watching a translated film could be very different from territory to territory. Furthermore, since Hollywood films were carefully prepared for foreign distribution, export cuts often differed greatly from domestic releases. As Adamson (2019) has noted, American films were meticulously tailored for international markets; hence, the film text itself was "subjected to reworking and reinterpretation" (Adamson, 2019, p. 49) even before entering foreign distribution.

Originally, production companies supplied both the original and translated title lists to their distributors or agents, who took care of the typesetting, filming, processing, and integration of the new intertitles into the positive copies of the film (Cherchi Usai, 2019, p. 389). Major Hollywood companies such as Paramount-Famous-Lasky Corporation proudly announced that their films were being translated into thirty-eight languages (Vasey, 1997, p. 69–70; Nornes, 2007, p. 98) and that their offices were compiling and sending title lists in seventy-five countries around the world (Cherchi Usai, 2019, p. 390). However, from the end of the 1910s onwards, language transfer operations were usually carried out locally and the responsibility for translating titles fell on the purchasing company or distributor, who began to entrust this work to language professionals. As a result, the quality of translations improved, although this often came at the expense of the original work's integrity (Raffaelli, 2003). The fact that silent films did not include any spoken words allowed for straightforward modifications: the text of title cards could be altered in the process of translation, and the number and position of the titles could be modified to suit local taste or censorship requirements (Cherchi Usai, 2000, p. 148).

Ruth Vasey (1997, p. 64) points out that silent movies were "inherently unstable". This was because, once films entered distribution, both domestically and internationally, they could be easily modified. Movies needed to adapt to a wide range of cultural requirements, leading to individual films often undergoing various "adaptive treatments" during the distribution and exhibition process. Vasey further observes that the practice of modifying movies to meet the requirements of local audiences was "consistent with the status of movies as commodities, rather than texts with a specific privileged arrangement of content" (p. 65). The filmic text was vulnerable to intervention and transformation, and ultimately determined by the specific context in which it was exhibited. In the silent era, as Broeren (2008, p. 65) argues, films were not "solid, unchangeable items". During those days, "the 'original' form of the film was chimerical" (Vasey, 1997, p. 67), and translation practices revolved around "fluid conceptions of the 'original'" (Broeren, 2008, p. 65).

In their chapter on the history of audiovisual translation, O'Sullivan and Cornu have highlighted that the translation of silent film remains a significantly underexplored area within audiovisual translation research. They argue that "AVT researchers have tended to write off this field on the grounds that the translation of silent film is unproblematic, at least by comparison with the problems which accompanied the coming of sound" (2019a, p. 15). From a film studies perspective, Adamson (2019, p. 37) similarly observes that the "international reach" of silent cinema has been "largely overlooked in existing scholarship", with notable exceptions such as Hanssen & Rossholm (2012), Barr (2019), Dupré La Tour (2019), Haina (2020), Peyrusse (2021), Abend-David (2024).

In what follows, I will attempt to illustrate film translation practices that were in place in Italy towards the end of the silent film era. Based on the premise that "the natural framework for looking at translation history is a translator-centred one" (O'Sullivan & Cornu, 2019b, p. 14), I will begin by focusing on the work of Guglielmo Giannini, a leading figure in the Italian film translation industry during that era. I will then proceed to examine the translation and adaptation of Charlie Chaplin's films in Italy in the early 1920s.

1. Translating Silent Movies in 1920s Italy

Guglielmo Giannini (1891–1960) was an Italian journalist, playwright, scriptwriter, theatre director, film director, and later a politician.[1] He is best known as the founder of a short-lived right-wing movement called *qualunquismo* (the ordinary man's front), which started in 1944. During the 1920s, before rising to prominence as a playwright, he played various roles in the Italian silent film industry (Cambiaghi et al., 2021). He was active as a film critic and established *Kines*, a magazine inaugurated in 1919, which he directed with a focus on the emerging Italian cinema industry (D'Ambrosio, 1976). During the 1920s, he translated American films for Italian audiences, serving as translator and title

[1] See *Guglielmo Giannini: A digital archive of film, theatre, and political activism* (https://giannini.deakin.edu.au/), founded by Victoria Duckett, Deakin University, Australia.

writer for MGM, United Artists and Paramount, as well as for Italian distributors of foreign cinema such as Anonima Pittaluga (De Berti, 2021).

In the late silent era, Giannini was among the most esteemed film translators in Italy (Raffaelli, 1992, p. 78; Mereu Keating, 2016, pp. 29–30). His contributions extended beyond serving as a title writer for foreign-language films; he also authored novelisations (Duckett, 2017, p. 131)[2] and was deeply committed to enhancing the visibility of film translation and elevating the status of film translators. He coined the term *riduzione* (literally, "reduction") to characterise the role of the silent film translator, which encompassed much more than translating intertitles.[3] In an article published in 1928, he explains that "in the early days of cinema, 'title lists' were often roughly translated, typically by accountants or young women with trade school diplomas and modest aspirations" (Giannini, 1928c, p. 2).[4] When Hollywood began to export films in which intertitles played a significant role, the approach to recruiting translators had to evolve. At that time, English was less commonly known than French, so those recruited were individuals "with a more refined cultural background" (Giannini, 1928c, p. 2).

The term *riduzione* was used by Giannini to mean "adaptation," involving processes that extended beyond translation proper. He first employed it in reference to his work on Cecil De Mille's *Saturday Night*, which was distributed in Italian cinemas in 1924. According to Giannini, "the challenging aspect of adapting that film into Italian was not merely the translation of the title cards", but their complete overhaul; "it required rewriting all the titles, as well as rearranging and deleting several scenes" (Giannini, 1927, p. 1). For this reason, he argued that the typical phrase "didascalie di" (titles by) was too limiting and introduced the term *riduzione*, thereby granting the translator an authorial status. It must be pointed out that Giannini was very active in promoting the status of film translators and secured their inclusion in the Sindacato Nazionale Scrittori (National Writers Union).[5]

During the silent film era, translating a film encompassed a range of different operations, including rewriting and (re)editing. Adapting a foreign film for local audiences often required restructuring the plot, and, at times, incorporating footage from different films. Giannini notes that "famous foreign films" that achieved great box office success were often the result of extensive reworking by the translator. This process involved not only rewriting intertitles and rearranging the order of shots, but also altering characters' identities and breaking down coherent narratives to craft entirely new stories. Giannini described the extensive changes that translators often made to films during the adaptation process, emphasising how characters' roles and relationships could be radically altered to comply with cultural norms or censorship requirements. For example, a character originally portrayed as a wife could be changed to a sister or another relative, if being a wife was deemed

[2] Fan magazines published novelisations of motion pictures, often illustrated with stills. These novelisations not only served as advertising but also made film narratives more accessible (Higashi, 1994, p. 32).
[3] The term *riduzione* was originally used to denote the adaptation of a literary work for the stage.
[4] All translations of the quoted passages from Giannini's articles are mine.
[5] See Giannini (1928b) and *Per i riduttori di films* (1929, p. 2).

inappropriate for the target audience. Similarly, the narrative structure could be significantly modified, with endings becoming beginnings, villains turning into heroes, and characters who were supposed to die ending up surviving:

> How many times does a wife in a film become a sister, cousin, aunt, midwife, or ironing lady because she could not possibly remain a wife? How many film endings become first act openings, how many villains turn good, and how many dying characters end the film in perfect health? (Giannini, 1928a, p. 1)

These changes illustrate the creative liberties taken by Italian film translators to make films more suitable or appealing to local audiences. In an article written in 1935, well into the dubbing era, Giannini explained that adapting films in the silent period was a straightforward process:

> Long and tedious films could be shortened and made humorous. Editing was simple because any gaps left by cuts could be easily filled with intertitles. Some films that were intended to be dramatic, but ended up being dull, were transformed into comedies. (Giannini, 1935, p. 58)

Moreover, some films were created using leftover titles and scenes from other films, showcasing the creativity and technical skills of early film translators.

Re-editing was also a common practice in the 1920s Soviet Union, where American films were often made "more acceptable by a mixture of re-editing and the writing of new intertitles" (Barr, 2019, p. 81). According to Yuri Tsivian, re-editing in this context referred to the process of modifying a film to make it suitable for a different country. It involved not only "re-editing in the proper sense of the word", but also "re-titling, altering the main title, changing character names and adding new scenes to pre-existing footage" (Tsivian, 1996, p. 327). The entire narrative could be completely transformed by eliminating happy endings or altering the characters' nationalities. In both Italy and the Soviet Union, re-editing was undertaken for various reasons. These included modifying content that might have been deemed inappropriate or offensive for target audiences. Giannini mentions that, for example, several close-up shots of a leper were removed from the film *The Gaucho* (Jones, 1927). He notes that the cuts were made following the advice of Douglas Fairbanks, who starred in the film (Giannini, 1928d, p. 3). In the case of *The Affairs of Anatole* (DeMille, 1921), local censorship led to the removal of a crucial scene featuring the Hindu hypnotist Nazzer Singh, played by Theodore Kosloff. The scene was cut because, as Giannini explained, "Italian censorship absolutely forbids even the slightest hint of hypnotism. And I do not blush to declare myself the author of that phenomenal cut!" (Giannini, 1928d, p. 3).

According to Giannini, a good film translator could resuscitate the dying body of a bad film, transforming it into a triumphant box-office success. Giannini himself was credited with saving hundreds of poor films from box-office disaster and was lauded as "un infaticabile raddrizzatore di gambe di centinaia di films" (a tireless straightener of legs for hundreds of films) (Za Bum, 1929, p. 6). He was celebrated for his talent as a "film doctor," i.e. "someone who could use the right words to take an unsuccessful movie and make it profitable" (Robinson, 2014, p. 47). He had the ability to turn an emotional drama into a comedy simply through creative titling. He argued that when an adapter

"knows his stuff, the transformation improves the film rather than damages it. Some films have achieved a triumphal success even after being transformed or deprived of several hundred meters" (Giannini, 1935, p. 60). He cited examples of films that enjoyed great popularity even after significant alterations or cuts. One such example is King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928), which Giannini extensively reworked. He stated that these changes significantly contributed to the film's remarkable success. Another film that was adapted by Giannini was Charlie Chaplin's *The Circus* (1928). In this case, a radical reworking was unnecessary as

> good films do not require to be edited, nor are they. They only need explanatory titling, and they have it. Conversely, poor films need to be reconstructed in the editing room, and it is not our fault that such films exist. (Giannini, 1928d, p. 3)

To gain a deeper insight into the Italian art of *riduzione cinematografica* (cinematographic adaptation) and the transformations commonly applied to film texts, the following section will examine how Chaplin's comedies were translated and adapted for Italian audiences.

2. Translating Chaplin's Cinema: The Mutual Comedies

2.1. The Study

As we have seen, the notion of film translation envisioned by Guglielmo Giannini and his colleagues bordered on free remake. This approach often altered the meaning of the film itself and occasionally even its visual component, compromising the integrity of the original work. To illustrate how Chaplin's cinema was rendered more appealing to Italian audiences through title translation, I will examine the extant documents pertaining to the Italian versions of Chaplin's Mutual comedies.

The study of translated silent cinema is made particularly difficult by the scarcity of relevant primary film sources, which are often inaccessible or difficult to locate (see O'Sullivan, 2019; Mereu Keating & O'Sullivan, 2021). Nonetheless, as I will demonstrate, a significant amount of archival material has survived, enabling an investigation of silent film translation that, in the absence of the final visual products, draws on the written documents that accompanied their creation. These documents provide valuable insights into the methods and decisions involved in translating and adapting silent films for different audiences.

The research for this study is based on archival materials housed at the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin, Italy. It brings together relevant documents from the Fondo Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga (SASP). Founded in 1919, Pittaluga was a company specialising in film distribution. It was among the most significant Italian film distribution companies of the 1920s and 1930s (Sanguineti, 1998). By 1926, Pittaluga had emerged as a major player in the Italian film market, supplying 80% of the films shown on Italian screens and thereby controlling the distribution of both foreign and domestic films (Reich, 2015, p. 193). The documents in the SASP archive are crucial to the study of

film translation in the late silent era, as they contain title lists, production notes, interim correspondence, and other related materials. They provide context and insight into the decisions and processes involved in translating and adapting foreign films, offering a deeper understanding of how the final visual products were shaped and presented to Italian audiences.

The study also draws upon materials from the Charlie Chaplin Archive, located at the Cineteca di Bologna in Bologna, Italy, as well as on censorship files and periodicals. Film magazines and journals offered information about release dates and the reception of individual films through film reviews, while the *Italia Taglia* database[6] was used to determine when the films were imported and presented to the Italian Office for Cinematographic Revision (i.e. the Italian board of censors).

The decision to base the analysis on the Mutual comedies was mainly guided by archival availability, as the SASP archive houses interim documents listing the titles for all 12 of Chaplin's films. This comprehensive collection enabled an in-depth examination of the translation strategies used in dealing with Chaplin's short films. From a methodological point of view, the study employs a qualitative approach, selecting recurring features and items of particular interest to illustrate the main tendencies observed in translator behaviour.

2.2. Chaplin's Short Films in Italy

Tracing the distribution paths of Chaplin's early short films in Italy is quite challenging due to the limited documentation available for the earlier years. Some of the Keystone comedies began circulating in 1916 with distribution by Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga. A review from 1917 highlights that it was impossible to find a seat in the cinema whenever a Chaplin film was showing, regardless of the time of day.[7] However, both censorship records and contemporary periodicals indicate that a new wave of Chaplin films hit theatres in 1923.

A unique aspect of Chaplin's reception in Italy is the order in which his works were distributed in Italian cinemas. Cecilia Cenciarelli highlights the "chronological disorder" in the distribution of Chaplin's films in Italy (2010, p. 52), noting that they were released years later and without following the sequence of their U.S. releases. Chaplin's comic films from Keystone (1914), Essanay (1915–1916), and Mutual (1916–1917) studios overlapped with his newer productions for First National, with *The Kid* (1921) being the most successful among them. While the Keystone shorts started to appear in 1916, many of the Essanay and Mutual comedies were not released in Italy until 1923, the same year as *The Kid*.[8] This led to some confusion among both audiences and critics.

[6] *Italia Taglia* is a database dedicated to cinematographic censorship in Italy, compiled from records preserved in the archives of the General Directorate for Cinema of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities (https://www.italiataglia.it/search/1913_1943).
[7] *La vita cinematografica*, 15, 1917, 22–30 April, pp. 105–106.
[8] As documented in *Bollettino della proprietà intellettuale,* xxvi (1–2), 1926, pp. 718–719.

As noted by Chaplin's scholars, his Tramp character evolved over time. Initially, in the Keystone and early Essanay films, the Tramp was depicted as a more negative figure – thieving, lecherous, and somewhat violent (Burnetts, 2017, p. 81). However, as Chaplin continued to develop the character in his later shorts and feature films, the Tramp transformed into a more sympathetic figure – "a well-meaning and romantically vulnerable loner" (Burnetts, 2017, p. 81), showing a significant shift from his earlier traits. While the classic elements of Chaplin's comedy, involving exaggerated physical actions and slapstick humour, continue to be central to his work, Mutual films such as *The Vagabond* (1916) and *The Immigrant* (1917) introduce narratives of romance and unrequited love, combining humour with pathos (Burnetts, 2017, p. 81). This evolution of the Tramp character should be taken into account when examining the transformations that Chaplin's comedy films underwent in the Italian context.

2.3. The Mutual Comedies

In some of the works from the Essanay period, such as *The Champion* and *The Tramp*, Chaplin refined the character of the Tramp, endowing him with greater depth and humanity. These works were characterised by a blend of humour and sentiment, a combination that would become a hallmark of Chaplin's style. The 12 two-reel films that Charlie Chaplin made for the Mutual Film Corporation between 1916 and 1917 marked the emergence of a fully developed Chaplin. Some of them, like *Easy Street*, featured subtle social criticism, while the mixture of comedy and pathos in *The Immigrant* (1917) became a signature of Chaplin's cinema.

Trade press ads and film reviews show that the Mutual comedies were distributed in Italian cinemas in 1923. Pittaluga took advantage of the favourable market conditions created by the international success of *The Kid* (1921), which premiered in Italian theatres the same year, achieving great success and establishing Chaplin as a well-recognised film star icon. Similarly, the decision to re-distribute these comedies in 1926 was likely influenced by the popularity and success of the film *The Gold Rush* (1925), which arrived in Italian cinemas in late 1925 (Cenciarelli, 2013, p. 6).

Below is a list of the Mutual films along with their corresponding Italian titles:

- *The Adventurer* (Charlot avventuriero)
- *Behind The Screen* (Charlot macchinista)
- *The Count* (Charlot conte)
- *The Cure* (Charlot fa una cura)
- *Easy Street* (Charlot e il colosso di bronzo/Charlot poliziotto)
- *The Floorwalker* (Charlot capo reparto)
- *The Fireman* (Charlot pompiere)
- *The Immigrant* (Charlot emigrante)
- *One A.M.* (Charlot beone)
- *The Pawnshop* (Charlot e l'usuraio)

- *The Rink* (Charlot al pattinaggio)
- *The Vagabond* (Charlot vagabondo)

Copies of the Italian title lists for all these films are located in the SASP archive. An analysis of the content of these documents is given in the following section. Since none of the original English title lists were found in the SASP nor the Chaplin archive, the analysis is based on the title cards found in the restored edition of the Mutual comedies produced by Cineteca di Bologna and Lobster Films (Chaplin, 2013).

3. Translating Chaplin's Comedies: Archival Findings

The Italian titles differ from the English title cards in several ways. First, the number of titles is significantly augmented, often doubled if not quadrupled. For example, *The Adventurer* has 11 title cards in English and 39 items in the Italian title list (SASP1191). The *Count* features 11 title cards in English, whereas the Italian version includes 54 titles (SASP1193). Similarly, *The Vagabond* has 19 titles in English, while the Italian version features 52 titles, all written in verse (SASP1202). Increasing the number of title cards lengthened the film and extended screening times. According to Guglielmo Giannini (1935, pp. 58–59), this was often done at the distributor's request when additional footage was needed in order for the film to meet the required length and fit into standard showing times. As regards footage and running times, the playing time of a Mutual Chaplin film in the 1920s was around 30 minutes[9] and the average footage was around 600 meters (Asplund, 1976, p. 207). In its Italian version, *The Immigrant* reached 730 meters in length[10] compared to the 630 meters of the international Swedish and Danish copies (Asplund, 1976, p. 207). A total of 47 titles are included in the Italian title list, compared to 17 title cards in the English version.

Differences pertain not only to number but also to length, as the titles vary significantly in the amount of text they display. Chaplin's sparse use of intertitles in his films is well-documented. Contemporary observers and critics concur that intertitles (also referred to as *sub-titles* or *leaders*) in Chaplin's films were minimal and highly succinct. Screenwriter Elinor Glyn notes in 1922 that in Chaplin's comedies, "there are few or no sub-titles" (1922, p. 346). Similarly, French comedian Max Linder observed in 1919 that "Charlie never speaks, and … his films have very few sub-titles" (quoted in Robinson, 1983, p. 85). Chaplin believed that the narrative should be conveyed primarily through visual action, using intertitles only when necessary to clarify the plot or dialogue. However, when films were translated

[9] According to Uno Asplund (1976, p. 204), establishing the playing time of a Chaplin film is quite complicated. While at the turn of the century silent films were designed to run at a rate of sixteen frames a second, in the 1920s the speed rose to about twenty and with the coming of sound it was fixed at twenty-four. Hence the playing time of a Chaplin film varies with the era.

[10] Figures are taken from the Pittaluga film catalogue for 1926 (*Rassegna delle programmazioni*, 5–6, 1926, p. 117).

for international audiences, the linguistic make-up of title cards changed as translators frequently made alterations, often incorporating jokes. As Brazilian screenwriter Alberto Cavalcanti recalls,

> In certain countries, the title writers re-edited imported films to provide opportunities for cracks. I remember once seeing in a Belgian cinema a copy of Chaplin's *The Pilgrim* almost ruined by the insertion of hundreds of sub-titles, mostly vulgar Flemish puns, each illustrated by cartoons which had nothing to do with the action. (Cavalcanti, 1939, p. 27)

The Italian title lists in the SASP archive are not only more numerous but also notably lengthy and verbose. A case in point is *The Rink* (Chaplin, 1916). True to Chaplin's style, the English titles are concise, economical and informative. This is exemplified by the first title card, which introduces two key characters with the simple text, "Papa and his daughter, Edna", conveying only the essential information. In contrast, the Italian titles are exceedingly verbose, indulging in comedic wordplay and inventing humorous names for characters that Chaplin's titles keep quite general (see Table 1 below).[11]

[11] Film stills are used in this and the following tables to illustrate the visuals associated with the analysed titles cards.

Table 1.

Opening Titles for the Italian Version of The Rink

 ©FPA Classics	Il barone Prosdocino di Perdincibacco, ultimo discendente della nobile schiatta De La Trip-Ala-parm-Igiana. [Baron Prosdocino of Golly Gee, the last descendant of the noble lineage De La Tripe à la Parmesan.][12]
 ©FPA Classics	La su proiettata madamigella è nientepopodimeno che l'unica figlia del suo unico padre: Eufrasia Perdincibacco - De La Trip-Ala-parm-Igiana. [The above projected mademoiselle is no less than the only daughter of her only father: Eufrasia Golly Gee – De La Tripe à la Parmesan.] (SASP1201, p. 1)

The characters are humorously presented as the last descendants of a noble family that goes by the pseudo-French name of *De La Trip-Ala-parm-Igiana*, which phonetically resembles the name of an Italian beef tripe dish, *trippa alla parmigiana*.

A similar situation occurs in *The Vagabond* (Chaplin, 1916), where the Tramp rescues a girl from a band of gypsies. In the English version, she is introduced at the end of a dramatic sequence by a succinct title card that reads: "The gypsy drudge". The dramatic atmosphere continues as we see Edna being mistreated by an old woman, who compels her to work harder. In contrast, the Italian

[12] The Italian titles are accompanied by a back translation into English, which was carried out by the paper's author.

titles are lengthy and convey a humorous tone (Table 2 below). They are composed in verse and specifically designed to provide a comedic commentary on the action.

Table 2.

Explanatory Titles for the Italian Version of The Vagabond

 ©FPA Classics	E l'erede dei Rampazzo non sapendo di chi è figlia fa da serva e da sollazzo a una sordida famiglia. [While the heir of the Rampazzo family, not knowing whose daughter she is,/ lives to serve and amuse a sordid family.]
 ©FPA Classics	Madre e figlio sono i capi della banda d'Ekebù degli zingari satrapi la più orribile tribù. [Mother and son are the leaders of the Ekebu gang / the most horrible tribe of the gypsy satraps.] (SASP1202, p. 1)

In *Easy Street*, a notice outside the police station announces a vacancy. The sign reads "Policeman wanted at once", with "at once" written in smaller font, lending "a desperate, pleading tone" (Kamin, 2008, p. 38). In the Italian titles, the ludicrously redundant sign is transformed into a darkly humorous job advertisement written in exaggerated and morbid language, which promises prospective police officers good compensation and coverage of their funeral expenses.

Table 3.

Translation of a Sign in Easy Street

 ©FPA Classics	(cartello) Cercasi agenti robusti, stanchi della vita, disposti a lasciarsi cadaverizzare per l'amore dell'ordine pubblico. Buona paga e funerali gratis. [Wanted: robust officers, weary of life, willing to be cadaverised for the love of law and order. Good pay and free funerals.] (SASP1195, p. 2)

Unlike Chaplin's succinct style of title-writing, these translated titles, written in a verbose, comically pompous style, were intended to play a significant role in the viewing experience. To achieve this, they introduced numerous elements absent from the original film and prioritised humour over the emerging quality of pathos and even tragedy characteristic of Chaplin's Mutual productions. The idea behind these "funny sub-titles" was that, in the context of comedy films, it was considered crucial for the titles to also be "facetious" (Montgomery, 1954, p. 162). This means that the target language titles were not mere translations of the original title cards but were crafted to add to the humour of the film, enhancing the overall comedic effect for the target audience. In doing so, they came close to what is now known as free commentary, a kind of adaptation where the target language text is "loosely connected … to the picture through a highly subjective or even subversive interpretation or repurposing of the visual channel" (Zabalbeascoa, 2024, p. 96).

An analysis of all the film titles led to the identification of various recurring features, which bear identifiable fingerprints of the translator. All the characters are given facetious, pompous, often pseudo-classical names. In *The Count*, Charlie works as a tailor's handyman and his superior is renamed "il Cavaliere Trappolone Tremendone" [Sir Tremendous Big Trap] (SASP1193, p. 1). "Mrs Moneybags" becomes "Contessa Tosacani" [Countess Dogclipper] and "Count Broko" is changed to a pseudo-German name: "Marchese di Sballingrossen" [Marquis of Fibbermeister] (p. 2).[13] In *The Fireman*, the fire chief becomes "il capitano Agesilappo Detremendis" [Captain Agesilappus De

[13] Based on the expression *sballarle grosse* / *sballarne delle grosse*, meaning "to tell falsehoods" or "utter absurdities". The humorous word *Sballingrossen* is documented in the early twentieth-century Italian press. In 1914 the socialist satirical journal *L'Asino* featured a section entirely written in pseudo-German, titled "Deutsche Sballingrossen Zeitung".

Tremendis], "the Captain's Sweetheart" and her father become "Agenore Detremendis, cugino del capitano Agesilappo, e la sua findanzata Mimì Bussette" [Agenor De Tremendis, Captain Agesilappus's cousin, and his fiancé Mimì Peekaboo] (SASP1196, p. 1). In *The Floorwalker*, the store manager is given a pseudo-Russian name: "Ortensio Tagliaborsoff" [Hortensius Lurcheroff] (SASP1197, p. 1). In *The Pawnshop*, the pawnshop owner is renamed "Strozzino Cravattaris" [Loanshark Gombeenis] and one of the clients "Eudosio Fiol Duncan" [Eudosius Son Ofabitch] (SASP1197, p. 3).

Place names were also subject to humorous treatment. For example, the opening title card of *The Adventurer* is as succinct as "The man hunt", which in the Italian titles was expanded to include a parodic, pseudo-French location called "Peretola-les bain" (SASP1191, p. 1), based on the name of a Tuscan country village (*Peretola*) followed by the constituent "les-bains" (French "the baths"), often associated with towns or cities that have natural hot springs or baths.

Table 4.

Title With Place Name From The Adventurer

The man hunt	Sulla ridente spiaggia di **Peretola-les bain**, una movimentata partita di caccia [On the charming beach of Peretola-les bain, an animated hunting game]

In the same film, Charlie, an escaped convict, attends an upper-class social party. In the Italian titles, he humorously refers to some unlikely islands called "Anchovy and Butter Sandwich Islands" (SASP1191, p. 3):

> – Mah! Un'avventura come questa mi capitò in pieno Oceano, all'altezza delle isole Sandwich al burro e acciughe…
> [Well! An adventure like this happened to me in the middle of the Ocean, by the Anchovy and Butter Sandwich Islands...]

Another comic device the Italian translator draws on is the incorporation of humorous, creative interjections. In *Easy Street*, one of the gags revolves around the telephone. Charlie pretends that the receiver is first a musical, then an optical instrument. The Italian titles provide commentary on the action, sprinkling the text with what appears to be the translator's favourite interjection: "*Corpo d'un dromedario!* Questo non è un telefono ma un cannocchiale!" [Holy dromedary! This is not a phone but a telescope!] (SASP1195, p. 3).

One of the functions these titles perform is comedy enhancement, i.e. the amplification of the comedic effect of a scene or situation, achieved through various techniques, including wordplay. For instance, in *The Pawnshop,* we learn that the pawnbroker's daughter is named "Isabella, che nonnè affatto isabrutta, come si può verificare" [Isabelle, who is not at all isa-ugly, as can be confirmed]. The wordplay revolves around the pseudo-morphological deconstruction of the name *Isabella* into

Isa + *bella* "beautiful", generating the antonymic nonce word *isabrutta*, composed of *Isa* + *brutta* "ugly". In the closing lines of *The Immigrant*, the Tramp proposes to Edna but, unlike in Chaplin's original, the Italian titles leave little room for romance, as Charlie is made to say: "Sposiamoci…. Così invece di prender due stanze ne prenderemo una. È sempre *un'economia e un'econovostra*" [Let's get married.... So instead of taking two rooms, we'll take one. It's always an econo-my and an econo-yours] (SASP1198, p. 3), suggesting a practical reason for marriage, i.e. saving money by sharing a room. The concluding wordplay, also based on a pseudo-morphological pun, underscores the unromantic reasoning behind the proposal: *econovostra* (literally "econo-yours") plays on the word *economia* "economy", deconstructed into *econo* + *mine*, implying that the savings will benefit both of them.

Another humorous technique the talented Italian translator adopts is the incorporation of idiosyncratic language. In *The Adventurer*, Edna's suitor finds a newspaper featuring Charlie's escape and his photograph. The Tramp then draws a beard on the picture to resemble Edna's bearded suitor (Eric Campbell) and, glancing at him, quips, "You need a shave!". In the corresponding Italian title, he humorously comments on Campbell's appearance, made amusing by the use of the quirky, unusual verb *sbarbificare*, for **debeardify*, meaning "shave" (SASP1191, p. 2).

Table 5.

English Title Card and Corresponding Italian Translation From The Adventurer

"You need a shave!"	Strano, strano, strano. È molto che non si **sbarbifica** lei? [Odd, odd. Have you not debeardified in a while?]

A similar instance occurs in *The Immigrant*, during the scene where Edna tells Charlie that her mother has passed away. While the original scene is far from comedic, the Italian titles transform Edna's revelation into another moment of humour by having her say: "La mamma… defunse" [mother deceased] (SASP1198, p. 3). The form *defunse*, the past tense of *defungere* (which is not used in spoken language), serves as a hyper-euphemism. Its comic effect arises from the common use of the past participle *defunto* ("deceased"), a euphemistic term often used in place of *morto* ("dead").

Finally, in addition to often being written in verse, the Italian titles occasionally display expressive spellings and typography. For example, in *The Rink*, title 11 reads "Grazzzzzzie" [thannnnnnk you] (SASP1201, p. 1) and in *The Pawnshop*, "SSSS! Nessuno deve sentirsi belare" [SSSS! No one must hear himself bleating] (SASP1200, p. 2).

The consistent use of certain stylistic choices and comedic devices across multiple films seems to support the hypothesis that the same person translated them. As we have seen, these recurring features include specific word choices, unique phrases, and particular ways of handling humour, which collectively point to a single translator's distinctive style. Although there appears to be no

official record of the translator's identity, either in the archives or in the press, one might reasonably suggest that Guglielmo Giannini is a plausible attribution based on the linguistic characteristics of the Italian text. The features that emerged in this study are distinctive and unique – a hallmark also evident in the Italian version of Chaplin's Essanay films (see Zanotti, in press), which I believe were also adapted by Giannini.[14]

4. Conclusions

As Mark Nornes (2007) argues, film distributors in the silent period used a wide range of translation strategies, from very minimal to highly creative, depending on their goals and the nature of the films. This flexibility stemmed from the films' primary aim of providing entertainment. As Nornes puts it, "[b]ecause the vast majority of films were conceived and executed purely for entertainment value… distributors did not think twice about their freest of free translations" (p. 101). This liberal approach to translation by distributors, often verging on "licentiousness", led to two distinct outcomes: on one end of the spectrum, some translations were very brief. These "'terse' translations" cut the intertitles down to the essentials, thus shortening the films and reducing screening times. On the other end of the spectrum, some translations were completely rewritten in a humorous or parodic manner. This "re-titling for burlesque", as Nornes calls it, involved discarding the source-language intertitles entirely and replacing them with new, comedic ones. This approach involved a high degree of creativity, often substantially altering the tone and content of the film. The Mutual Chaplins that were offered to Italian audiences in the 1920s undoubtedly fall into this category.

According to Fawell (2023, p. 2), "silent film provided no language obstacles to the craze for Chaplin's charming humour that swept through the world in 1915–1916, and so he enjoyed an international celebrity that would be hard to come by in the sound era". The SASP documents demonstrate that, contrary to Fawell's argument, extensive translation was evidently necessary for Chaplin's films to be distributed internationally. The humorous titles that were added to Chaplin's short films served a specific purpose: they were designed to enhance and amplify Chaplin's unique comedic style. These titles added an extra layer of humour to the films by providing ironic and absurd commentary on the action. While "Chaplin put a premium on encasing ideas and emotions in fine physical detail and not spitting ideas out in words" (Fawell, 2023, p. 152), the Italian Mutuals relied on a textually rich and verbose apparatus that was loosely connected to the film's original meaning, superimposing new interpretations onto the visuals. According to Fawell, Chaplin was a master in "the art of 'just selection'", which entailed "winnowing a scene down to the few details that can convey meaning efficiently and visually, avoiding the need for title cards and instead making use of the audience's skills of, and pleasure in, deduction" (Fawell, 2023, p. 179). Quite on the contrary,

[14] D'Ambrosio (1976, p. 103) also suggests that Giannini served as a translator for Chaplin's short films. What complicates matters further is the fact that he conducted part of his work as a film translator and critic under various pseudonyms, most notably "Zorro", as documented in the pages of *Kines*.

through translatorial interpolations, the Italian titles drew attention to themselves, possibly taking centre stage in the viewers' experience.

The Italian Mutual Chaplins seem to confirm the shared view that the craft of film translators during the silent era extended beyond language transfer. In those days, translators did much more than just translate intertitles: they often rewrote the films. As Guglielmo Giannini tirelessly emphasised, title writing was closely connected to editing. Silent film translators were well aware of the creative power of title writing and the fact that the medium was silent allowed for significant creative manipulation of both images and text (Barr, 2019, p. 100). As we have seen, through retitling, drama could easily turn into comedy. While pathos and romance became central to most of Chaplin's later shorts and subsequent feature films (Maland, 2004), the humorous Italian titles completely obliterated this dimension.

The Chaplin case shows that, in the silent period, translation encompassed a wide range of transformative practices, including forms of "overtranslation" (O'Sullivan & Cornu, 2019a, p. 7). The analysis of some foreign-distributed versions of Chaplin's films reveals that films were subject to a wide range of reworkings and that "each act of translation create[d] a new filmic text, or 'cinematic event'" (Serna, 2014, p. 141). Involving far more than a mere replacement of title cards, the translation of intertitles was "a form of context-specific mediation" (Serna, 2014, p. 141), which had "implications for film textuality and film circulation" (O'Sullivan & Cornu, 2019b, p. 3). In the silent era, films, as objects of consumption, were more than simply translated. Through translation and re-titling, they were reworked, transformed and re-functioned for new audiences.

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