An interdisciplinary approach to studying linguistic variation in audiovisual texts: extrapolating a synergy of Neuropsychology, Semiotics, Performativity, and Memetics to Translation Studies

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Abstract
This paper explores the perceptual power of accent and dialect through an interdisciplinary prism, which renders the utterance of accent performative and the ideological load of accent memetic. The theoretical framework established synergises Neuropsychology, Semiotics, Memetics, Performativity, and Sociolinguistics and is extrapolated to the field of Translation Studies. In light of the performativity of accent and the existence of dialectal memes (often shared ideas around linguistic identities) in lingua-cultural communities, it is posited that speaking in any given accent triggers a chain reaction culminating in perception, whereby preconceived ideas or ‘memory’ associated with the speech variety is activated in the listener, from which point an image of identity is formed in his or her psyche. The use of accentual variation, therefore, to create audiovisual identities in original versions is illustrated and, in turn, the flattening out of cultural dimensions in dubbed versions is attributed to the levelling of accentual variation into a standard. Spatiotemporal and other practical constraints, as well as ideological questions, imposed on dubbing practices are considered with a view to translating linguistic variation. Audiovisual translation practices are considered in the context of English-language productions dubbed into Castilian Spanish.

Keywords: accents, audiovisuals, cultural identity, dialects, dubbed translations, memes, Performativity, Spanish, speech acts, standardisation

1. Introduction

Unlike the real world, the audiovisual sphere is a realm wherein all speech is ‘prefabricated’ (Chaume, 2004: 168). In Translating Regionalised Voices in Audiovisuals (2009), Federici called on Cronin’s (2006) assertion that regionalism is tied to notions of linguistic and cultural identity and added that “when a regional voice appears in an audiovisual, the choice is automatically born out of identifiable narrative needs” (2009: 19). Northern Irish linguist and eminent dialect coach, Brendan Gunn (2015), describes the activity of dialect coaching as changing an actor’s hardware by using a different software. What does hardware really mean in this analogy? Apart from makeup and wardrobe, and special effects of course, the physical appearance of the actor will not much change. The new hardware referred to by Gunn is best understood as the perceivable identity – geographical, social or otherwise – projected by the actor through accent. Therefore, when we – the viewers – hear Received Pronunciation (RP) or a Standard British-English (SBE) accent, for example, we assume first: that the character is British and likely from the South of England and, secondly; that he or she is posh or perhaps pretentious, and maybe even deceitful. Perception is, therefore, a top-down process. Screenwriters take advantage of this process and direct the use of specific accents by actors in order to forge their characters’ identities. If this is the case in original audiovisual texts, why then are dubbed
versions almost invariably unvaried in their use of dialect and accent? How are dubbed-version viewers meant to intuit the nuances of characters’ identities when the audio track flatlines and the visual channel keeps on going? The translational prism through which sound (audio) and light (visual) waves travel leads to a kaleidoscope of possibility and problematics: while the image remains intact in translated audiovisual texts, the acoustic dimension of the text is transformed by accompanying subtitles, more significantly so by dubbed dialogue and voice-over, and perhaps mostly by audiodescription. This paper delves into the power of linguistic variation in original versions wherein it conveys a medley of cultural identities to the (original) audience, and considers the diversification of accent renditions in the paralinguistics of dubbese in cognisance of the challenges posed to translation by industry norms, viewer expectations and, most pertinently, by the ideological weight of accent in different lingua-cultural communities:

Language variation in fictional products for the screen, of course, reflects precisely the same kinds of language variants which are to be found in reality. Thus, just as big and small screen attempt to emulate numerous scenarios of visual veracity, similarly, they also try to reflect verbal reality too. It therefore follows that in the same way as real language changes in time and in space, according to a person’s age, gender, education and personal experiences, so does the language of the screen. However, to complicate matters further for operators involved in [screen translation], every language connotes such changes in its own special way. (Chiaro, 2008: 11)

In this paper I construct an interdisciplinary framework, suitable for intra- and inter-linguistic analyses on accent, drawing from Neuropsychology, Semiotics, Sociobiology, Performativity, and Sociolinguistics. The resulting framework is ultimately extrapolated to Translation Studies. This synergy of disciplines elucidates (i) the role played by individual and collective memory in perception processes, (ii) the manner in which ideas about accent and cultural identity are created and spread, and (iii) the performative quality of accent-layered utterances, which sees audiovisual identities realised through the medium of linguistic variation. According to the new framework, it is postulated that the ideological load of accent is memetic and the utterance of accent performative. The applicability of this framework is discussed and illustrated throughout with examples from audiovisual fictional material, with the overarching aim of the paper being that of contemplating the diversification of accent renditions in dubbed versions. The case of dubbing in Spain will be taken into particular consideration.

2. The Neuropsychology and Semiotics of Accent Perception

In a study carried out by neuroscientist Vilayanur Ramachandran, it was discovered that through mirror therapy, phantom pain experienced by people with an amputated arm was largely diminished and in some cases entirely cured. Participants in the experiment inserted their surviving arm into a box with a mirror so that a second was reflected. The illusory effect of a second arm caused a new message to be sent to the brain, which allowed the participants to sense the

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presence of their amputated arm and then to relax said ‘arm’ thus relieving the pain (Gawande, 2008). This suggests that our brain senses pain more than—or rather than—our senses themselves. Moreover, it is the brain’s memory that accounts for most of the sensation, or perception of sensation. Quoting Richard Gregory, a prominent British neuropsychologist, Gawande, a medical doctor, academic and writer, argued that “visual perception is more than ninety per cent memory and less than ten per cent sensory nerve signals” (Gawande, 2008).

The bottom-up theory of direct-perception (Gibson, 1966) is largely refuted in psychology and experiments such as the aforementioned illustrate that it is our brain that houses and stores perceptions and our physical senses are merely stimuli or channels for this cognition. The most interesting part of the process is the storage of perception as memory, and the influence this exerts on posterior perceptions. On the back of Ramachandran’s experiment, Gawande (2008) postulated a “brain’s best guess” theory of perception, according to which the mind of an individual “integrates scattered, weak, rudimentary signals from a variety of sensory channels, information from past experiences, and hard-wired processes” and conjures up a full sensory experience in the brain. An example given by this author is that of a dog running behind a picket fence: although receiving only slices of vertical images of the dog, our brain perceives the dog as whole. Similarly, we can consider the two-dimensional image we see on mobile, computer and television screens, which we perceive as three-dimensional and full-scale and do not for a moment consider the people appearing on-screen have been flattened or indeed shrunk. On a basic level, although not entirely analogous, the same goes if we consider our sense of sound: when a siren wails, we imagine an ambulance is nearby, although the sound may in fact have been artificially reproduced in a speaker. When we perceive a –natural or convincing– British accent on screen, we take it for granted that the speaker is in fact from the UK. And if the accent is not authentic and/or we are aware of the actor’s origins from elsewhere, a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ (Coleridge, 1817: 69) allows us to overlook the fact that the accent has been artificially reproduced by the speaker. This can be illustrated by the Anglophone audience’s acceptance of many characters in HBO’s series Game of Thrones (2011-2019), for example: mildly Yorkshire-accented Jon Snow who is played by Londoner and natural SBE-speaker Kit Harington; or RP-speaking Tyrion Lannister, played by American Peter Dinklage.

In order to develop this point on accent perception further, it is useful to tie in neurological signals with semiotic signs. In semiotics, all meaning is conceived to be communicated through signs. In the late 19th century, Peircean semiotics emerged. For Peirce, signs comprised a sign, an object and an interpretant (Atkin, 2013). Eco (1976; 1988) separated these into naturally and artificially occurring signs, such as the position of the sun communicating the time of day (Guillemette & Cossette, 2006) or a baby’s cry communicating hunger, respectively. Within artificial signs, Eco differentiated between those produced intentionally to signify and intentionally as functions. Concerning the first type, these originated with a source, as illustrated in Figure 1.

```plaintext
source – sender – channel – message – receiver –
[ sic ]
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Figure 1: Simplified canonical model of communication (Guillemette & Cossette, 2006)
This model of communication can be extrapolated to the sensory-perception process as follows: speaker (source) – voice (sender) – sound waves picked up by nerve impulses in the ear (channel) – brain’s reception and perception (message) – psyche or conscious mind of the listener (receiver). In this chain example, the receiver might perceive the voice as feminine or masculine, old or young, native or accented, and so on. The second type of artificial sign explained by Eco concerned those produced intentionally as functions, and these did not require an animate sender: these were objects with either a primary, secondary or combined function. Examples given by Guillemette and Cossette (2006) of a sign with a primary function was a chair for sitting, and for signs possessing a secondary function:

A marble bathtub from Italy encrusted with gold and mother-of-pearl is so strongly associated with wealth, prestige and luxury that its primary function as a tub in which to bathe is relegated to secondary status. The same is true of a sculpted chair made of solid wood and velvet and adorned with precious stones, known as a "throne", for which the function "royalty" is dominant, rather than the primary function of "sitting”.

The authors pointed out that most signs are of the third variety– having combined functions. They illustrated this using the example of a police officer’s uniform which has the primary function of protecting and covering the body and the secondary function of signalling to others the presence of law enforcement. When it comes to speech, a hybrid category of artificial signs, which both signify and have functions, would be best fitting. Consider the example of a British-made film in which one character says “hello” to another in an Irish accent. The utterance of “hello” signifies the greeting. The functions of rendering an Irish accent are to signal the identity of the character: the primary function is diatopic insofar as the accent points to Irish geographical origins; the secondary function is to signal an outsider and, more specifically, may be used to serve as a diastratic marker indicating inferior social class or as an idiosyncratic comedic marker. The most likely scenario would involve the use of an Irish accent with a combined function. However, like in the marble bathtub example given above, there is one (sub)genre where the secondary function of the Irish accent could be elevated to primary, in fact effacing the original primary function altogether: fantasy in imagined worlds, or “specific book universes” (Zlatnar Moe & Žigon, 2015: 160). For example, whereas Harry Potter (2001-2011) is a fantasy that occurs within a fictional version of the real world, The Lord of the Rings (LotR) (2001-2003) unravels in an entirely fantastic universe that is specific to or originated in the books. As such, accents in LotR films are used primarily to create a sense of identity and not place. Returning momentarily to the example of the Irish accent, it should be noted that the character in question might have said “howiye” and not “hello”. This is a timely reminder that, although not mutually inclusive, dialect and accent tend to be realised together.

In order for signification to be possible, there is one prerequisite: a common code (Eco, 1988: 28). Guillemette and Cossette (2006) highlighted the multimodality of codes by alluding to codes as described by Jakobson, which include systems of communication ranging from referee-signalling in sports to languages. In the case of Ramachandran’s mirror therapy, the code was sight.
Participants in the experiment would not have received the necessary impulses to the brain without the visual sensory receptor. As concerns accent perception, the code is not just a sense of hearing but also belonging to a língua-cultural community. In each of these communities exists a topos, which has been defined as the ideological principles that are shared by a relatively extensive linguistic community, which enable the arbitrary construction of ideological representations (Anscombre, 1995: 301). This means that the nuances of identity conveyed by a Spanish dialogue rendered in a Galician accent will be lost on a non-Hispanophone audience and, more specifically, on a non-Castilian one. This does not mean, however, that auditory stimuli are not triggered whatsoever, but rather that perception is reduced to the primary function of the accent whereby the non-Spanish-speaking audience perceives the Galician accent as, more generally, Spanish. Peircean semiotics identified the necessity for sign users’ interpretations in order for meaning to be made:

The importance of the interpretant for Peirce is that signification is not a simple dyadic relationship between sign and object: a sign signifies only in being interpreted. This makes the interpretant central to the content of the sign, in that, the meaning of a sign is manifest in the interpretation that it generates in sign users. (Atkin, 2013)

The neuropsychological-semiotic perspective allows for a synecdochical understanding of accent whereby its utterance sends sound waves that stimulate nerve impulses to arrive at the brain, at which point the verbal content of the message registers and the functional content of the accent is perceived. Although an utterance may contain only scattered accentual and dialectal markers, the brain perceives the speech as wholly characterised by the given accent and/or dialect and, therefore, perceives the identity of the speaker. Hence, perception is top-down, ‘unconscious inference’ (Helmholtz, 1867: 28–29). As will be discussed below, this process –or processing– is made possible by previous exposure to the accent or representations of it, i.e. memory.

3. The Sociobiology of Accent: Memetics

A meme is a unit of cultural transmission. This term was coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) from the Greek ‘mimeme’, meaning an imitated thing. However, Dawkins sought a monosyllabic term that would rhyme with ‘gene’ in order to facilitate an analogous dialogue between genetics and memetics, genes and memes, the gene pool and the meme pool, and so on. And given that meme is so close to the French ‘mème’ (same) and English ‘memory’, he felt justified with this term. Examples of memes given by Dawkins were: “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (Dawkins, 1976: 206). Memes can be thought of as topoi, or “received ideas” (Chesterman, 1997: 7), such as the cultural identities connoted by and perceived through differing pronunciations. As genes propagate by fertilisation through human bodies, for Dawkins, memes propagated by a kind of imitation through a cerebral pathway, jumping from brain to brain. While accents themselves could fall within the parameters of a meme, I see them as a token or a fragment of a much larger sign that is a sociolinguistic meme of identity, which I will call a ‘dialectal meme’: dialect referring to the linguistic qualities of dialect and accent; and meme
referring to the surrounding ideas of identity attached to that dialect and/or accent. From this point of view, accent could be the Peircean sign, and the meme the object. As for the interpretant, when an accent or dialect is perceived in an utterance, this triggers its meme to be engaged in our psyche, unleashing a labyrinth of ‘memetic signs’, on diatopic, diastratic, idiosyncratic and diachronic levels. These four facets of memetic signs will henceforth be considered as housed in and carried by the dialectal meme.

Given that accents are the outward expression of dialectal memes, it can be posited that they are the phenotype of cultural identity. And just as phenotype is the detectable expression of our genes, ‘memotype’ can be considered the detectable expression of our identity. The science of epigenetics endeavours to locate the trigger of gene expression and possible influences of environmental factors – why are certain genes expressed while others are not? It is very difficult for geneticists to locate the stimulus for gene expression. Similarly, it is very difficult for linguists and psychoanalysts to determine whether we speak with a certain accent as the expression of our identity or whether our identity is performatively created by the accent with which we speak. It would appear there is a mutual causality at play. Nevertheless, this conundrum is reconciled in television and cinema, as all speech occurring therein has been prefabricated. Scriptwriters and directors act as doctors of ‘epimemetics’, as they choose accents for their characters, thus artificially switching on the expression of memes. This is to say that when actors render dialectal and accentual variants, they are not just creatively performing but performatively creating their character’s identity. For example, as soon as the meme for the northern-English accent has been activated in the viewer or listener, the character will likely be perceived as uncouth, salt-of-the-earth, “defiant and bolshy” (Beal, 2019). This can be seen in the case of the pan-northern (mostly Yorkshire) English accents used in the aforementioned series Game of Thrones to create a regional identity within the fantasy universe of the series for characters who are brutish but redeemed by their integrity, a good sense of humour and “an aversion to pretentiousness, which is about as Yorkshire a trait as it gets” (Taylor, 2017). It is prior exposure to the accent or representations of it that make the meme intelligible. That is to say that the accent is not directly perceived when it is heard but that it is perceived mostly through memory.

How do dialectal memes become mainstream, ‘shared ideas’? The propagation of dialectal memes has occurred through prescriptive and fictional discourse in the past and continues to be perpetuated in – often-stereotypical – representations of accent in fictional literature, audiovisual productions and sung performances. There is a circular relationship between dialect representation and dialect awareness (Beal, 2019), hence the perpetuation of memes. This is not to say that the meme cycle gets stuck in a loop: as perceptions around accent change over time, dialectal memes evolve. In Darwinian fashion, memes are subject to a survival of the fittest, hence the catching-on, or propagation, or even imitation, of ‘strong’ memes, such as fashion trends and flops. Insofar as dialect and accent are concerned, written and audiovisual texts play a pivotal role in the circulation and survival of memes.

To date, meme theory, or ‘memetics’, has not received a great deal of academic attention or development, in general, and extremely scant notice in Translation
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Studies, in particular, although in recent years it has piqued interest in other social sciences. As regards direct and indirect links to Translation Studies, I have encountered it most notably in the scholarship of the following authors: García Hosie (2015), Bragstad (2015), Chesterman (1997), and Baltrusch (2006). García Hosie has looked to memes to explain changes in socio-cultural ideas and values that occur across generations and how these “mutations” take place successfully. The process by which ideologies evolve is similar to the evolution of dialectal memes: mutations here referring to changing perceptions, or ideas, around accent that occur over time (diachronically) and across generations (diastratically). These changing perceptions are often the reflections of greater changes in society and are therefore intertwined with García Hosie’s meme theory around changing values. This phenomenon can be illustrated by the evolution of the northern-English meme: the economic surge resulting from the industrial revolution in the North of the country lead to the rise of the bourgeoisie and, on the one hand, a more positive image of the North in the South and, on the other hand, a “covert prestige” (Trudgill, 1972: 183) amongst northerners.

Bragstad extrapolated meme theory to Film Studies and postulated memes of genre and narrative, which experience change in the screen-adaptation process to which novels are subjected, as screenwriters seek out a “culturally sustainable context” (Bragstad, 2015: 49) to ensure the financial success of a film. While Jakobson (1959) considered that adaptation, in the sense of a modal shift, could be called intersemiotic translation or transmutation, a distinction can be made between the terms whereby a modal shift (change in medium) is intersemiotic translation but a shift in narrative is transmutation. Bragstad argued that while evolution by natural selection is not purpose-driven, adaptation is. This “purposive agency” (Bragstad, 2015: 5) is synonymous with the ‘epimemetics’ concept I have described previously. While real-life meme creation has a circular directionality (or perhaps triangular), the audiovisual meme cycle is linear, as depicted in Figures 2a and 2b. Nonetheless, it should be noted that there is also a circular relationship at play between real-life and audiovisual memes, which enter into a cycle of perpetuation. This has been depicted by Beal (2019) in relation to the ‘enregisterment’ of dialect (see Figure 3). In the modified sense of ‘transmutation’, Bragstad considered a successful adaptation as achieved through replication and change. From this point of view, optimal memetic propagation involves the evolution of new memes. This can be seen in the use of different linguistic and/or conceptual resources in original and translated texts in order to produce, for example, a humoristic effect.

Figure 2a: Real-Life Meme Cycle

Figure 2b: Audiovisual Meme Cycle
Chesterman’s contribution to memetics was in the context of Translation Studies. Chesterman considered the different theoretical turns in Translation Studies to be memes. He coined the term “supermeme” for “memes operating at a high level of generality” (1997: 6), making them resilient and becoming norms (Chesterman, 1997: 51). Chesterman posited that the translation strategies that emerge from the adherence to these norms are in turn memes (1997: 87). Within audiovisual-translation practices, dubbing could be taken as a supermeme in countries such as Spain and Italy, and, within dubbing strategies, the standardisation of accents the prevailing supermeme therein.

In line with Chesterman’s theorisations, Baltrusch (2006) considered the act of translation was memetic; however, whereas he coincided with Chesterman insofar as translation theories fall within the parameters of a meme, he did not consider translation strategies themselves to be memes. This author postulated the existence of a “translation conscience” (2006: 33) that is memetic, wherein memes are all the constructions of a language that are conventionalised and then imitated by users of any given language. The fact of there being a conscience, for this author, does not suggest the moral evaluation nor active cognisance of the translator but rather that any individual translator will be destined to produce a translation that is the product of those memes housed in his or her brain (accumulated through previously acquired knowledge i.e. memory), which have been trialled and errored from a Skopos perspective– conditioned by the expectations of the target audience. While Baltrusch’s interpretation of memetics contemplated the translator as a mere meme operator unbeknownst to him or herself, my own theorisation of memetics does not involve that somewhat robotic imitation of memes by language users. Instead, I consider memes to be those ideas specific to lingua-cultural communities, which are imprinted on–and not imitated by– our brains. What I would like to utilise from Baltrusch’s theorisation, however, is the concept of a conscience through which memes operate as well as the singularity of an individual’s meme pool (or personal topos) according to his or her prior exposure to memes; hence the varying degrees of interpretational specificity.

Memetics, then, describes the process by which memes are created by language users: whether in reality, literature or in an audiovisual context. As concerns dialectal memes –which are the subject of this paper–, these could be used by translators in a sort of ‘memetic translation’ wherein memetic signs are conveyed through accentual and dialectal markers in order to convey the dimensions of Representation of Dialect in Text
character identity. However, it should be noted that the use of dialectal ‘equivalents’ in the target language would trigger a new set of memetic signs to be evoked. This point will be discussed in more detail further on. The core of memes is that they are ideas, often shared but idiosyncratic based on individual experience. Jon Hyde (2015) described the discipline of Discourse Analysis as: “the science of analysing how the black box works” (my translation). For Hyde, the black box was all of the inner workings of an individual’s mind. As regards accent and dialect, memetics serves to explain how the ideological load of accent is registered in one’s ‘black box’ and utilised for characterisation in fictional texts.

4. The Performativity of Accent

As the utterance of accents switches on memes, speaking with an accent (which is inevitable) becomes a performative act and, from this point of view, it can be considered that accents are themselves speech acts. According to Derrida (1988: 18), the performative nature of words is only made possible by their “iterability”, in such a way that a word that ‘performs’ a command, for example, is only capable of doing so because of the existing tradition that word has as a command. Similarly, it can be observed that an accent is only capable of evoking a dialectal meme because of its previous enregisterment as an accent, along with indexed social values.

Derridean ‘iterability’ was a crucial development in speech-act theory, because it had a knock-on effect on Austinian ‘illocutionary force’ or ‘intention’. Where Austin differentiated between illocutionary force (the effect intended by the speaker, such as asking someone to open a door and expecting that the person would oblige) and perlocutionary effect (the action of the person opening the door), Derrida dissolved the demarcation. Derrida shifted the position of the ‘effect’ within the performative paradigm so that the effect was no longer a linear consequence of the performative utterance but that due to the iterability of the utterance, the effect was also part of it. So this performative quality of the text itself –where text denotes any spoken or written unit of language in use (Halliday & Hasan, 1976: 1-2)– meant that the intentions of the speaker could not be authentically present in the utterance (Derrida, 1988: 18). From this point of view, when an actor interprets the Cockney accent, the memetic signs, or ‘effect’, of the accent will be triggered in the audience, and whether or not the scriptwriter intended all of the memetic signs pertaining to the Cockney accent to be attributed to the character’s identity becomes immaterial; the character’s identity will be perceived by viewers according to the memetic signs stored in their memory for that accent. As such, it is much more useful in the audiovisual sphere to study the performativity of accents in original versions from an ‘effect’ standpoint, rather than from an ‘intentional’ one and then, as a translator, intentionally use memetic signs in dubbed versions to prompt a similar effect. The use of accentual variety in fictional products relies largely on the iterability of the speech act i.e. the existence of a dialectal meme.

A reading of Judith Butler’s gender performativity allows for further elaboration on the theorisation of performativity of accent. According to Butler, gender identity is a fluid construct created through behaviour in such a way that it is performatively realised. Butler offered: “a rethinking of performativity as cultural ritual, as the reiteration of cultural norms, as the habitus of the body in
which structural and social dimensions of meaning are not finally separable” (Zelezny, 2010) wherein men and women who had tended to iterate – or imitate – that behaviour traditionally associated with – but not determined by – their sex could choose to act atypically, as it were, thus bringing about a different gender. Moreover, “for something to be performatively means that it produces a series of effects” (Butler, 2011), which is reminiscent of the process previously mentioned by which sound impulses travel and awaken memes, unleashing a series of memetic sings. Butler has made the important distinction that gender is a performative act and not a performed one: that is to say it is an act of ‘doing’ rather than ‘being’, although what is consolidated via the performative act is the “impression”, or perception, of being a man or a woman (Butler, 2011).

Then, if we consider cultural identity as performatively created through utterance in a hybrid Derrida-Butlerian concept of performativity, a mutual causality (or iterability complex) can be observed: it becomes hard to determine whether an individual speaks with a certain accent as the outward expression of his or her identity, or whether that person’s identity is internalised following the accented utterance (see Figure 2a). You could say it is a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Nonetheless, and as I have mentioned previously, this cause-effect paradox is reconciled in fictional dialogue, given that all speech therein is prefabricated and thus occurs the linear creation of identity (i.e. illocutionary force or epimemetics) through the performative medium of accent. Given the contained nature of audiovisual texts, it might be deduced that character identity in fact comes to fruition and is, therefore, not performatively created but performed; however, I will postulate a different argument. My hypothesis is that, like the need for sign users in Peircean Semiotics, the listener must be – simultaneously or consecutively – present in the speech act in order for it to be performed; which means that each time the utterance is perceived (for example: each time a film is watched and/or heard), the accent performatively creates the identity at the audiovisual interface as it triggers memetic action in the audience’s minds. The audience’s perception is thus an active part of the speech act and the identity perceived will differ between individuals, lingua-cultural communities, and across generations.

A final perspective that should be added to the speech-act theory on accent is a Bakhtinian one. Bakhtin deemed ‘heteroglossia’ the defining element of novelistic discourse. Heteroglossia, or raznorečie (Bakhtin, 1934-5: 263), denoted the use of a “social diversity of speech types” and “individual voices” in the novel, a stylistic practice that did not involve the use of eye dialect (non-standard orthography indicating non-standard pronunciation) but which conveyed dialect, register and other idiosyncrasies through dialogue or descriptions (Bakhtin, 1934-5: 262-263). For Bakhtin, the acts of speech and writing were a “literary-verbal performance […] that require[d] speakers or authors to take a position”, and to the tune of epimemetics, “even if only by choosing the dialect in which they [would] speak” (Akopov, 2019: 67). Bakhtin considered all dialogue, discourse, and the novel on a whole to be a speech act. The Derrida-Butlerian speech act I have proposed is specific to dialect and accent; however, it will be useful to adopt the concept of heteroglossia as it is relevant for the transposition of identities from novelistic to audiovisual text, whereby dialectal speech acts in adaptations represent heteroglossia in novels. For example, Game of Thrones is the adaptation

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of a series of novels by author George R.R. Martin in which the screenwriters harnessed accents to compensate Martin’s heteroglossic literary devices, therefore facilitating the intersemiotic transfer of identities. Performativity, then, elucidates that accent-laden utterances are speech acts that trigger dialectal memes and, ultimately, performatively create cultural identities.

5. The Sociolinguistics of Accent

Accents and dialects have not been contemplated as speech acts or memetic triggers to date; however, the work of sociolinguists has been pivotal in cataloguing the phonetics of accents and exposing the diachronic, diastatic, diatopic and idiosyncratic social values that pertain to these. In addition to exposing these memetic signs, sociolinguistic research reveals how dialectal memes come into being. Agha (2003; 2006; 2007) elucidated the processes by which dialects become “enregistered” (2003: 231) (acknowledged as being dialects) and acquire social values, which become spatiotemporal phenomena. Agha has exhaustively studied the explicit socialisation of accent in prescriptive treatises as well as its implicit socialisation in literary works and penny weeklies throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, and, more recently, the “circulation of representations of speech and speakers in genres of public sphere discourses, including the mass media” (2006: 39). He pointed out that the “minimal condition” required for the spatiotemporal transmission of an accent’s indexed values was that these be “embodied in sensorially perceivable signs” (i.e. memes embodied in accents), which could be mediated directly in conversation or indirectly in “perduring artifacts” such as “books, electronic media [and] other semiotically ‘readable’ objects” (Sapir, 1949 in Agha, 2007: 155). Therefore, audiovisual media are a platform for the propagation of pre-existing real-world memes. It should be noted, however, that many accents and dialects undergo change as they move over to audiovisual texts in order to ensure intelligibility, although their memetic signs remain the same. For example, Michael Caine has described his Cockney accent as “a voice that has Cockney in it” and explained that this dilution of his original accent is an effort to make himself more understandable to an American audience (Tartaglione, 2017 in Ranzato, 2019: 244). Agha has explained that accent is subjected to dramatisation in fictional texts in an effort to clearly establish a link between accents and social personae (Agha, 2006: 215). This dramatisation is indeed apparent in audiovisual texts and likely aims to facilitate the digestion of characters’ identities via swift unconscious inference.

The dichotomy between northern and southern English dialects and accents has been subject to significant dramatisation in textual representations and has been the subject of ample discussion in sociolinguistics. Nonetheless, dialectal memes are interpreted by groups of linguistic communities in varying degrees, whereby perceptions are more refined the closer we are to home: “a Liverpool working-class accent will strike a Chicagoan primarily as being British, as Glaswegian as being English, an English southerner as being northern, an English northerner as being Liverpudlian, and a Liverpudlian as being working-class” (Wells, 1982: 33). In the aforementioned series Game of Thrones, there is a display of ‘pan-northern’ accents in many variants and strengths but generally striving for a Yorkshire common ground. Given that the vast majority of viewers of the series...
are not from Yorkshire itself, the relatively idiosyncratic variations in the renditions of the fictional northern accent is to some extent justified and the use of any northern accent rather than a specific one can be considered a type of dramatisation that aims at consolidating a generally northern meme. And for those viewers who are more familiar with the northern English accents, the use of the accent(s) likely triggers the full spectrum of the northern dialectal meme they know despite its irregularities, as the mind perceives fragmented images, and perhaps memes, as whole. Thus, dialectal memes are interpreted at varying levels of specificity at the speaker-listener interface where the speech act is performed.

Before extrapolating the memetic-performative framework for accentual analysis, which I have endeavoured to develop in this paper, to Translation Studies, an important distinction between accent and dialect should be made:

‘Accent’ refers to the way in which a speaker pronounces, and therefore refers to a variety which is phonetically and/or phonologically different from other varieties. ‘Dialect’, on the other hand, refers to varieties which are grammatically (and perhaps lexically) as well as phonologically different from other varieties. If two speakers say, respectively, *I done it last night* and *I did it last night*, we can say that they are speaking different dialects (Chambers & Trudgill, 1998: 5)

In other words, dialects are what we say and accents are the way we say it. Accents and dialects are, therefore, not mutually inclusive, although they do tend to co-occur. In audiovisual productions, however, dialects are largely diluted to meet intelligibility requirements and so accents that are usually accompanied by certain dialects are expressed through somewhat of a standard instead.

6. Accents in Translation: Dubbing

When it comes to the translation of dialect and accent, the careful epimemetic work undertaken by authors and, to a larger extent, screenwriters, is wiped out in one fell swoop. Dialectal variation tends to be flattened out in translation, in general, and systematically standardised in dubbed versions, in particular. Chiaro has described screen translations as “[portraying] a world in which everyone speaks in the same way, with the same accent, cadence and, more or less, the same command of the language” (2008: 10). Federici has pointed out that “translating dialects, regional languages and minority languages, and the political and social implications of these translations, puts forward several queries on what audiences are ready to accept. Yet what audiences seem to accept implicitly does have an impact on their lives as viewers and consumers” (2009: 22). This impact is evident in the impoverishment of identities that is brought about by the use of a single standard accent in current industry practice. Moreover, what audiences seem to accept not only impacts their current mode of viewing but also any potential changes. This is to say that there is no way of knowing whether a new audiovisual translation practice will have success until the audience has experienced it and become accustomed to it, such as Netflix’ recent dubbed translations into English, which have been unprecedentedly well received by audiences (Bylykbashi, 2019; Newbould, 2019) albeit after a hesitant moment of transition. Audience perception can inhibit experimentation in audiovisual
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An interdisciplinary approach to studying linguistic variation in audiovisual texts, particularly for smaller dubbing studios that cannot afford to run the financial risk they may incur even if only temporarily during the transition period.

According to Halliday (1990: 169), “we can translate different registers into a foreign language” but “we cannot translate different dialects: we can only mimic dialect variation”. This idea of mimicking evokes the concept of equivalence, which is largely refuted in Translation Studies in favour of descriptive approaches to translation as recreation and Frederic Chaume, has classified the use of dialectal equivalents as an “older practice” (Chaume, 2012 in Bosseaux, 2015: 205). Furthermore, the use of equivalents involves a meme exchange whereby if Yorkshire accents, for example, were substituted with Basque ones, this would trigger all the signs of the Basque meme present in the *topos* of a given Spanish audience. The use of dialectal variation in dubbed versions without breaking the cinematic illusion –or without avoiding criticism on first attempts, at least– is no mean feat.

In *Translating Dialects and Languages of Minorities* (2011, 4-5), Federici asked “why translations [in general] often work as obliquely censored messages” and why sociolects are standardised “even in those countries where far more provocative films are produced in the native tongue?”. This is a particularly pertinent question for postproduction in Spain– a country that boasts an avant-garde and booming film and TV industry (not to mention theatre) that advocates regional diversity. Take Atresmedia’s series *Mar de Plástico* (2015-2016) and *Fariña* (2018), which are dominated by renditions of Andalusian accents from Almería and Galician accents and dialect in Spanish (as well as occasional Galician-language usage), respectively. Nonetheless, all dubbed material is rendered in a standardised accent in such a way that there is no distinction made between speakers of Cockney, RP, UK, US or foreign-accented English, but to name a few accents and dialects, and they are all translated into the standard Spanish accent that has a meme of its own.

The performativity of accent, as postulated in this paper, implies that accents in originals are best understood from the ‘effect’ standpoint. It is from this standpoint that translators can strive to recreate the effect, trusting in the iterability of the speech act and the existence of dialectal memes. As regards diachronic markers, in the Spanish dubbed version of *Game of Thrones*, archaic dialect, archaic grammatical structures, clear enunciation of consonants, and formal register are often employed. The *voseo* (an old grammatical structure to formally address the second person, now obsolete in Spain), for example, is often used. In the original version, there is no use of archaic forms such as *thou, thy*, or *thee*. This might be because these pronouns and possessives echo a real history, whereas the world of the series purports to be entirely fantasy. Or it could be due to the fact that these forms are famously associated with Shakespearean language, although they in fact precede him, and would therefore provoke a problematic of diachronic verisimilitude in a pseudo-mediaeval world. On the other hand, the dubbing directors found no issue with using the *voseo*, despite the fact that it gives rise to similar issues as being considered *cervantino*, even though it was in use prior to Cervantes, albeit with a slightly different register. In any case, dialect is a useful linguistic resource for diachronic signalling; however, the ideological load carried by accents in original versions conveys many more dimensions of meaning and forges more richly textured identities.

One genre wherein target-culture memes could be used is fantasy set in entirely fictitious worlds. For example, there is a foreign, vaguely Hispanic accent in the
original version of *Game of Thrones* in the kingdom of ‘Dorne’, which is standardised in the dubbed version but it could be exoticised in the Spanish dubbing by using a French or Italian accent for example, as the Hispanic accent in the original is not used to denote Spain or any Latin American country but rather to awaken all of the connotations associated with being Spanish (the mediaeval time period and iconic Andalusian architecture point to Spain specifically). If a Hispanic accent were used to denote an existing Hispanophone country, however, this strategy would not be practicable. The use of a target-culture meme could be considered a mutation or evolution, to the tune of Bragstad’s memetics, rather than an ‘equivalent’. For dubbed-version viewers, the acceptance of the screen voices speaking their own language is a result of the ‘suspension of linguistic disbelief’ (Romero Fresco, 2009: 49), and the standard accents as well as prefabricated orality—which is the affected spontaneity in audiovisual speech, especially in fiction (Baños-Piñero & Chaume, 2009)—are, then, an extension of that suspended linguistic disbelief. Can linguistic disbelief be suspended any further? The use of Neopolitan and Sicilian accents in Italian dubbing and one-voice voice-over in Poland suggests so. Alternative translation strategies could be experimented, such as Lupe Romero’s (2013: 208) “subtly marked social dialect with orality features” (my translation) that avoids leaving geographical traces. Netflix, who is currently advertising for ‘Creative Dubbing Supervisors’, has identified the need for more creative dubbing strategies:

The ideal candidate will have a great passion for language, experience with the production of dubs, a deep appreciation of regional cultural differences, and a high level of intellectual curiosity. The role requires you to develop a relationship with our originals content and be able to strategically identify the challenges and complexities localization will face before it even begins. Preserving creative intent will be your mission and developing creative approaches to the challenges at hand will be your passion. This is a demanding and fast moving position that requires someone who is a proactive and positive thinker, and able to exercise good judgment and initiative. (Netflix, 2019)

On a practical level, the use of linguistic variation is plausible within the synchrony constraints of dubbing—which require dubbed speech be synchronised with the movements of characters on screen—, given that these determine what is said but not the way in which it is uttered. So, in theory, the use of accents could be easily incorporated into dubbed dialogue (provided pronunciations do not clash with lip-sync). And as regards the synchronisation of utterance duration (‘isochrony’), accent is an economical way of conveying many depths of meaning. The processes through which the original audio is replaced with the dubbed file, however, do present a few obstacles on the road to accent variation, given that the original dialogue tends to be translated by a linguist who may or may not have a finely tuned ear to accent and is then adapted by a dialogue writer who may or may not have any knowledge of the source language. In an ideal scenario, the script sent to the translator would include an advisory note outlining any dialects or accents relevant to characterisation and this information could be translated by the translator for the attention of the dubbing director (in Spain, this person tends to also be the dialogue writer) who would choose an accent, social dialect or other linguistic resource that shares memetic qualities with the source-
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language accent so as to achieve a similar characterisation effect in the target audience. The dubbing director could include accent preferences in the casting brief, which might resemble the following example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of talents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice characterisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4 (Bertolini & Hervouet, 2019, with my addition of the final row: Accents)

7. Conclusion

The line of thought interwoven through Neuropsychology, Semiotics, Memetics, Performativity, Sociolinguistics and Translation Studies in this paper, has synergised to form an interdisciplinary framework suitable for the study of accents and dialects in audiovisuals: original versions, adaptations and dubbed translations. Within this framework, I have theorised that the utterance of accent is a performative speech act that is realised at the speaker-listener interface, activating dialectal memes and ultimately conveying cultural identity. The richly textured ideological load carried by accents in their lingua-cultural communities of origin, then, falls by the wayside at the translational frontier due to the standardisation practices to which they are subjected in (audiovisual) translation, generally, and dubbing, specifically. The complex processes involved in the creation of dubbed versions do complicate but do not preclude the incorporation of dialectal or accentual marks into the paralinguistics of dubbese, which could serve to replenish audiovisual identities that are currently being reduced to the superficial due to the standardisation norms that prevail in the dubbing industry. Nonetheless, due to the problematics of verisimilitude associated with dialectal ‘equivalents’ and the predominantly descriptive approaches to Translation Studies at present, alternative strategies, such as diachronic markers, have been discussed. The feasibility of the use of accentual variants or marks by dubbing talents has been considered within the technical limitations of the practice. The ‘accent theory’ developed in this paper invites further research and the application of memetic-performative frameworks to audiovisual-translation case studies on linguistic variation.
References

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**Filmography**


