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2024

https://doi.org/10.25595/2879

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Cuscito, Miriam: *Queer Language in Italian Audiovisual Translation*, in: Open Gender Journal, Jg. 8 (2024) Nr: 1, 1–27. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/2879.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: https://doi.org/10.17169/OGJ.2024.268

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FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

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OPEN GENDER JOURNAL

Queer Language in Italian Audiovisual Translation

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Abstract: This study examines the audiovisual translation of queer language, elements, and themes through a contrastive analysis of the Italian reception of the movie "If These Walls Could Talk II", created by HBO in 2000 and the British series "Sex Education", first released in January 2019 on Netflix. Several scholars have investigated the role of queer topics in translation, highlighting the tendency to censor potentially problematic or ideologically marked concepts in the target culture. The aim is to call attention to the level of censorship, the strategies related to the period of production and distribution, genre, and reception throughout a diachronic analysis which accounts for audiovisual products circulating with almost twenty years of distance. The research's findings highlight a strict relationship among prevailing ideology, temporality and censorship in the Italian rendering of queer language and offer some new perspectives to manage the language of queer related issues.

Keywords: Censorship, Film, Language, LGBTIQ, Queer

Submitted: 15 February 2024
Accepted: 10 September 2024
Published: 08 October 2024

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17169/ogj.2024.268

This article was edited by Bojan Bilic and Dshamilja Gosteli.

BerlinUP Journals

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Miriam Cuscito

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Introduction

Gender in Translation

During the 1960s, feminist advocacy movements that developed mainly in Western[1] countries started to question gender disparities. As a first step, it was established that biological difference was not sufficient to explain the presence of well-defined social roles. The concept of gender has been strongly contextual since its birth; gender is determined by the historical period in which it is understood (Deaux/Major 1987; Morrow 2006; Summers 2017). Unlike the biological component, which has remained almost identical from the birth of humanity to today[2], the concept of gender has shown diachronic and cultural variation that places it fully in the fields of Sociology and politics. As the concept of gender originates in the condition of both men and women, Gender Studies have developed, at least in their early days and in the Western context, from Women's Studies as the attempt to better understand the role of people in society based on the social expectations that depend on their sexual traits. Gender Studies have also largely influenced other academic disciplines, including Literary Studies. As Luise von Flotow (2010) writes, issues of gender concerned almost immediately also the fields of language and literature, for example by analysing the manipulative power of language that had characterised (as it still does) Western patriarchal societies. Considering that gender is a product of patriarchal institutions and that conventional language serves as a tool for acquiring and maintaining power (Bourdieu 1993; Fairclough 2015; Holmes/Meyerhoff 2003; Walsh 2001), the role of translation before these institutions seems pivotal in the circulation of knowledge and the affirmation of identity. Language has been historically used to dictate women's choices and conditions as well as to confine and shape wo-

1 In this work, "the West" and "Western" are to be understood as umbrella terms for countries that belong to Western Europe and North America, respecting the definition given by René Guénon in his essay "East and West" published in 1924 (Guénon 1924/2001).

2 Despite the slow pace at which science has been acknowledging all its characteristics, the sexual components that define a human being have never been strictly binary by nature. The "discovery" of other biological sexes, such as intersex, was a rather myopic and belated scientific recognition of a phenomenon that has always existed in nature. For a detailed discussion, see Anne Fausto-Sterling's works "Sexing the Body. Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality" (2000a) and "The Five Sexes, Revisited" (2000b).

men into roles that serve "mankind" (Thorne/Kramarae/Henley 1983). The close link between gender and language, then, is an issue that intimately concerns the world of translation. Not surprisingly, Sherry Simon (2003) reports an almost ironic parallelism:

> "'Woman' and 'translator' have been relegated to the same position of discursive inferiority. The hierarchical authority of the original over the reproduction is linked with imagery of masculine and feminine; the original is considered the strong generative male, the translation the weaker and derivative female". (p. 1)

Sherry captures the complexity of gender issues through a paradigmatic reflection that explores the relationship between men and women and between original texts and translations. This comparison evokes one of the oldest misconceptions in human history and translation: the myth of Eve's creation from Adam's rib, which Romolo Capuano explains as a translation error of the Jewish word *tselah*, translated as "rib" just one time out of forty-nine and as "side" or "half" the rest of the times (Capuano 2013). This has likely had a significant impact on current gender issues, as the idea that women are derived from a rib rather than being considered an equal counterpart, the other half, to men has deeply rooted itself in the collective consciousness of societies built on Abrahamic religions (Silverstein/Stroumsa/Brague 2015). Sherry's observation draws attention to the ironic parallel between the subordination of women in a patriarchal society and the marginalised role of translation. This parallel underscores the broader issue that both gender and translation are often relegated to inferior positions within their respective frameworks.

Complementing this perspective, José Santaemilia argues that translation is intrinsically predisposed to understanding gender issues, as "both translation and gender/sex studies can only make us more aware of the fluidity of meaning(s) and identity(ies), as well as of the complex workings of language, culture and power" (Santaemilia 2018). Christopher Larkosh's concept of re-engendering translation (2014), which he defines as a transcultural practice of substitution of binary opposites, introduces new categories to define identity, among them culture, language, nationality, gender, sexuality. Translation is an instance of textual manipulation (Santaemilia, 2018) that, in the practices of Gender Studies and Queer Studies, can become a tool for those aiming to question and dismantle the dominant dynamics that have upheld inaccurate historical interpretations[3], such as of the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles, between

3 In this regard, it is convenient to refer to *straightwashing*, a specific type of gay erasure that originated from the film industry and has quickly gained traction in explaining the phenomenon of heteronormalising historical, literary, and cinematic queer characters (Manea 2016; Smith 2024).

Sappho and the recipients of her poems, and, more niche, of the role of Hans van Merle as a mere co-translator to James Holmes or of the passionate letters Emily Dickinson wrote to Susan Gilbert (Larkosh 2014; Smith 1992). Von Flotow (2010) points out that "the perspective of gender allows researchers to re-evaluate historical texts, their translations, authors, translators, socio-political contexts and influences or effects". Therefore, a gender perspective does not only concern the individualistic level but is also a valid tool for cultural analyses of complex societies, as it unmasks power relations and subordination on a gender basis. From this perspective, translation can help to convey a more accurate and satisfying conception of self-definition, one in which all of an individual's personal traits contribute to the re-construction of their identity.

It is certainly worth pointing out a terminological change that has been occurring in the last twenty years, in line with the reform intentions of feminist movements from the 1980s to today. In recent years, the concept of intersectional feminism (Crenshaw 1989) has made its way; it has permeated social debates so profoundly that it has become a pivotal element for understanding and dismantling power dynamics, as it "highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity [such as gender, race, sexual orientation, social class] when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw 1989). Conceiving the world intersectionally means recognising the interrelations that exist in human experience and examining how various social identities – such as race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, and others – interact and overlap in ways that create complex systems of oppression and privilege. Since intersectionality paved the way, interest in gender in Translation Studies has evolved, and the panorama of professionals and scholars is being more and more oriented towards the concept of re-engendering translation. This concept breaks through the initial limits of early feminist translation, which was created in and for a privileged context and focused on questioning the role of straight white women in Western societies and not yet of all women and all minorities.

Queer in Translation

While Postcolonial and Intersectional Studies had gained momentum earlier, queer theories emerged more prominently only in the 1990s (Baer/Kaindl 2018). In fact, while Keith Harvey had already produced illuminating works on Queer Translation in 2003, systematic studies did not arrive until 2010, finally producing works that, even if sporadic, approached queer issues transculturally and intersectionally, giving life to rich and multifaceted collections of essays on the subject of queering translation, such as "Queer in Translation" (Savci 2011), "Re-

Engendering Translation" (Larkosh 2014), "Queer in Translation" (Gillett/Epstein 2017), and "Queering Translation, Translating the Queer" (Baer/Kaindl 2018), among many others.

Brian James Baer and Klaus Kaindl, venturing a parallelism between queer theories and Translation Studies, comment on how these two fields of research can be problematic:

> "To the extent that queer theory problematizes the representation of otherness, and translation studies highlights the otherness inherent in representation, bringing together queer theory and translation studies should productively destabilize not only traditional models of representation, understood as mimesis, reflection, and copying, but also the authorial voices and subjectivities they project." (Baer/Kaindl 2018, p. 1)

From this perspective, the task of the translator (Benjamin 1923) who is willing to follow this kind of ideological path is primarily to know how to be receptive. Translators must be willing to take on the challenge of making ethical choices – whether in response to textual typology, such as avantgarde or openly queer texts, or to social needs, such as creatively re-writing texts linked to outdated norms, or as a political act driven by their own, personal ideology. So far, studies on queer translation, often more theoretical than prescriptive, have not specifically addressed the Italian audiovisual context. Within the debate, what Santaemilia (2018) calls the queer turn has emerged, an academic critical interest in issues related to sexuality and the textualisation of identities. However, there is a lack of systematic studies on audiovisual translation, and this has a significant impact on translation practice in regard to queer translation issues. Using generic tools narrows the possibilities of identity representation through the media, highlighting the boundaries of translation. Also, the (hyper-)production of audiovisual content needs to be taken into proper account. A great number of entertainment products need to be translated by either dubbing or subtitling, practices that are not exempt from ideological dynamics. Serena Bassi, in her study on the Italian localisation of the US campaign "It Gets Better", makes a first epistemological attempt on the analyses and practices of queer translation:

> When we de-center Anglophone sexualities in the study of contemporary Western LGBT politics, ontological categories that defy positivistic and modernist paradigms may play a far more important part in the construction of messages of sexual liberation and social emancipation than scholarship in queer studies has accounted for up until now. (Bassi 2020, p. 60)

So far, the Italian debate about queer in translation has been linked to linguistic and cultural practices and their effects on audiences. Nonetheless, an attempt to

overcome those standard "best practices" and to prevail against market logics is being made. This present paper is positioned as part of this attempt at renewal, perhaps challenging and overcoming limits and mainstreams of translation in the Italian localisation of queer English-language audiovisual products dubbed – or subtitled, when dubbing is not available – into Italian.

Methods

The chosen corpus offers different social situations and different identity representations. The audiovisual products chosen are "If These Walls Could Talk II" – in the following referred to as ITWCT2 – which deals with lesbian relationships in the United States from the 1960s to the early 2000s and "Sex Education" – SE – which invites viewers to ponder adolescents' definitions and struggles of self-identity (Erikson 1968). The following analysis focuses on elements related to queer contents – language and characters – and on the strategies and procedures adopted to carry out their translation (Hervey/Higgins 1992; Newmark 1988; Nida 2003; Venuti 2011). I will examine lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic elements as well as the translation choices made. Lastly, my analysis will focus on the perlocutionary effects of the translation choices in the Italian version, and I will use a hermeneutic approach to evaluate the subtext of both the original and the Italian version.

Analysis

If These Walls Could Talk II

ITWCT2 was produced in 2000 for HBO in the United States, a sequel to the 1996 film "If These Walls Could Talk".[4] Its story is set in a house that hosts three generations of lesbian women and bears witness to the problematic and touching events of their respective everyday lives. The film is divided into three segments, each with different main characters.

The first segment, directed by Jane Anderson, is set in 1961 and focuses on two elderly women, Edith Tree (Vanessa Redgrave) and Abigail Henley (Marian Seldes), who are a couple. In my analysis of (the Italian translation of) this segment, I could not find any censorship-related phenomena; there was no change of register nor were there any tendencies towards neutralisation. This can be

4 The first film tells the stories of three different women who struggle with abortion, all living in the same house at different times.

explained by the nature of the original product: given the setting – the United States in the 1960s – and the type of characters on screen – all of medium-high social status, all of advanced age, all strongly aware of their social roles and ready to embrace their nature – it is reasonable to believe that in this segment, elements potentially problematic for censorship or neutralisation are absent.

The second segment, directed by Martha Coolidge, is set in 1972. This time, the tenants are a small group of college girls who have been kicked out of their feminist group for being lesbians – a form of exclusion that shows how feminist boundaries and interests have changed over the years. The segment tells the story of one of the girls living in the house, Linda (Michelle Williams), who meets Amy (Chloë Sevigny) and immediately falls in love with her. Due to her appearance, Linda's friends see Amy as a girl who sticks to an outdated lifestyle and follows the oppressive patriarchal rules that the girls tried to dismantle. In my analysis of (the translation of) this segment, I was mainly interested in the sexual references, the register, and the representation of lesbianism on screen. Two curious and almost opposite translation tendencies emerged. On the one hand, implicit but clearly visible references to sexual relations between women were censored in the Italian version, as in the following case, in which Linda is talking to her friends Karen (Nia Long) and Michelle (Amy Carlson) (table 1):

Table 1: Scene 1 from "If These Walls Could Talk II".

1	Eng	Linda: Was that woman here late last night? Karen: Very, very late. Michelle: Man, you scored. What happened? Karen: We're *lying there afterwards*. And I'm thinking, "That was nice. She seems cool." It was almost as if I said it out loud, 'cause the girl starts freakin' out, saying this was her first experience with a woman … and she just wanted to know what it was like.
	Ita	Linda: Ehi, fino a quanto è rimasta quella ragazza ieri sera? Karen: Fino a molto, molto tardi. Michelle: Cavolo, ti è andata bene. Che avete fatto? Karen: Beh, ecco, *abbiamo passato la serata abbracciate sul divano*.[5] Siamo state bene. Credo che sia una ragazza in gamba. Veramente all'inizio si è fatta prendere dal panico, ha cominciato a dire che non aveva mai avuto un'esperienza con una donna e lo faceva solo per sapere com'era.

5 "We spent the night hugging on the couch."

The description of what happened was softened in the Italian translation, transforming from a problematic, free and disappointing experience between sexual partners to an intimate, pleasant, happy-ending experience between friends. This translation shifts meaning from the openly sexual sphere to the affectionate relational sphere. This affects the characterisation of the character in question, who, in the original, is a lesbian woman in full struggle for the recognition and validation of her sexuality that deals with a "curious" woman carrying out a "scientific experiment". In the translated version, she turns into a shy woman who reflects on a pleasant emotional exchange that she had had with an initially sceptical partner. If, in the original script, the intention was to show a sexually connoted reality, the translation attenuates the sexual charge, which inevitably reflects on the nature of the characters and makes the plot less consistent.

While the translation attenuates explicit sexual references here, in other places, it hypersexualises the characters in a way absent in the original version (table 2).

Table 2: Scene 2 from "If These Walls Could Talk II".

2	Eng	Linda: You sure this is a lesbian bar? Michelle: It's a dyke bar. (The car shakes because of Michelle's driving) Linda: Oh my god! Karen: Yeah, *would you lay off?*
	Ita	Linda: Sei sicura sia un bar per lesbiche? Michelle: Sì, è un bar per lesbiche. (La macchina sbanda un po') Linda: Ehi! Sei impazzita? Va' piano! Karen: È che *non vede l'ora*[6]*, capisci*?

The Italian version of this scene includes a sexual implication that does not exist in the original, in which Karen only asks Michelle to drive safely. Michelle's bad driving is not necessarily because she is in a hurry to get to the bar, and even if this were the case, my analysis of the segment still reveals a certain translational paternalism in making an underlying concept more evident so that the audience does not miss the lead. Another scene that achieves sexualisation through the addition of linguistic material is the following (table 3):

6 "She can't wait."

Table 3: Table 3: Scene 3 from "If These Walls Could Talk II".

3	Eng	Michelle: Man, look at that suit. Karen: Be careful; *she might slip you her number.*
	Ita	Michelle: Cazzo, dà un'occhiata a quella. Karen: Attenta, *se ti si infila nel letto, ti fa a pezzi.*[7]

Here, the sexualisation effect of the translation is evident. "She might slip you her number" refers to a pick-up method, ungendered, typical of bars and clubs without overt sexual connotations. The main characters, sitting at the bar, find themselves in an environment that they do not recognise as theirs, precisely by virtue of the type of feminist fight they have decided to undertake. They therefore display a critical attitude but never refer to any sexual performance or to the danger of having sex with a woman in a suit; rather, they criticise the suit itself, which they see as symbol of patriarchal power. In the Italian version, the woman in the suit gets explicitly sexualised. The women's disapproval, in the Italian version, is expressed via reference to a violent sexual act ("she'll tear you apart"), which we might understand as a reference to the characters' perception of male violence that they see represented by the (person in the) suit. This translation choice embodies a discourse of stigma that is mostly absent in the original. In the English version, the central issue of the scene is the link between identity and power; in the Italian version, it is sexuality.

Throughout this analysis, I also took into account stereotypes related to presumed masculinity/femininity. The second segment of ITWCT2 revolves precisely around the struggle between feminism and definitions of identity in the lesbian community. In this regard, as discussed in relation to scene number 3 above, the image of the lesbian woman in stereotypically masculine clothing is not appreciated by the other characters, as they consider it an element of oppression in the original version (table 4):

Table 4: Scene 4 from "If These Walls Could Talk II".

4	Eng	Michelle: Oh man, tell me that's not a tie. Eveline: *I even got my dad to stop wearing one.*
	Ita	Michelle: Oh cazzo, dimmi che quella non è una cravatta. Eveline: *Non riesco a far smettere di portarla neanche a mio padre*.[8]

In this segment, the element of oppression is a tie, and the subtext suggests the need of liberation from old socially divisive symbols, such as specific items of clothing. The original statement refers to the conception of power linked to sym-

7 "Watch out; if she slips into your bed, she'll tear you apart."
8 "I can't get my dad to stop wearing it either."

bolic garments, a practice considered outdated by the characters to the point that even a man stopped participating in it. In the Italian version, however, reference is made to the impossibility of dividing the role of power from its symbol: men simply cannot give up ties. The message that reaches the Italian audience in this scene is not that of radical change as a consequence of feminist analysis of gender dynamics. Instead, it is imbued with a strange nuance, almost out of tune with the plot, focused on the liberation from oppressive dynamics. The suggestion is that in an Italian understanding, it is impossible to separate the tie from the man, the wrapper from the content. The sentence was substantially reshaped, and the result is an alteration of its meaning to the exact opposite of the original. This choice bears the ideological weight of a certain tendency towards a gender-binary categorisation inherent in the Italian version's discourse (Spallaccia 2021). The ideology of the original version reflects the movements of liberation of the 1970s, underlining the fading of the old relationship between symbols and gender. The ideology of the Italian version perpetuates the idea of a close relationship between gender expression and social roles. In this scene, attire, the tie, becomes inseparable from the gender role, the man.

In regard to register, there is a general level of equivalence between the original and dubbed versions. A colloquial style was maintained throughout almost the entire segment, with some exceptions. The translation kept swear words, colloquialisms, vulgarisms, and taboo words almost entirely, showing preference for an explicit youthful language to neutralisation. There are also examples of partial neutralisation, however, such as (table 5):

Table 5: Scene 2 from "If These Walls Could Talk II".

2b	Eng	Linda: You sure this is a *lesbian* bar? Michelle: It's a *dyke* bar.
	Ita	Linda: Sei sicura sia un bar per *lesbiche*? Michelle: Sì, è un bar per *lesbiche*.

Here, "dyke" was generalised, replaced by a more neutral term that already appeared shortly before, "lesbian". The following is another example of neutralisation of the colloquialisms of lesbian lingo, one that partially impacts the audience's likely interpretation of the plot (table 6):

Table 6: Scene 5 from "If These Walls Could Talk II".

2b	Eng	Linda: You know, I think it's time that the *big, bad, scary lesbians* went inside and had sex, if anybody cares.
	Ita	Linda: Sai, credo proprio che sia ora che queste due *lesbiche irriducibili* se ne va-da-no in casa ad abbuffarsi di sesso, non ti pare?

The "big, bad, scary lesbians" become "*irriducibili*" (incurable, irreformable, beyond reclaim), a single adjective of a more formal register and with positive connotations. This ignores the effect that the set of negative adjectives in English has as a form of linguistic reappropriation, common among members of the LGBT+ community and other minorities. Yet, the overall register and style of the scene are maintained in the Italian version.

The third segment of ITWCT2, directed by Anne Heche, is set in 2000 and about Fran (Sharon Stone) and Kal (Ellen DeGeneres). It shows a glimpse into the life of the established, happy couple who is trying for a child via artificial insemination. Similar to scene 1 as discussed above, here, too, one main translation strategy is substitution, which impacts how the audience understands the plot (table 7):

Table 7: Scene 6 from "If These Walls Could Talk II".

2b	Eng	Fran: It's not that we don't want you in the child's life. Kal: It's really … it's mainly that *we just don't want you in the child's life.*
	Ita	Fran: Non è che non vi vogliamo nella vita del bambino. Kal: Sì, semplicemente che v*ogliamo essere solo io e lei i genitori … i genitori*[9] del bambino.

In the original version, Kal repeats the words and phrasing of Fran but reverses the meaning of the statement completely, expressing their wish to exclude the male donors (a gay couple) from every aspect of their future child's life, revealing Fran's initial statement to have been merely an expression of politeness, an introduction to soften the blow of their actual stance. In the Italian version, however, the stress is put on the *status of being a parent to the child* rather than the very presence of the donors in the child's life. The original implications within this exchange are drastically attenuated in the Italian version, which allows the men to remain in the story.

Another fundamental issue is the use of the word "*genitori*" (parents) in the Italian version, a term absent in the English version. In the context of Italian culture and legal frameworks, this word carries significant implications regarding parenthood and biological ties. Notably, under current Italian law concerning

9 "It's simply that we want to be the only parents of the child."

homosexual couples who have a child through heterologous insemination, only the parent who physically carries the pregnancy is legally recognized (Bertocchi 2017; Lingiardi/Carone 2016). This reflects the strong emphasis on biological links in determining parental rights. In contrast, in the English version, Fran and Kal do not frame their position in terms of parenthood, as the word „parents" is not used. The Italian translation, however, introduces the concept of parenthood through the use of „*genitori*," implying that the men could be considered parents unless explicitly excluded by the women. This word choice highlights the importance placed on biological connections in Italy's cultural and legal understanding of kinship, as it is in many other societies, where blood ties are often seen as fundamental to parenthood.

Word choice is always significant in reflecting a specific ideological position. The translation reflects the Italian socio-cultural situation of the 2000s, including on a profound level that is not always easy to decode for audiences. In the same vein, the following scene includes translation choices with very specific connotations (table 8):

Table 8: Scene 7 from "If These Walls Could Talk II".

7	Eng	Fran: Do either of you guys remember the *zero-parenting-responsibility clause* that we all agreed to? Man: *[silence]*
	Ita	Fran: Ve la ricordate o no la c*lausola zero responsabilità, zero diritti* su cui tutti eravamo d'accordo? Man: *Veramente, noi non la vedevamo così, giusto*?[10]

The English version's "zero parenting responsibility clause", which focuses on the responsibility of parents in caring for and being present in the life of the child, has been transformed into a clause of "zero responsibilities, zero rights". The inclusion of the word "*diritti*" (rights) implies a legal link with the future child. This translation choice represents not only the amplification of a concept, which is a common translation strategy (Molina/Hurtado Albir 2004) but specific moral values, such as the idea of biological link alone as a sufficient condition for parenting rights. Another element to point out is the added line in the Italian version that reinforces the concept of violation of parenting rights. Where, in the original, there was just silence, the Italian version adds "Actually, we didn't see it that way, right?" and in doing so, the women end up being depicted as overbearing for having openly ignored the needs of the gay couple donating the sperm.

10 "Actually, we didn't see it that way, right?"

The next scene is my final example here to demonstrate the specific meaningful translation choices that were made. For the insemination process, the couple decided that Fran would be the one conceiving the baby, and it was Kal's desire for the baby to at least resemble her a little bit. Kal is therefore very aware of her role within this process, which is never marginal but certainly less chromosomally engaged than her partner's. In the following dialogue, her feelings towards insemination are clear (table 9):

Table 9: Scene 8 from "If These Walls Could Talk II".

7	Eng	*(Talking about an online shop that sends semen via mail.)* Fran: You can order it and they send it in the mail. Kal: Oh, no. *No, I'm gonna pick it up. That's the least I can do.*
	Ita	Fran: Tu lo ordini e loro te lo mandano per posta. Kal: Oddio, no, *non potrei mai andare a ritirarlo, mi vergognerei come una ladra.*[11]

"The least I could do" because, as anticipated, Kal's role is neither the pregnancy itself nor the insemination. The central issue here is a feeling of powerlessness in the face of the laws of nature, which are indifferent to the intensity of love. The tone of the original is calm, decisive, and the meaning is clear: if the only thing I can do is get the sperm, I will at least go and collect it myself, as an active part of the birth-attempt process. In the Italian version, the sentence is completely distorted not only on the syntactic-pragmatic level, but in particular on the level of implication. Kal's characterisation is altered: in the English version, she was determined to fulfil her role in taking important steps towards pregnancy; in the Italian version, she abruptly distances herself from all responsibilities and moves away from the attentive nurturing figure that she is in the original.

Here, the theme of powerlessness is replaced with the idiom of "ashamed like a thief"[12], with clearly humorous intentions. Leaving aside the analytical question for a moment, this textual manipulation creates a big gap in the development of the plot: Kal is clearly against transporting the sperm; yet, her behaviour (when she collects the sperm) tells a different story (to the Italian audience). Viewers can see Kal as she happily transports cans and cans of sperm and is looking satisfied to be doing so.

This analysis of the third segment revealed a tendency towards rather ambiguous textual manipulations, which not only change the underlying intention of the original but also distort its nature, producing translations that express the exact opposite of what was said in the English version. In so doing, audiovisual

11 "Oh God, no, I could never go pick it up; I'd be ashamed like a thief."
12 The Italian expression means to be profoundly ashamed.

conflicts are created, creating alienation for the Italian audience in their reception of what is heard and what is seen on screen.

Sex Education

"Sex Education" (SE) is a 2019 British TV series created by Laurie Nunn and distributed by Netflix. To date (2024), it consists of four seasons, which were released in 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2023. The story develops around Moordale High School, and the protagonists are teenagers, teachers, and parents who are all struggling with sex-related issues. Otis Milburn (Asa Butterfield), son of a sex therapist (Gillian Anderson) and Meave Wiley (Emma Mackey), daughter of an absent father and a drug-addict mother, set up a sex clinic at school to help peers – such as Lily Iglehart (Tanya Reynolds), Eric Effiong (Ncuti Gatwa), Adam Groff (Connor Swindells), Jackson Marchetti (Kedar Williams-Stirling) and Aimee Gibbs (Aimee Lou Wood) – and adults with their struggles around sexuality, gender, and identity. The series features a very dense plot and, through the characters' various devel-opments, portrays many facets of humanhood, such as performance anxiety, sexual harassment, family relationships, dealing with otherness, questioning, and self-doubt.

SE often contains explicit use of language, such as youthful slang, sexual terms, swear words, and coloured euphemisms. This vocabulary is enriched by specifically British slang relating to sexuality, as in the following examples (table 10):

Table 10: Scenes 1, 2, and 3 of "Sex Education", English version

1.a	S1E3[13]	Lily: Do you dress up like a *lady*? Eric: No. No, I mean, I like dressing up, but no, I'm not a *ladyboy* or anything.
2.a	S2E2	Adam: I lied; it's not my weed. They wanted me to get expelled because they're *poofs*.
3.a	S3E1	Schoolmate: You're a *poofter* now, Groff? Adam: Yeah, I'm a bit of a *poofter* now.

"Ladyboy"[14], more commonly used in British English, refers to the Thai "*kathoey*" (Winter 2008). The word is nowadays used mostly within the sex industry to refer to some types of transgender women, alongside the (often derogatorily

13 Here and in the following, "S" indicates the respective season and "E" the respective episode.
14 See Oxford English Dictionary 2023 https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1286328228 and Collins English Dictionary https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/ladyboy.

intended) term "shemale" and others. The LEXICO online dictionary[15], in its UK English section, defines "ladyboy" as "(especially in Thailand) a person who was born male but who adopts a female appearance or identity". As Sam Winter (2008) reports, a *kathoey* in East Asia is considered a third gender *tout court*. In the UK, on the other hand, the term has a clear derogatory attribute to it.

In scene 1.a, there is also a certain continuity in linguistic usage: Lily uses "lady", which might prompt Eric to choose the term "ladyboy" due to assonance. Now the Italian version (table 11):

Table 11: Scene 1 of "Sex Education", Italian version.

1.b	S1E3	Lily: Ti vesti da femmina? Eric: No. No, cioè, mi piace travestirmi ma non sono trans.

The word "ladyboy" carries cultural implications that are not conveyed as such in the Italian version: The use of "*trans*" removes the original's relation to the very specific gender identity of *kathoey*. Still, this translation could be understood as maintaining the slightly derogatory tone of the English scene. One good solution here could have been the word "*travestito*" (transvestite), which better implies a double meaning. However, to be sure of the efficacy of this choice, audiences would first have to be tested in regard to the acceptability of this term.

My final comment to this scene concerns the choice of "*femmina*" (female) as a translation of "lady". Using the words for "female/male" instead of for "woman/man" is still very common in Italy (as elsewhere) as the debate on gender is still wide open (Botto et al. 2022); therefore, the translation does sound natural to Italian native speakers. However, this choice perpetuates an idea that many queer movements, also in Italy, have been trying to deconstruct: that "female" always/automatically means "woman" and "male" always/automatically means "man". The lack of an inherent link between biological sex and gender is at the root of the confusion that enrages those who cling to linguistic parochialism. Indeed, strategies for Italian such as using "ə" (the IPA schwa symbol), "*" (the asterisk), or "@" (the at sign) to neutralise gendered words and increase inclusion for non-binary people are feared and vehemently rejected by many (Acanfora 2022; 2021; Gheno 2022). In the wake of the linguistic foresight maintained for the entire series, it would have been good practice to reflect on this implication. For example, using "*ragazza*" (girl) instead of "*femmina*" could have both allowed a certain linguistic naturalness and put attention to the more purely social aspect of the word.

15 Closed on August 2022. Archived on https://web.archive.org/web/20220127053625/https://www.lexico.com/definition/ladyboy.

Scenes 2.a and 3.a include the British slang terms "poof" and "poofter", both listed in Merriam Webster and the Cambridge Dictionary as offensive and disparaging terms (unlike "ladyboy"). The Italian translation (table 12):

Table 12: Scenes 2 and 3 of "Sex Education", Italian version.

2.b	S2E2	Adam: Ho mentito, l'erba non è mia. Volevano che mi espellesse perché sono *finocchi*.
3.b	S3E1	Compagno di scuola: Sei un *finocchio* adesso? Adam: Sì. Sono un *finocchio* adesso.

In both cases, the noun "*finocchio*" is used ("*finocchi*" in scene 2.b is the plural). Despite losing the English version's geographical and colloquial traits, this translation maintains both the used term's meaning of male homosexual and its derogatory value. This equivalence between the original and the target version finds its results in the common value gained from the use of a derogatory term via language reappropriation: in both versions, Adam eventually uses it ("poofter"/"*finocchio*") for himself as an empowering move. He reclaims his identity and sexuality by reclaiming the discourse, both in the English and Italian versions.

A scene of the series' third season reveals a translation choice that has strong consequences on reception, due to the encrypted cultural value the original utterance carries. In this scene, Eric is talking with his mother Beatrice about the suit he is wearing (table 13):

Table 13: Scene 4 of "Sex Education".

4.a	S3E6	Beatrice: Do you like it? Eric: Yes! It is *camp* as hell! Beatrice: [shushes] Your grandma might hear.
4.b		Beatrice: Ti piace? Eric: Sì! È *pacchiano* da morire! Beatrice: [shushes] Tua nonna potrebbe sentirti.

The term "camp" has a similar meaning to "kitsch" and is also used to describe exaggerated forms of personal expression that often incorporate elements from popular culture. Camp is a way of presenting oneself that is often associated with effeminate gay men, who might also be said to use "camp language". Today, camp indicates theatrical and generally exaggerated demeanour, often designating homosexuality or queer-culture elements (Sontag 1966).

As for the Italian version, "*pacchiano*" is a good translation option for "kitsch" but lacks the nuance of appreciation for a certain taste for horror or meanings

inherent in queer culture. For these reasons, the use of this word, on the one hand, flattens the polysemy of "camp"; on the other, it makes the conversation between Eric and his mother unusual: why should it be a problem if Eric's grandmother hears that his suit is "gaudy"? It is true that she might be offended, but it would be even more problematic if the conservative Nigerian Catholic grandmother knew that her 17-year-old grandson is gay, a risk made quite explicit in the English version by the use of "camp" and Beatrice's agitated admonishment of her son. In the Italian version, this warning is received as a response to the pride the grandmother takes in clothing rather than to Eric's homosexuality.

One possible solution to this could be to entrust the Italian voice actor with the task of conveying the missing information through a vocal performance that represents a certain style of speaking that is typical of gay/camp irony, using a particular cadence or form of exaggeration in his pronunciation. This would have been a translation technique of variation (Molina/Hurtado Albir 2004). On the level of lexis, translators could opt for adjectives that are used more commonly in Italian queer culture and the gayer meanings of which have been conveyed through other TV series, films, and other audiovisual products as available in the Italian dictionary of gay jargon (De Lucia 2015). Applying such a strategy of domestication (Venuti 1998) through the use of authentic Italian jargon, then, could result in using the words "*favoloso*" (fabulous) or "*divino*" (divine), as appropriate alternatives (table 14).

Table 14: Scene 5 of "Sex Education", translation proposal.

5.a	S1E5	Man: *You gay fuck!* Eric: Please, please. *This isn't me*. It's a costume.
5.b		Uomo: *Fagliela vedere!* Eric: No, per favore, per favore. *Non sono strano*, è solo un costume.

In this scene, Eric is dressed as "Edwig", the main character of the musical film of the same name. He is walking down a dark street on his way home when two men in a car approach. Seeing him dressed like a woman, they beat him up. "You gay fuck" could easily have been translated as "*gay del cazzo*", which would have kept the statement's quality as a homophobic insult. However, the actual translation – "*Fagliela vedere!*" (Show him!) – simply focuses on the physical rather than the verbal violence of the scene. Additionally, an adjective absent in the original appears in the Italian version: "*strano*" (strange). In English, Eric only says "this isn't me", trying to convey that his outfit is not the expression of his identity but, as he stresses, "a costume". The Italian version introduces a reference to a strange or bizarre aspect of character. This could be read as an attempt to clarify

the ambiguity of the phrase "this is not me". This choice has serious implications on the overall meaning as it makes Eric sound somewhat transphobic. Not only because of his use of "*strano*" here but also because of his use of a highly derogatory term as discussed in regard to scene 1. This way, his character comes to present paradoxically queerphobic nuances in the Italian version. One solution to avoid this could be the following translation (table 15):

Table 15: Scene 6 of "Sex Education".

5.c	*S1E5*	Uomo: *Gay del cazzo!* Eric: No, per favore, per favore. *Non sono così*, è solo un costume.

In this version, the vagueness of the original is maintained while a bad characterisation of Eric is avoided.

A similar case to scene 1 can be found in the following scene, where a group of girls is given detention for a disrespectful message written with lipstick on the gym's bathroom mirror, addressed to a teacher. They are held as suspects and are not allowed to leave until the culprit is found (table 16).

Table 16: Scene 6 of "Sex Education".

6.a	S2E7	Viv: Let's just tell Miss Sands that we resent being grouped together and forced to bond on the basis of our *gender*.
6.b		Viv: Diciamole che siamo offese di essere state obbligate a legare solo sulla base del nostro *sesso*.

This is another example of the terminological confusion that feminist and queer movements have been working to clarify. Both the Cambridge Dictionary and Merriam Webster define "sex" as a complex of anatomical sexual traits present from birth and "gender" as a complex of social, cultural, and psychological traits that are associated with sex. In Italian, the De Mauro Dictionary lists definitions that are very similar to these. Although it must be admitted that no meaning is lost on a conceptual level here, the Italian term "*sesso*" (sex) can be argued to be more equivalent to "sex", which the English writers deliberately chose not to use. Using "*sesso*" implies excluding transgender women and including transgender men based on anatomical traits, but it is precisely a social trait for which the girls are being grouped. For all these reasons, I argue that the best solution here would have been "*genere*" (gender) and not "*sesso*".

Many of the topics that the series covers concern identity and self-discovery and are often thoroughly addressed in a manner that combines depth with a popularising discourse. The series seems to want to engage its audience by in-

tentionally being provocative and free from bigotry. As a result, there are a number of humorous linguistic uses of queer jargon, which I found to have been playfully carried forward into the Italian version. For example (table 17):

Table 17: Scene 7 of "Sex Education".

7.a	S2E5	Ola: I'm *pansexual*, apparently. Adam: What, like, *fucking pots and pans*?
7.b		Ola: Sono pansessuale, a quanto pare. Adam: Cioè, tipo, che *fai sesso con il pane*?[16]

Here, the English pun finds an amusing, very fortunate match in Italian, switching from "pans" to "*pane*" (bread). The original humorous effect is almost identical in the dubbed version, and the translation technique of discursive creation (Molina/Hurtado Albir 2004) successfully retains the informal register, even though it slightly softens the vulgar tone of the original. Another example of such a strategically successful translation can be found in the following scene (table 18):

Table 18: Scene 8 of "Sex Education".

8.a	S4E5	Jackson: You are *beautiful*.
8.b		Jackson: Tu sei la *bellezza*.

The recipient of this compliment is a non-binary kid named Cal, who arrives at Moordale High School at the beginning of season three. The translation choice here was to replace the adjective (which would usually need to be gendered in Italian, such as in "*bello*" or "*bella*") with a corresponding noun. Issues that arise from grammatical gender markers in Italian conjugation and declination are hence eliminated through a strategy of lexical modulation. While the translation introduces a poetic nuance not present in the original version, it fully maintains the statement's gender-neutral character and even extends it beyond what was originally conveyed: as reported by Merriam Webster, when used to describe physical appearance, beautiful is "overwhelming used of women or a physical aspect of a woman (such as her hair or skin)". The existence of the male-gendered counterpart to "beautiful", "handsome", makes this observation even more meaningful. Ultimately, the most probable co-occurrences[17] of the two adjectives show a strong polarisation towards "woman" for "beautiful" and "man" for

16 "Do you have sex with bread?"
17 Used here according to the definition of Christopher J. Gledhill 2000 as well as Susan Hunston and Gill Francis 2000.

"handsome"[18]. The Italian version, on the other hand, presents the erasure gender-related connotations. It also stands out to the Italian audience, perhaps intentionally so, in its delivery of a noun where an adjective was expected, further emphasising Cal's non-binary identity

However, the translation does not always preserve this level of care; sometimes, a masculine form is used to address a mixed-gender group of people (table 19):

Table 19: Scene 9 of "Sex Education".

9.a	S3E3	Cal: I used to get changed in the abandoned toilet block so the idiot popular girls wouldn't say shit about my body. *Other queer kids* would change there too.
9.b		Cal: Prima mi cambiavo nei vecchi bagni per evitare le battute delle ragazze popolari sul mio corpo. *Anche gli altri queer* si cambiavano lì.

In English, "kids" is a gender-neutral term; in Italian, "*gli altri*" is vague but gendered as masculine. This exemplifies the (over-)use of masculine forms as so-called "general" or "neutral" forms typical of the current Italian linguistic system. In this case, a choice more consistent with the linguistic attention shown throughout the series would be a gender-neutral term such as "*persone*" (people), "*gente*" (people, folks), or "*gruppo*" (group). Alternatively, a riskier yet efficient solution would be the reformulation of the sentence (respecting lip-synchronisation and screen time), such as (table 20):

Table 20: Scene 9 of "Sex Education", translation proposal.

9.c	S3E3	Cal: Prima mi cambiavo nei vecchi bagni per evitare le battute delle ragazze popolari sul mio corpo. *Era il nostro bagno queer ormai*.[19]

This translation choice takes for granted that viewers have or are willing to infer certain information, since "our queer bathroom" expresses the existence of other queer students less explicitly than "other queer kids" does. However, strategies to avoid using masculine forms are many, and the debate on how the Italian language can use its linguistic resources to become a more inclusive code system is ongoing (Gheno 2022). Creative strategies are all the more important in cases such as this, where the character who is speaking is non-binary and the series as such has proven more than once its commitment to inclusion and a critical approach to gender issues. The audience expects Cal, as a non-binary

18 In order to test the collocation of "beautiful" and "handsome", I used the SKELL corpus through the webapp SketchEngine. For further information about this corpus and the tools, see Vít Baisa and Vít Su-chomel (2014).

19 "It was our queer bathroom."

person, to pay particular attention to the language they use when referring to other non-binary people.

However, it is not easy to work between two languages that tend to be very different from each other in terms of grammatical inflections, especially when one is closely related to cultures in which the gender binary has been the target of deconstruction for many years and the other to a culture that has only started approaching queer issues in such a way. An example of considerable difficulty is contained in the following scene (table 21):

Table 21: Scene 10 of "Sex Education".

10.a	S3E2	Jackson: I know her. Well, I mean, *she* bumped into me the other day. Cal: *My pronouns are they/them*, but no worries. I'm Cal.
10.b		Jackson: Ci conosciamo. Oh, beh, mi sono imbattuto in *lei* l'altro giorno. Cal: *Avresti dovuto dire in loro*, ma non c'è problema. Mi chiamo Cal.

Non-binarism is commonly understood as an umbrella term that encompasses all gender identities outside the man/woman dichotomy (Richards et al. 2016). Many linguistic features in different languages are (binary-)gendered, such as pronouns in English and Italian as a means of referring to people. In English, the plural pronoun "they" has been used as a gender-neutral pronoun in general and also specifically for queer people who identify with it. This way, "they" has come to take on the role of a gender-neutral singular pronoun also in standardised language use (cf. Merriam Webster). In recent years, the English sentence "My pronouns are …" has almost become a fixed polyrematic construction because of how commonly it has been used. In the Italian context, the situation is quite different. Not only is there no widely accepted gender-neutral pronoun for the third person singular, but using "*loro*"[20] in this way is also unusual. The debate on pronominal gender-neutrality is still open, but in the absence of a satisfying and definitive solution, the use of "*loro*" is actually gaining momentum in Italian. "*Loro*", however, can lead to several linguistic issues in combination with other parts of speech, which is why Italian non-binary and queer communities are also employing other gender-neutralising strategies, such as using "ə" (the IPA schwa symbol), an "x", or "*" (the asterisk) to replace parts of gendered declensions (Berti 2022; Lupetti 2021; Quaranta 2021).

Against this background, the translation difficulties in this scene are evident. While the choice by the series' translators aligns with the progression of the series' plot, it's important to note that this construction may create a sense of es-

20 "*Loro*" is the pronoun for the third person plural and indeed understood as gender-neutral in standard Italian.

trangement for the Italian audience, who may not be fully familiar with this use of "*loro*". Moreover, this version implies an obligation to already know about Cal's pronoun use. If, in the original, the sentence is informative; in the Italian version, it is a soft reproach. A more literal translation perhaps would leave viewers equally puzzled, on the other hand: the meaning of a sentence such as "*il mio pronome è loro*" (my pronoun is *loro*) is likely to be very obscure to most Italian viewers. All that being said, translating this particular scene brings problems on several levels, but a combined approach of literal and creative renderings could produce valid alternatives, such as the following (table 22):

Table 22: Scene 10 of "Sex Education", translation proposal.

9.c	S3E3	Cal: *Puoi darmi del loro*[21], ma non c'è problema. Mi chiamo Cal.

This translation keeps the informative intention of the original and adds a sort of educational intention to respect other peoples' pronoun choices. Furthermore, the assonance with the very common phrase "*darsi del*", which has the sociolinguistic function to explicit the degree of formality that one is willing to grant to the interlocutor, makes this choice familiar enough to an Italian audience and ultimately recalls the debate about gender-neutral language that is gaining more and more popularity in Italy.

Discussion

In my analysis of the translation choices in regard to socially marked elements of queer-related language in the realm of audiovisual material as discussed, I have found several instances of what Julie Tarif calls *translasorship*, the "censorship linked to the process of translation" (Tarif 2018). The analysis focused on linguistic structure, discourse, and the potential implications of references to certain concepts, such as the relationship between identity and representation. When an artistic product is prepared for a specific target culture, translation becomes subject to "operational norms" that can enhance or discourage censorship as the effect of "manipulation and power relations" (Munday 2007); "operational norms can then be the locus of censorship" (Tarif 2018) according to the values of the target culture in a given period.

First, this study confirms the relation between diachrony and censorship, initially highlighted by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere (1998) and addressed in the Italian context by Maicol Formentelli and Elisa Ghia (2021) as well as by

21 "You can address me with '*loro*'."

Antonio Bibbò (2013). The older the audiovisual product, the more consistent the censorship of queer identities. ITWCT2, distributed in Italy in 2004, presents copious examples of textual manipulation related to censorship, such as lexical substitution (as in Table 2: Scene 2), suppression of homosexual references (as in Table 1: Scene 1), or addition of sexual elements where they were not present originally (as in Table 3: Scene 3). The situation drastically changes with SE, which belongs to the 2020s. As shown, the Italian dub of SE maintains much of the original meaning, often relying on a strategy of retention when it comes to queer language (such as in Table 12: Scenes 2 and 3 and in Table 17: Scene 7). While there are also instances where implicational meaning was erased (as seen in Table 13: Scene 4 and in Table 14: Scene 5), the main translation approach for SE seems to be found in the attention paid towards specific linguistic choices that try to avoid ambiguous alteration of the original text.

Second, an authentic Italian queer jargon has been emerging (De Lucia 2015), one that includes but also offers alternatives to loans from English, producing a lexical form of "equivalence" that, over the years, has contributed to the improvement of the quality of queer-themed audiovisual translations. This socio-linguistic phenomenon holds significant social value for queer individuals as it can enhance a sense of belonging and recognition within queer communities by providing linguistic tools for self-expression and empowerment. It serves as a means of affirming identities, challenging societal norms, and reclaiming space in both linguistic and social contexts (Livia/Hall 1997). Again, my analysis shows that diachrony affects audiovisual translation not only from a social perspective, which can erase or enhance specific identity representations through the ways it approaches problematic concepts, but also from a linguistic one, as it determines the number of resources available to an inclusive translation.

Third, within the context of my corpus of audiovisual texts, genre cannot be confirmed as affecting levels of discrimination in regard to translation choices. Even though the two products I have discussed here share both genre and humour, I have shown that the translation of ITWCT2 presents a level of censorship that is not present in the translation of SE. It is to be noted, then, that within the same genre, censorship in dubbing may function more or less systemically, depending on other product-related aspects, among them distribution, intended audience, imagined moral values of the recipient culture. (Marset 2015).

Fourth, an important element that influences these translation choices is the means of distribution (Chaume 2013, 2004). ITWCT2 was distributed in Italy by Mediafilm Home Entertainment s.p.a., both as a television film and on DVD in 2004. SE is produced and distributed by Netflix, a subscription-based on-demand platform. Within the context of my comparison, the distribution of

ITWCT2 to a wide audience on Italian national television network might have led to a higher degree of censorship as the film had to be suitable for all kinds of audiences, from children to elderly people. This might be one reason behind the softening of socially problematic themes, such as the lesbian sex and gendered power dynamics that feature in the film. Netflix, instead, does not require any particular restrictions regarding explicit language[22] and allows its customers to choose what to watch, thus having better control of what the audience requires prior to subscription.

In conclusion, this study traces some development in translation practice for dubbing in an Italian context that can be attributed to the ongoing social change in regard to queer identities and themes as well as to new ways of audiovisual-content production and distribution. As some of the most significant changes in relation to audiovisual translation of queerness, I have found in my corpus a decreasing tendency towards censorship, which follows social renovations, an increasing recourse to using Italian itself as a queer language rather than relying on English patterns, and an increasingly creative approach to the translation of ideologically and culturally marked elements related to queer, gender, identity, and sexual issues.

Given these final considerations, I want to suggest dabbling in the re-translation of old queer-themed films and series using modern approaches to queer issues as useful for high-lighting sociolinguistic advancements in Italian language and culture. This could not only be an exciting challenge but also allow evaluating changes in censorship over time, eventually helping to test the current reception of audiovisual products by Italian audiences and critics.

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22 For further information about Netflix' policy, please refer to the section "Quality Control and Dubbed Material" available on https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com/.

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