ACROSS LANGUAGES, ACROSS MEDIA:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF LINGUISTIC VARIATION IN LITERARY TRANSLATION AND TRANSMEDIAL ADAPTATION OF A CHINESE-AMERICAN FICTIONAL CHARACTER

ATRAVÉS DAS LÍNGUAS, ATRAVÉS DA MÍDIA:
ANÁLISE COMPARATIVA DA VARIAÇÃO LINGUÍSTICA NA TRADUÇÃO LITERÁRIA E NA ADAPTAÇÃO TRANSMIDIÁTICA DE UM PERSONAGEM FICCIONAL SINO-AMERICANO

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This study explores translation and transmediality by examining the adaptation of Charlie Chan's literary and cinematic portrayal in English and Italian. As a Chinese American fictional detective created by E.D. Biggers in the 1920s (often accused of stereotyping the minority he represents), Charlie Chan navigates various cultural contexts, providing a rich ground for intermedial comparisons. By employing an intercultural and intermedial approach to Translation Studies, this research sets out to understand how linguistic variation is represented across languages and media. The analysis intertwines multiple levels of translation, as it investigates the passages from English source to Italian target version of both novel and film (interlingual translation), as well as the novel-film adaptation as a form of rewriting (and therefore of medium translation). In particular, the focus will be on how Chan's language variation, with specific attention to those traits that are supposed to delineate his fictional 'Chineseness', may have changed across these multiple translational passages. The findings of this research reveal that the different versions preserve and adapt to various extents Chan's portrayal, and that both different languages and media contribute to a nuanced understanding of the complexities in the (stereotyped) representation of the image of minority characters.

Keywords: Translation. Transmediality. Linguistic Variation. Interference.

Este estudo explora a tradução e a transmedialidade através da representação literária e cinematográfica de Charlie Chan nas adaptações em inglês e italiano. Na qualidade de detetive fictício sino-americano criado por E.D. Biggers na década de 1920 (frequentemente acusado de estereotipar a minoria por ele representada), Charlie Chan passa por diversos contextos culturais, proporcionando um terreno fértil para comparações intermediais. Ao empregar uma perspetiva intercultural e intermedial aos Estudos de Tradução, esta pesquisa tenta compreender como a

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variação linguística é representada através das línguas e da mídia. A análise entrelaça vários níveis de tradução, investigando as passagens do inglês inicial para o italiano, quer seja do romance quer seja do filme (tradução interlingual), bem como a adaptação do romance para o filme como forma de reescrita (e, portanto, de tradução de mídia). Em particular, o foco encontra-se na forma como a variação linguística de Chan, nomeadamente os traços que se supõe delinearem a sua 'chinesidade' ficcional, podem ter sido modificados nessas múltiplas passagens tradutórias. Os resultados desta pesquisa revelam que as diferentes versões preservam e adaptam em diversos graus a representação de Chan, e que tanto as diferentes línguas como a mídia, contribuem para uma compreensão matizada das complexidades na representação (estereotipada) da imagem dos personagens que fazem parte de uma minoria.

Palavras-chave: Tradução. Transmedialidade. Variação Linguística. Interferência.

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1. Introduction[1]

Translation is an intricate process that facilitates cross-cultural communication by converting texts from one language to another dealing with "equivalence in difference" (Munday, 2008, p. 37). An essential tool for global exchange, it is intrinsically multilingual and interdisciplinary, involves languages going beyond limited definitions of 'text', and increasingly calls to expand the conventional understanding of its very nature. As a matter of fact, the concept of translation, often adopted implicitly in both traditional and scientific literature, requires a re-definition to account for the complex and diverse processes usually implied in the notion. Going beyond inadequate binary oppositions, a flexible system of categorisation relying on the notion of fuzzy set allows a gradual approach to text classification and – focusing on the relation between source and target – to the varied forms of adaptation and re-writing.[2]

Within this broader understanding is transmediality, which can be seen as a form of translation that plays a key role within global translationscapes (Taronna, 2009). Transmediality has been defined as a part of the broader concept of intermediality, so it may be worth briefly looking at both. Intermediality is "to communicate about things through different forms of media" (Elleström, 2019, p. 4), while transmediality refers to the idea "that different media types share many basic traits that can be described in terms of material properties and abilities for activating mental capacities" and it "is evidently a central part of *intermediality*, which is an even broader concept based on the proposition that different media types are interrelated in all kinds of ways" (Elleström, 2019, p. 5, italics in the original). While the distinction between the two may not always be apparent as they both refer to the interconnectedness and interaction of different media forms, here Elleström's distinction will be taken as a reference, as it entails "media characteristics of

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[1] The article emerged from the joint effort of the two authors. More specifically, Dora Renna wrote sections 2 and 4.1, while Francesca Santulli wrote sections 1, 4.2 and 5.

[2] It obviously lies outside the scope of this short introduction to discuss the concept and role of translation across centuries of history. Suffice to mention, with reference to the broad fuzzy-set approach, Garzone (2015, 2021), offering a comprehensive framework to account for the immense variety of processes and products labelled under the heading in the contemporary world.

an initial medium are perceived to be represented again by another kind of medium" (Elleström, 2019, p. 5).

That is why another key term for this research is adaptation – a word that has several acceptations, which become more or less relevant according to the disciplinary perspective taken as a standpoint. In general, adaptation can be defined as "the process of changing to suit different conditions" (Cambridge Dictionary). It is important to note that, however co-occurrent they may be in the daily life of professionals in the field, these two practices have long had a somewhat difficult relationship in terms of theoretical approaches. This is especially true when it comes to establishing clear-cut boundaries as "the relationship between translation and adaptation might be interpreted differently across the globe", making it impossible to impose "absolute definitions" (Raw, 2017, p. 494). Often, adaptation is used within Audiovisual Translaton Studies in a way that is yet to have a precise definition. In fact, it often overlaps with the concept of audiovisual translation itself, but it more specifically tends to identify translator's choices that are "more intrusive, ranging from reshaping some parts, to cutting others" (Fois, 2012, p. 2). On the other hand, in the field of media studies, adaptation has to do with telling "a story across multiple media" (Jenkins, 2011, n.p.).

It is at the crossroads among these practices that this paper emerges, with the aim of looking at translation and transmediality as different layers of linguistic representation of a character that constituted an early example of what Jenkins defined as "transmedial storytelling", while also being a particularly challenging interlinguistic translation case of linguacultural stereotyping: Charlie Chan. Born in literature in the 1920s, the character has 'travelled' and expanded his universe across cinema, radio, stage and television,[3] which makes it a case on point for transfictionality. In fact, Chan's storylines across media display both extension with new storylines and transposition in a different setting, key elements for transfictionality (Doležel, 1998, p. 206) and both present in the film here analysed.

A further reason to investigate this topic is that Chan has acted as a (problematic) bridge across media and across languages, and this paper aims to see how this influential stereotype, born in literature and soon migrated to the screens, was re-constructed linguistically across semiotic and linguistic levels, especially given that language, as will be shown here, acts as a distinguishing feature. After briefly introducing the character and his sociocultural meaning, various versions of Chan will be compared: a novel and its Italian translation, a film and its Italian dubbing, to find the linguistic items that worked as a fil rouge identifying and joining together Chan's transmedial storytelling.

2. Portrait of a model minority

Charlie Chan, a Chinese[4] detective from Honolulu, Hawaii, was created by the American novelist Earl Derr Biggers. He was inspired by Chang Apana, a legendary detective in

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[3] A fan website carefully reports all the existing adaptations, including lost media: https://charliechan.org/ (Retrieved December 4, 2023).

[4] This chapter analyses ethnotypes as fictional constructs for cultural differences (van Doorslaer *et al.*, 2016). Identity discussion is limited to language explanations. Refer to Lê Espiritu (1992), Lowe (1991),

Honolulu who stood out for his skills during a period when Chinese people in the United States were exploited and discriminated (Huang, 2010, pos. 243–247). Initially introduced as a secondary character in *The House Without a Key* (1925), Charlie Chan's popularity among the audience turned him into the protagonist in the subsequent five novels (Huang 2010, pos. 1965–1973), as well as numerous films from the 1920s to the 1940s. He was portrayed by Western actors (such as Warner Oland and Sidney Toler) in yellowface, a cinematic makeup technique aimed at creating the illusion of East Asian features that is nowadays unacceptable but was routine at that time (Ono & Pham, 2009, p. 33).

Charlie Chan contrasted the previously more familiar image of Dr Fu Manchu, who embodied the 'yellow peril' stereotype, whereby Chinese (and Asians in general) were depicted as mysterious and ineffable, possessing immense intellect only matched by their malevolence. Charlie Chan, on the other hand, used his genius-like abilities to uphold justice. Furthermore, his intelligence is 'softened' by his round and amiable appearance, as well as his non-standard English, which will be further explored in this article. Chan counters the yellow peril stereotype with another one, known as the model minority, an ambiguous, less overt, and therefore potentially more elusive stereotype. Already emerging after World War II (Chang, 2003, pp. 9–10), it became mainstream in the 1960s, when the media were filled with Asian American 'success stories'. Such narratives aimed at contrasting the struggles for civil rights by portraying AAPIs as a minority group that had quietly "made it" in society through "strong family values, determination, and hard work" (Mok, 1998, p. 192). Although belonging to a model minority may appear positive, this image actually imposes impossible and unjust standards to adhere to (Chao *et al.*, 2013, p. 90).

With his above-average intelligence and gentle character, Chan represents one of the key images of this stereotype, and the fact that he was one of the most beloved characters in the cinema of his time, one of the few Chinese individuals portrayed as a positive hero, further adds to the controversy surrounding his nature:

> So, who is Charlie Chan? To most Caucasian Americans, he is a funny, beloved, albeit somewhat inscrutable – that last adjective already a bit loaded – character who talks wisely and acts even more wisely. But to many Asian Americans, he remains a pernicious example of a racist stereotype, a Yellow Uncle Tom, if you will; the type of Chinaman, passive and unsavory, who conveys himself in broken English. (Huang, 2010, pos. 231)

The contrasting interpretations demonstrate how Charlie Chan is more than just a character; he carries a strong political charge, as "to write about Charlie Chan is to write about the undulations of the American cultural experience" (Huang, 2010, pos. 236). The negative conceptions of this character are summarised by Ma (2014), who focuses on Chan's deeply humiliating, "bad, atrocious English characterized by the mangling of r as

or Feng (2002) for more information. Terminology is based on existing literature and not open to questioning. "Asian American" aligns with Feng's concept (2002) from Lowe (1991). "Chinese Samerican" and "Chinese diaspora" refer to overseas Chinese in the US. "Chinese" includes all ethnic Chinese. "Asian American Pacific Islanders" (AAPIs) encompasses the broader community, following the Coalition of Asian Pacifics in Entertainment (CAPE) perspective.

l, the dropping of definite and indefinite articles, a lack of verb conjugations, a paucity of logical reasoning, and a general ignorance of grammar" (Ma, 2014, pos. 352). With this English, Chan "leads a legion of clowns [...] [whose] clumsy and unwieldy tongues betray their identity as mimic men, aliens," and "the tongue's inflexibility symbolizes the foreigner's maladaptability; its dysfunctional state announces to white culture the nonnative speaker's inferiority" (Ma, 2014, pos. 365–369). In this sense, Charlie Chan overlaps with another stereotype, the "fresh off the boat" (FOB), representing the newly arrived immigrant, encapsulating the trauma of cultural shock, and transforming it into an existential condition of cultural and linguistic inadaptability to the new reality (Ward *et al.*, 2001).

Chan remains an ambivalent character who can shed light on the vision of China that the United States produces and exports to the world. His language is as important and central as his character, and transposing this complexity into another culture through translation potentially adds new layers of meaning.

3. Mixing levels of translation in a hybrid and contrastive methodology

Given the intrinsic differences between a written and a cinematic representation, but also the need for comparable results, it was necessary to devise a methodology that, while using different (software) tools, would be based on a common and adaptable framework. In terms of framework, the multimodal scheme of language variation implemented in Ramos Pinto and Mubaraki (2020) and Renna (2021) was adapted to an analysis whose main focus was the linguistic aspects of language variation of a fictional Chinese character. It is therefore important to note that fictional language, although resembling spontaneous language to some extent, can be regarded as a reproduction wherein linguistic variations are creatively utilised as a textual resource. This serves to assist readers in defining the socio-cultural portrayal of characters and their positions within the fictional socio-cultural context (Ramos Pinto, 2009, p. 291). Consequently, the analysis of fictional linguistic variation does not conform to the schemes devised for natural language but needs a framework specifically designed for fictional works. This framework is based on two primary criteria (Ramos Pinto, 2009; Assis Rosa, 2015; Renna, 2021): 1) the speech patterns employed are deliberately marked to establish connections with ethno-linguistic groups, be they 'dominant' or 'minority' within the fictional context (in this case, WASPs and Chinese Americans); 2) the speech patterns are to be compared with the respective 'standard' language of the diegetic contexts here analysed, i.e. Standard American English (SAE) in the source texts (ST) and, in the target texts (TT), standard Italian for the written version and *dubbese*[5] for the cinematic version. By positioning fictional speakers within this framework, a sense of prestige is conveyed, with higher prestige associated with speech patterns that align more closely with the centres of prestige, namely the dominant group and the standard language (refer to Figure 1).

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[5] *Dubbese*, resembling written language and not commonly used in everyday interactions, serves as a geographically neutral form of Italian (Antonini, 2008, p. 136).

Figure 1. Scheme of fictional linguistic variation (Renna, 2021)
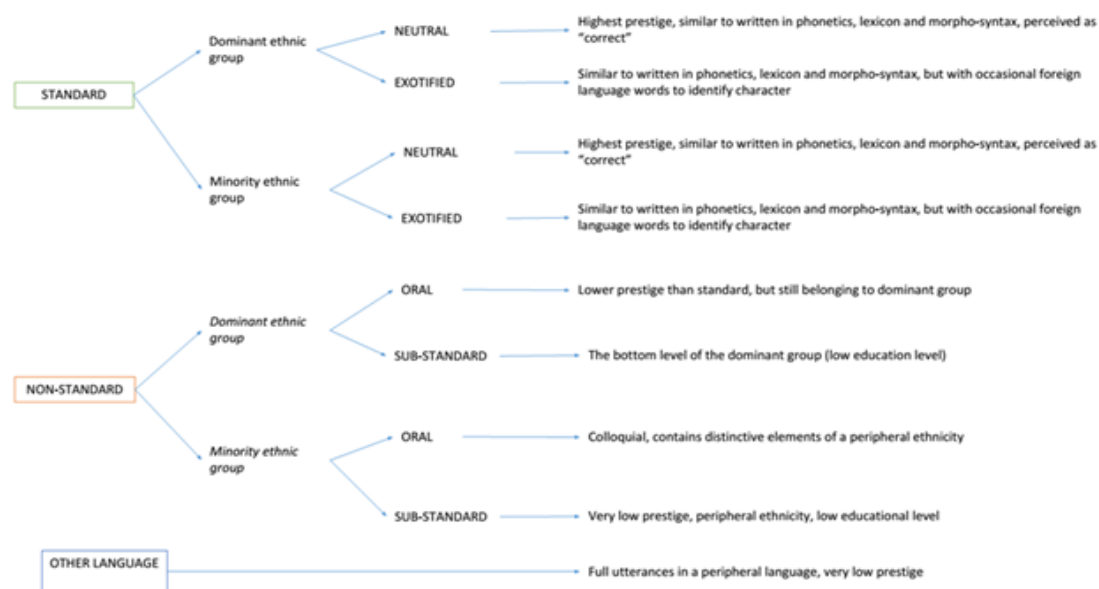
Within each line, only a single option may be chosen, and the elements that can be associated with each marked line include phonetics/phonology,[6] morphosyntax and lexicon. It is possible to annotate multiple options for a single line. The multimodal part of the small corpus was analysed using the software EXMARaLDA (Renna, 2022), while the textual part using NVIVO™, but both parts were annotated according to the same framework.[7] The same manual annotation was carried out for both ST and TT of both versions.

It is important to explain which texts and how they were chosen, given the number of products that feature Charlie Chan. Amongst the novels, the choice was to opt for one of the latest works, with a well-formed character. As for the films, given Bigger's untimely demise in 1933, in order to see how Chan had become a transmedial character even in absence of a direct reference, the intention was to find a film shot after Bigger's death and not based on a specific novel. To pick amongst the remaining titles, the following filter was based on availability of both English and Italian versions, and this left the analysis with the novel *The Black Camel* (1929/2017) and its Italian translation *Charlie Chan e il Cammello Nero* (1929/2014), the film *Charlie Chan in London* (1934a) and its Italian dubbed version *Charlie Chan e il Nemico Invisibile* (1934b, lit. *Charlie Chan and the Invisible Enemy*). In the novel, Chan investigates the murder of a famous actress who was on holiday in Honolulu, where Chan usually lives and works, while in

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[6] While certainly present in the cinematic versions, phonology can be marked in the written text, for instance through spelling (e.g., Malkani, 2006). However, as will be seen later, this will not be the case in the analysis at hand, or at least not for Chan. On the other hand, intonation was excluded for its more challenging rendering in written texts.

[7] It is important to note that both parts belong to a larger corpus built as part of a research project carried out at Ca' Foscari University of Venice between 2020 and 2022, which collects mediated representations of Chinese Americans from the 1920s to this day.

the film Chan is visiting London and is approached by a noblewoman who begs him to save her brother from an unjust conviction.

Out of these texts, only Chan's lines were sampled out and annotated. As a unit, each line was isolated according to conventional diegetic devices including turn-taking, scene change and long pauses, which in the films were calculated as above 3 seconds and, in the books, according to the narrator's indications (Gurskis, 2006, p. 180). The results were then elaborated using Microsoft Excel™ and compared in order to see whether there was continuity. The analysis was operated on the premise that the results themselves would potentially indicate linguistic elements of interest to be further discussed. As will be noted in the following section, two elements were deemed characterising, and of them one was chosen for this analysis, while the other is commented on in other works concerning this corpus (Renna & Santulli, 2021).

4. Results: transmedial interference-concocting

The investigation was carried out on the four versions, for a total of 1,694 lines from the two versions of the novel (847 each) and 451 lines from the two films (225 ST, 226 TT).[8] The language varieties and the marked features as annotated in the corpus can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1. Charlie Chan's speech patterns and marked features

Variety	Novel ST	Novel TT	Film ST	Film TT
DOM STAND	**28.9%**	**100%**		**17.7%**
Standard features	MS 99.2% — Lx 99.2%			Ph 87.5% — MS 77.5% — Lx 92.5%
DOM ORAL	**8.0%**			**8.0%**
Oral features	MS 98.5% — Lx 7.4%			Ph 100% — MS 88.9% — Lx 55.6%
DOM SUBST				**0.4%**
Substandard features				Ph 100% — Lx 100%
MIN STAND			**19.0%**	
Min. standard features			Ph 100% — MS 88.4% — Lx 97.7%	
EX MIN ST			**6.6%**	**0.9%**
Exotified features			Ph 100% — MS 93.3% — Lx 100%	MS 50% — Lx 100%
MIN ORAL			**0.4%**	
Min. oral features			Ph 100% — MS 100% — Lx 100%	
MIN SUBST	**62.6%**		**73.5%**	**73.0%**
Min. substandard features	MS 97.7% — Lx 24.9%		Ph 100% — MS 99.4% — Lx 35.5%	Ph 2.4% — MS 100% — Lx 12.7%

Note. Empty spaces are varieties not used in the version. Ph = phonetics/phonology; MS = morphosyntax; Lx = lexicon. Empty spaces are elements not emerged in the version.

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[8] The dubbing process has replaced a silent nod from the character seen from behind with a brief response. This results in an apparent discrepancy of approximately 0.5 percentage points between the source text (ST) and the target text (TT).

The table displays a list of different varieties of language use (from Dominant Standard to Minority Standard), and the percentages corresponding to each variety (in bold) represent its frequency within the respective text.

The Dominant Standard accounts for 28.9% of the ST novel. While absent in the film ST, this category is present in both TTs, to a minor extent in the Italian dubbed TT (17.7%), while the entire text of the TT novel is rendered in the Dominant Standard, (100%). The other Dominant group varieties appear to a lesser extent (all between 0 and 8%).

The Minority varieties are overall more present, with the exception of the TT novel. In particular, Minority Standard is represented solely in the film ST, accounting for 19.0% of Charlie Chan's speech patterns. The other minority varieties are barely present (all below 6%), apart from the one that, with the sole exception of the TT novel, is the most used variety across all versions, i.e., Minority Substandard: in the ST novel, it accounts for 62.6% of Chan's lines. It is even more present in the filmic versions, with Film ST and TT scoring similarly, 73.5% and 73.0% respectively.

Below each variety percentage, it is possible to see which marked features were annotated as characterising. The distribution of marked features across the versions reveals some aspects worth considering. First, neither the author nor the translator of the novel tried to reproduce a minority phonology in Chan's speech patterns (while they did in minor characters, as will be seen), and this is the only common choice between them. In fact, ST novel Chan's Minority Substandard is realised relying heavily on morphosyntax (97.7%) and much less on lexical choices, with less than one in four lines having marked lexicon. The peculiarity of Chan's speech is actually a rather elegant vocabulary tangled in a net of substandard grammar that, as will emerge in the examples, attempts at reproducing a stereotyped ESL Chinese speaker. In this sense, albeit with different numbers, it is important to note that ST film Chan also seems to make broad use of substandard morphosyntax (99.4%), with the impression of a marked minority speech reinforced by the constant resort to a pseudo-Chinese accent (100%). The TT novel is flattened on a Dominant Standard, while the TT film, in its prevalent Minority Substandard occurrence, heavily relies on morphosyntax (100%).

Overall, it could be possible to 'classify' the versions based on how far from fictional linguistic prestige they are. The ST film would be the farthest, with the highest frequency of Minority Substandard language and the broadest range of marked features, followed by the TT film, whose translators opted for a centralisation strategy (Ramos Pinto, 2009), preserving the ST variation, albeit to a lesser extent. In fact, the marked features are almost exclusively grammatical (100% with the other features scoring less than 15%). TT film Chan still predominantly speaks a Minority substandard language, but occasionally gravitates towards a standard language that carries no minority markers and is either colloquial or standard (see Table 1). By looking at the feature distribution it is also possible to point out that the TT film version is the least 'coherent', with at least some lines annotated across the full range of varieties. At some distance, but not too far away, the ST novel ranks third, with a polarised speech that is either Minority Substandard or Dominant Standard. Here, lexicon seems to overwhelmingly mark standardness (99.2% in Dominant Standard *vs* 24.9% in Minority Substandard), while the

variation of morphosyntax is predominant in all varieties (always above 97%). Finally, at a considerable distance and making Chan appear like a completely different character, is the TT novel, where the standard language makes him virtually indistinguishable from any other character from the dominant group, at least in terms of linguistic variation. In this case, the strategy is a complete standardisation.

Despite the translation choice adopted in the TT novel and excluding aspects of language that pertain to style and content (i.e., proverbiality and figures of speech, treated in Renna & Santulli 2021 and 2023), substandard grammar is the only transmedial and translingual sign of stereotyped Chineseness in all the versions. In fact, as will be seen, the standardness of the TT novel still attempts to retrieve it elsewhere. This is why it may be worth looking in more detail at the realisation of Chan's substandard morphosyntax, which reflects an effort to reproduce that of a less-than-proficient ESL speaker, turning him into a transmedial and translingual concocter of linguistic interference.

4.1. The synoptic versions: Mandarin interference?

As will be seen in this section, Chan's substandard grammar most often derives from linguistic interference, which may mean that Biggers conceived his speech patterns as a translation in the first place, a pseudo translation of Chinese grammatical structures into English. Indeed, to adapt the classic Labovian terminology (1972), even though Biggers was not able to speak Mandarin, he was probably able to consciously recognise and reproduce stereotypes[9]. Some of Chan's most common substandard linguistic stereotypes in both ST and TT synoptic versions were omission of "to be" in auxiliary position, article omission, and lack of interrogative inversion.[10] These are all traits that can also be found in lists of the most common 'mistakes' made by Chinese speakers published with prescriptive purposes and that will be used here as a reference: Lay (1975, 1991) for the ST and Limonta (2009)[11] for the TT. Those works report a much broader range of interference instances, while Biggers disproportionately resorts to the ones just listed. Although the authors of this paper do not necessarily share the prescriptive approach to language learning, it may be useful to assume this point of view to understand Bigger's creative decisions and the adaptations that derived from them.

The first feature cited is the omission of the verb "to be", which, according to Lay (1975), is a consequence of interference, as in Mandarin it is "not normally used before

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[9] Labov's seminal work in 1972 delineated three distinct categories of variables that exhibit social variation: markers, indicators, and stereotypes. Indicators are nuanced linguistic features that often elude untrained individuals, thereby lacking the ability to elicit explicit responses from listeners. In contrast, markers represent the most salient cues associated with a particular social position, enabling most listeners to extract social information even when these markers are unconsciously employed by the speaker. Stereotypes, on the other hand, encompass conscious portrayals of specific groups that are widely recognised by outsiders, often acquired through exaggerated depictions in the media. Consequently, stereotypes tend to elicit hasty judgments and contribute to the stigmatisation of these social constructs.

[10] Furthermore, there were other recurring interference instances apart from those explored here, *e.g.*, those related to tense and aspect, but they were left out because a complete analysis would require a much larger space than that of an article.

[11] It must be noted that all the most complete guides used written productions as a reference. This may be seen as not fit for a character's dialogue but given that all the versions were written in the first place, they were deemed adequate for the purpose of this research.

stative verbs except for emphasis" (1975, p. 54), and states that Mandarin speakers tend to omit it before adjectives and as a predicate (Lay, 1991, p. 51). This type of interference, while being easy to notice for the non-expert, does not hinder understanding for the audience, be it reading or watching, especially since Chan mainly omits it before adjectives, in most cases 'replaced' by the adverb "very":

(1)   ST novel: a. I think you very smart man (p. 808)
                        b. You very much busy now? (p. 858)
                        c. Tarneverro very odd name. (p. 869)

       ST film: d. Murder not very good joke. (min. 38.34)
                        e. Method of French police, sometime very good. (min. 24.49)

In these cases, the use of "very" and the omission of the verb "to be" seem to be a literal translation of the adverb of degree 很 (hěn) that would literally translate as "very" but does not necessarily imply an emphasis, as in Mandarin it is often used to signal that the following adjective is not used comparatively (Romagnoli, 2012, p. 49). Nonetheless, the rendering of this interference presents some issues. To explain in what sense, sentence 1a can be taken as an example. In Mandarin, it could be translated as:

我觉得你是一个很聪明的男人。Wǒ juédé nǐ shì yīgè hěn cōngmíng de nánrén
I/think/you/be/one/very/smart/of/man

Or as:

我觉得你很聪明。Wǒ juédé nǐ hěn cōngmíng
I/think/you/very/smart

The issue is clear: if the adjective is only preceded by 很 (hěn), or most other adverbs, it is then not followed by the noun, while the presence of the noun requires the verb "to be" 是(shì) to be followed by a number and a classifier, in this case 一个(yīgè), with the noun preceded by the structural particle 的(de) that links a determiner to a determined, in this case "smart" and "man". The 'indiscriminate' application of the "to be" omission stereotype even in sentences where a Chinese learner would be likely to use it (like 1c and 1d) as well as in sentences where it sounds like a credible interference (1b and 1d) suggests that both Biggers and the film scriptwriters overextended the stereotype beyond its actual uses. As for Italian, Limonta (2009, p. 41) places copula omission as the first morphosyntax issue of Chinese users of Italian as a second language. In the TT film, Chan also presents similar linguistic behaviours, with the adverb *molto* replacing the English *very*:

(2)   TT film: a. Lei molto scossa (min. 9.18) [lit. You very shaken]

                            b. Metodo polizia francese, a volte molto buono (min. 24.49) [see 1e]

                            c. Usanza di rendersi invisibile a volte molto utile (min. 41.42)
                            [lit. Habit of becoming invisible, sometimes very useful]

                            d. Charlie Chan, uomo molto curioso (min. 48.23)
                            [lit. Charlie Chan, very curious man]

        While in cases 2a, 2b, and 2c the interference mirrors the construction seen above, in cases like 2d a similar issue to the ST (1a to 1d) versions emerges. It may be worth noting that, while 2b is the translation of 1e, the omission of the copula was not necessarily reproduced in both the source and the target version of the same sentence. For example, the film line reported in 1d was in fact translated with the copula "Morte non è bello scherzo" [lit. Death is not good joke]. Furthermore, in all the synoptic versions the omission of the verb "to be" is not constant, as can be seen in the following examples:

(3)   ST novel: a. I am humble business man (p. 700)

                            b. Speed is necessary (p. 725)

                            c. You are bright boy (p. 727)

         ST film: d. You are much troubled (min. 9.18) [see 2a]

                            e. He is afraid (min. 34.09)

         TT film: f. Io sono un tipo molto curioso. (min. 30.55)
                            [lit. I am a very curious type]

                            g. Mondo è grande. (min 9.02) [lit. world is big]

        3d is the ST of the sentence in example 2a, and it is worth noting that, in this specific case, a 'correct' ST sentence was translated with an interference. While there was a slight increase in marked morphosyntax in TT film Chan, very often the interference was transferred on other parts of the full line, probably where it 'sounded better' to the dubbing translators, or in a way that fitted better in terms of lip sync.

        The examples from group 3. show that, even in sentences where the authors opted for a conventional use of the verb "to be", another substandard feature is evident: the omission of articles of any type. Although not omnipresent, it can be noticed across Chan's speech patterns. Lay states that a difference between English and Mandarin that leads to interference is indeed the fact that, while articles are common in the former, the latter do not have them.[12] When a quantitative specification is required, Mandarin resorts to the combination of number and classifier (Lay, 1975, p. 51), as seen previously with 一个 (yīgè), where 一 (yī) is the number one and 个 (gè) one of the most widespread classifiers in Mandarin, used to count many nouns, including those referring to people (albeit not in all cases). Even more than the omission of the verb "to be", the lack of

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[12] It must be noted that recent literature has questioned the lack of articles in Chinese, stating that, especially in spoken uses, words with article function are emerging "via a mechanism of tonal change. In particular, ge and zhe no longer function as classifiers or demonstratives in the unstressed neutral tone, which differentiate the classifiers gè and zhè in that the latter ones keep the original high falling tone" (Luo & Deng, 2022, p. 51).

articles appears here as a Labovian stereotype that can be (ab)used as it does not impede understanding in most cases. Limonta (2009, p. 41) also notes the lack of articles and of articulated prepositions in Chinese speakers of Italian as a second language, and she specifies that in Mandarin varying degrees of determination, rather than from articles, derive from the position of the noun.

This omission phenomenon appears frequently across the synoptic versions,[13] as can be seen in the following examples:

(4)   ST novel: a. Vital portion of letter […] seems to have traveled elsewhere (p. 730)
                    b. I speak to you for short moment (p. 812)

       ST film: c. If you will honor other room with your presence (min. 9.18)
                    d. You have had most distressing interview with lady (min. 6.51)

       TT film: f. Ricorda attentato contro me? (min. 61.30)
                    [lit. remember attack against me?]
                    g. Risposta a questa domanda è molto desiderata (min. 39.38)
                    [lit. answer to this question is much desired]

In all cases, articles are missing in all forms. While English has a rather limited range of articles ("a/an" for indefinite and "the" for definite nouns), Italian also considers masculine/feminine and singular/plural categories to establish which article to use. Furthermore, masculine and feminine are applied to objects as well as to people and animals without actual reference to gender (e.g., "the couch" is "il divano", masculine, and "the armchair" is "la poltrona", feminine), a common trait of romance languages that can make learning even more challenging for a Chinese learner. Nonetheless, article omission is the only article-related issue in Chan, even though other type of 'errors' are registered for Chinese speakers learning both English and Italian. Lay (1991, p. 54) and Limonta (2009, pp. 41–43) specify that article-related 'mistakes' include not just omission, but also misplacing and intrusion. Such mistakes may have been avoided by author and translator in order to ease audience fruition. Furthermore, different article uses can be found even within the same sentence, as can be seen in the following examples:

(5)   ST novel: a. But gentleman you know was friend of the departed lady (p. 812)
                    b. China, like the purse of a generous man, has endured much (p. 826)
                    c. We have had a good talk, Mr. Van Horn (p. 837)

       ST film: d. Did anyone in house hear noise […] the night of murder? (min. 33.06)
                    e. Hush money, given by murderer (min. 43.00)

       TT film: f. Soldi sporchi, dati da assassino (min 43.00) [see 5e]
                    g. Qual è il suo nome, prego? (min. 72.55)
                    [lit. what is the[14] your name, please?]

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[13] The use of articles follows different rules in English and in Italian. Therefore, it can happen that an omission produces a mistake in one version but not in the other, see, among others, example 5g.
[14] The article is correct in Italian.

In the ST film, there are only two cases of the article "the" being used in total (the second one will be shown later), both in the 'correct' position. The TT film has a few more articles, although still significantly less than the ST novel.

As mentioned, another common feature in Chan is the lack of interrogative inversion when asking questions. It must be noted that this inversion only exists in English among the analysed languages, as Italian and Mandarin both have different ways to signal interrogatives. Italian mainly uses an ascending intonation towards the end of the question, so that the sentence "Paolo va in banca" [lit. Paolo goes to the bank], read with an ascending intonation, will be written as "Paolo va in banca?" [lit. does Paolo go to the bank?] and will be broadly intended as a question by Italian speakers. Mandarin, on the other hand, has several question-making devices. Among them a common one is the use of particles, a basic example being 吗(ma), which has no specific translation but – placed at the end of a sentence – will turn it into a question. To use the same example, the sentence would become 保罗去银行 [Paolo/go/bank, Bǎoluó qù yínháng] as an affirmative sentence and the adding of the particle in the end would build the interrogative: 保罗去银行吗 [Paolo/go/bank/question, Bǎoluó qù yínháng ma]. In the two STs, novel and film, Chan does not always show this type of interference, but it does appear often enough to be noticeable:

(6)   ST novel: a. She told you the name? (p. 726)
                      b. You went immediately to the beach? (p. 734)

        ST film: c. You know this trouble? (min. 9.11)
                      d. Hamilton was soldier? (min. 20.17)

All cases in the examples above are yes/no questions, the main type of question where Chan shows interference. In fact, the wh- questions seem much less affected: [15]

(7)   ST novel: a. What have you been engaged in doing this evening? (p. 739)

        ST film: b. Where was body found? (min. 25.10)

All the examples above feature perfectly formulated wh- questions, although sometimes other interferences appear (missing article in 7b) and, very often, these short questions are included in less grammatical lines. In particular, 7a is a rather 'difficult' sentence to build for a learner, and is certainly among those that can be considered

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[15] Like English, Mandarin and Italian also feature wh- questions, requiring the replacement of the unknown piece of information with an interrogative pronoun. In the case of Mandarin, some examples are: 什么 [shénme, what], 哪 [nǎ, which], 谁 [shéi, who], 几 [jǐ, how many (small number)], 多少 [duōshǎo, how many (large number)] in an otherwise affirmative statement. Italian also has wh- questions, usually characterised by pronouns such as "chi" [who], "quale" [which], "cosa" [what], "quanto" [how much], "quanti" [how many] in the place of the missing information. It must be noted that many of the Italian pronouns change based on gender and/or number.

standard in ST novel Chan. It is important to note, however, that the lack of interrogative inversion does not constitute an 'incorrect' usage of Italian, and that is why most questions in TT film Chan feature other instances of interference.

To conclude this part, it is worth emphasising that the marked features did not necessarily occur in the same position in ST and TT, even if their frequency is similar. This could happen for several reasons: something that is identified as a 'mistake' in English may not be that in Italian (*e.g.*, interrogative inversion); the reproduction of a certain feature in a specific place does not read/sound natural; etc. In dubbing, lip sync and time constraints are added issues. This adds to the importance of having both individual examples and quantitative overviews, even in smaller corpora.

4.2. The 'odd one out': TT novel Chan

As noted above, the Italian version of the novel offers a profoundly different linguistic representation of the character. Chan consistently uses standard Italian. Suffice to examine a couple of examples:

(8)   TT novel: a. Permettete che mi presenti […] nonostante io non sia degno della vostra considerazione. Mi chiamo Harry Wing e sono *un* umile uomo d'affari [I am humble business man] di quest'isola. Oso troppo se chiedo di vedervi da solo? (p.16)

b. *La* parte vitale della lettera […] sembra essere passata in altre mani. [Vital portion of letter […] seems to have traveled elsewhere] (p. 47)

The ST of 8a partially reproduced above, corresponds to example 3a, while 8b corresponds to 4a. In both cases, the omission of the article marking the English version as sub-standard does not occur in the translation: the indefinite article *un* (emphasised in 8a) and the definite article *la* (in 8b) correctly reproduce the standard Italian use. All the recurring mistakes that characterise Chan's speech in English never occur in the translation, where there is no linguistic clue to reveal the Chinese origin of the character. In this respect, the novel's translator, Roberta Formenti,[16] behaves differently from the translator who worked on the dubbing. As the mistakes occurring in the cinematic TT do not concern the phonetic level but are mostly morpho-syntactic in nature, a similar characterisation of Chan's speech could have been produced for the written text – but actually was not. The choice for standard Italian may be partially due to the universal tendency of translators to adopt widely accepted language forms, and avoid marked expressions (Toury, 1995, p 268). In this case, however, this general trend sharply contrasts with the need to reproduce the marked features of the ST, which are evidently functional to the intended representation of the character. It can be assumed that for the translator this aspect was considered to be less important than the fluent correctness of the language adopted for the whole text, which in turn suggest that the Italian readership

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[16] Unfortunately, information about the translations of Biggers's novels is extremely scanty. It was not even possible to ascertain the date of first publication of *Il cammello nero*, despite inquiry by the publisher of the currently available reprint (Newton Compton).

was supposed to attach less importance to the Chinese origin of the character and therefore to be less sensitive to the "Chineseness" of the language he uses.

Apart from the standárd forms replacing in the TT the most frequent mistakes stemming from a (supposed) interference with the mother tongue of the speaker, Chan's Italian displays no features that could suggest a limited command of the language. The lexicon is rich and appropriately varied; complex syntactic structures are frequently used, with refined choice of tenses and moods, even when the spoken register would allow easier solutions. [17] Chan behaves as a learned native speaker and is often more sophisticated in his choices (especially those concerning figurative language)[18] than most of the other characters in the novel.

Yet it is important to note that the translator takes a different stance when confronted with three minor characters of Chinese origin, whose speech in the TT displays interesting substandard traits supposedly linked to their mother tongue. Chan's wife, in the first place:

(9)   TT novel: a. Ho sentito di Shelah Fane […]. *Essere* triste tragedia (lit. I heard of Shelah Fane […] to be sad tragedy)

b. Tutti continuavano a parlare di S. F. […] Credo che era molto bella. Voglio che prendi l'uomo cattivo in fretta (lit. They all continued to talk about S.F. I think she was very pretty. I want you catch the bad man quickly)

c. Vuoi altro tè? (Do you want more tea?)

Suffice to compare the literal translation of the examples above with the ST:

(10)   ST novel: a. Heah about Shelah Fane […] Plitty tellible thing.

b. All time chillun make talk, Shelah Fane […] I think mus' be velly fine woman. I want you catch bad man plenty quick.

c. Mebbe you have moah tea

Here the language used by Chan's wife is much more marked towards the lower register and displays numerous mistakes – also at the phonetic level. The omission of the verb in 10a corresponds to the use of the infinitive in 9a (*essere*), but this is the only actual mistake in the Italian version. Tenses and articles are correctly used in 9b (while they are not in 10b), and the register is rather colloquial, but not substandard. As a matter of fact, the indicative is used (*era, prendi*) where subjunctive (*fosse, prenda*) would be considered more appropriate in a formal, but not in a spoken context. While 10c is evidently marked as heavily substandard at all levels, 9c is perfectly adequate for a family conversation (in this case, a literal translation would be misleading, as it may suggest that the forms are not correct in Italian). In other words, in the TT Chan's wife makes one single mistake, using the infinitive in 9a (*essere* 'to be'), which is a stereotyped way of marking speech

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[17] See above for the mixing of correctness and stereotyped mistakes in the ST.
[18] For the analysis of figurative speech and proverbiality in the novel, see Renna and Santulli (2023).

produced by a Chinese speaker with limited command of the Italian language. The translator seems satisfied with this choice, which is the only evidence of her effort to reproduce the very marked language of the ST.

Another minor Chinese character in the novel is the cook at the victim's house:

(11)   TT novel: a. A che ora è la cena?

b. Che razza di casa *essere* questa? *Cena* deve essere mangiata appena fatta [lit. what kind of house to be this? Dinner must be eaten as soon as it is done]

c. La signorina *ha visto* orologio e ha detto che dodici minuti sono molto ritardo. Io ho detto che anche *cena* era in ritardo. Cose che capitano. [Miss has seen watch and said that twelve minutes are much delay. I said that also dinner was late. Things that happen]

ST novel: d. What time dinnah?

e. Wha' kin' house this is? Dinnah mebbe sometime plitty soon aftah while. I get dinnah ready - boss say wait - dinnah goes to hell

g. Missie look-see watch, say twelve minutes aftah eight plitty muchee time bootleggah come. I say plitty muchee time dinnah gets on table. Mebbe that can happen now if not new cook needed   heah wikiwiki

11a is perfectly correct. In this case, the translator does not adopt the "infinitive-strategy" to mark the speech nor the article-dropping (it could have been: *a che ora essere cena*), although the ST (11d) shows a strong phonetic clue of the Chinese origin of the speaker. The infinitive does occur in 11b; furthermore, the noun *cena* ('dinner') is incorrectly used without the definite article (in standard Italian: *la cena*, as 11a). Only these two mistakes occur in 11b. In 11c the lexical choice *ha visto* is inappropriate (it should be *ha guardato* 'looked at'),[19] the noun *cena* occurs without the definite article again and the expression *sono molto ritardo*, though not completely wrong per se, is inadequate in the context of the sentence. These mistakes, however, are almost negligible when compared with the language used in the ST, displaying a large variety of substandard forms, phonetic mimicking of a Chinese accent and stereotyped mistakes, which make it look like a sort of pidgin.

Finally, Sam, the "head bell-man" at the hotel:

(12)   TT novel: a. *Essere* un bel lavoro […] molte mance
b. Uomo molto elegante. Mio amico

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[19] It is worth noting that in the ST *look-see* seems like an attempt at reproducing the Chinese complement of result, which is used to express the outcome or result of an action or event. They provide additional information about the consequences or effects of the main verb, in this case "see" would be a consequence of "look", like in the common mandarin combination 看见 (kànjiàn), where 看 (kàn) can mean both "look" and "see", and 见 (jiàn) is "see" and "catch sight of".

                      c. Quando è venuto ha detto di essere stato molti anni in Cina e di parlare bene cinese. Così abbiamo chiacchierato in cantonese. Non parla molto bene, ma capisce cosa dico

                      d. Non lo so. Questa mattina ho parlato come *altro giorno* e lui mi ha guardato come uno che non capisce

                      e. Molto bizzarri […] Ma tutti danno mance

ST novel: f. Plenty fine job […] All time good tips.

                      g. Plenty fine man. Good flend to me.

                      h. Day he come, he say long time ago he live in China, knows Chinese talk plitty well. So he and I have talk in Cantonese. He not so good speaking, but he knows what I say allight.

                      i. I don't know. This moahning I speak all the same any othah day he has funny look an' say don' unnahstand.

                      l. Plenty funny […] All same give nice tips.

Sam's speech in the TT is particularly interesting. His first line is marked with the usual infinitive (*essere*), as in the examples discussed above. This functions as a sort of card introducing the character and giving the reader an easy recognisable clue of his ethnicity. The elliptic expressions in 12a (*molte mance*) and in 12b (*mio amico*) are a weak symptom of Sam being a foreigner: rather, they may appear as merely colloquial elements. 12b also includes a case of omission of the indefinite article, which is however acceptable in a spoken context (*uomo elegante* instead of *un uomo elegante*). A similar mistake occurs in 12d, though in this case the omitted article is a determinative (*altro giorno* instead of *l'altro giorno*). Apart from these few typical mistakes, Sam uses a correct Italian, showing a rather advanced ability to master complex syntactic structures and tense relations (ex. *Ha detto di essere stato molti anni in Cina* [he said he had spent many years in China], in 10c). There is a sharp contrast between his initial (stereotyped) mistakes (in 10a and 10b) and his fluent exposition in the following line (10c). The contrast is even sharper when comparing the TT with its source: as in the other two cases examined above, there are numerous marked phonetic features, combined with omission of copula and articles, and with a very poor mastering of tense relations (especially visible in 12h),

      To sum up, all the three minor Chinese character show in the TT some linguistic traits that are considered to be typical of the Italian language used by Chinese-mother tongue speakers with limited command of the foreign language. Yet, apart from a few of these stereotyped clues, they seem to master the language pretty well, in some cases in sharp contrast with the mistakes they make – which suggests that the latter are a mere gimmick to manifest linguistically their ethnic origin. On the other hand, in the ST these characters speak a very corrupted form of English, with repeated phonetic markers of interference with their Chinese mother tongue, and full of typical morpho-syntactic mistakes. The author evidently intended to characterise them as less educated than Chan, and basically unable to integrate into the American English-speaking society they live in. There is a wide gap between their proficiency and that of the protagonist who, though linguistically characterised as *alien*, is still capable of communicating clear and effective

messages, in which his Chinese origin is source of both (stereotyped) mistakes and refined oratorical values.

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to investigate the strictly linguistic aspects involved in the transmedial representation of a fictional character with a strong ethnical component. In this respect, it aimed to develop a research approach that is not frequent in this area, where socio-communicative, narrative, and multimodal issues often prevail. In our opinion, neglecting language and language variation limits the possibilities of delving into both the intentions of the authors and the expectations of the audiences. Indeed, language choices play a crucial role in the construction of a character, and in its reproduction across media and cultural contexts.

The choice of Charlie Chan as a case study made it possible to span from interlinguistic to intermedial comparison – and combine the two. The analysis of Chan's speech patterns was carried out using both a quantitative and a qualitative approach. Namely, the former offers the possibility of categorising and classifying the relevant linguistic traits, giving an overview of the most frequent issues. On the other hand, close reading and comment on individual occurrences is functional to discussing specific phenomena, exploring their possible origin and significance in the context of the different texts.

The results of our analysis show that there are important correspondences across three of the texts under scrutiny – the English novel and film (both to be considered ST) and the Italian film (TT). In them, the Minority Substandard prevails, and the numerical data reveal a very close similarity between the two film versions, while the novel is slightly less marked. Across these three versions, deviations from standard mainly concern morpho-syntax, but it is worth noting that the English cinematic version also makes use of the phonetic patterns typical of the minority. Actually, marking deviating phonetic choices in writing (as, for example, *plitty* for *pretty*) impacts strongly on the readers, and may even compromise their capacity of fluent fruition of the text. In the oral version, on the other hand, the foreign accent sounds exotic, and (combined with the 'yellowface') reinforces the representation across modes. The minority pronunciation is not adopted in the Italian film version, in favour of a standard typical of dubbing, above all in the decades here considered (so-called *dubbese*). In other words, the approach to filmic translation common in Italy well into the second half of last century prevails over the need to mark pronunciation, and thus makes it inconsistent with other aspects of the representation of the character. As for morpho-syntax, in the three versions deviations from standard norm mostly aim to reproduce interference with Chan's mother tongue, thus contributing to the construction of his ethnicity.

The fourth version taken into account for this analysis is profoundly different from the others, as the language used by Chan is flatly standard, and the typical features characterising the other three texts (both English and Italian) never occur. In this case, the translator opted for normalisation (in strict compliance with a universal translation trend), totally neglecting the ethnic representation of the main character's language – and thus

actually "under-translating". This suggests that the Italian readership was thought to be less sensitive to the language identity of the characters, even when it was functional to conveying their ethnic origin. As mentioned above, the dubbing translators, though complying with a neutral pronunciation standard, chose to characterise the speech patterns of the main character with typical morpho-syntactic structures. This was presumably in tune with the expectations of the film audience, probably prone to accept deviations from standard corresponding to the ethnic origin of the character emerging from the plot and consistent with his visual representation.

To sum up, we believe that the results of this study confirm the crucial role of language in the construction of Chan as one of the first examples of transmedial and translinguistic storytelling. The analysis of these instances of fictional language proves that language stereotypes and markers are widely exploited by authors, appealing to the capacity of their intended audience to identify and interpret them.

Given the limited space, this article could not offer a broader view on Biggers' adaptations and had to focus on a few specific traits that were deemed of particular interest for the subject and had been neglected by previous literature on the subject. Further research could explore other significant aspects concerning for example other morpho-syntactic or phonological and prosodic features (e.g., use of tense and aspect, suprasegmental traits, etc.), or compare Chan's language to that of other akin intermodal heroes, be it other famous 'immigrant' detectives like Hercule Poirot or more recent Chinese American characters, like Marvel superhero Shang-Chi. Indeed, Chan's speech patterns are an important source of information to improve our understanding of sociolinguistic mechanisms underlying the cultural representation of the Other in an era of 'Orientalist gaze'.

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