

TOPOLINO VS MICKEY MOUSE – AN UNEVEN MATCH

Some remarks on the cross-cultural reception of comics

Elana OCHSE

ABSTRACT • Known as *Mickey Mouse* in English, *Topolino* has been so relevant to Italians, both young and old, that one of the most popular Fiat car models back in the 1950s, a shaping status symbol for the upcoming post-war bourgeoisie, was named after him.

The icon developed an aesthetic, from cartoons to films to advertising, which rapidly annihilated age, gender and class boundaries, with a bit of frowning from conservative teachers. Foreigners, however, are astonished to discover that *Topolino* is not just tolerated but welcomed in most Italian homes – thoroughly nationalised and largely naturalised.

The difference lies in the verbal dimension, which in the English-speaking world is not appreciated by most adults. Why do intellectual, and even elitist Italian adults perceive the creature as *simpatico*, and why instead do educated Brits and Americans tend to consider his language as a model which you would not want your child to grow up with?

There are national discourses of education impacting not so much on the reception of the semiotics of cartoons, nor on their proposed political/social models but on lexically, syntactically and above all “socially inappropriate” language use. This resistant Gordian knot tying up the “doing” of class with discourses of parenting, education and language pragmatics will be undone in this paper by showing how the Italian *Topolino*, analysed in a translation class, reveals a degree of linguistic sophistication/creativity unknown in the English genre and text-type.

KEYWORDS • Comics; Education; Language Use; Translation; Cross-Cultural

1. Introduction

A while ago I was asked by an Italian colleague to check the students’ work in her MA Translation class. The task they had been set was to translate a *Topolino* magazine story from Italian into English. As a native speaker, I was expected to evaluate how adequately the linguistic and textual dimensions had been interpreted.

Two thoughts flashed through my mind at the time:

- 1) Why translate *Topolino* into English? Isn’t the Source Text already in English?
- 2) *Mickey Mouse* magazines were not allowed into my home when I was a child.

The translation task, or rather the texts chosen for it, were somewhat surprising, since the predominant interest in translation research and training seems to be now in the area of dubbing

and translating TV/web videos,¹ with an emphasis on transposition.² However, the opportunity to work with our apprentice translators led to a number of “discoveries” and reflections which are worth discussing. Hence, my focus here will be comics, i.e. cartoon strips, in their traditional paper format, keeping in mind Chiaro’s warning (2009: 142) that the translation of comic books differs from that of other printed texts. Since they are “made up of images and words that are closely interconnected”, a “narrative whole” of oral/aural and visual elements is produced. And narrative continuity is also emphasized by Zanettin, who elaborates on the analogy between reading a comic book and watching a film or “visual narration” (2008: 12). However, both transposition and translation involve a pre-operative phase with an eye on the contextualization of the text type at hand, and one good question to start with is: what is the status of the genre and text type, in the source and target culture respectively?

This is precisely the point I am trying to raise. Is the experience of reading *Mickey Mouse* and *Topolino* strips equally valuable across cultures? The issue seems worthwhile exploring because in this case isomorphism is apparently lacking: the cultural status of the *Topolino* /*Mickey Mouse* narrative strips, as I will try to show, is not the same across the source and our target culture. My aim, then, is to investigate the reception of these verbal-visual narratives across cultural contexts, with particular attention to the age variable and to a specific discursive domain: more precisely, I am interested in the reception of comic strips within the discourse of education and its participants, namely teachers, parents and children, across the Anglophone world – the UK and the USA in particular – and amongst Italian nationals respectively.

My argument is actually rooted in personal experience when, a newcomer to Italy and its language in the early 1970s, it was recommended to me by several well-meaning Italian friends – all of them young parents, differently positioned in terms of education, class and status – to read *Topolino* (see Figure 1) as “best practice” to become familiar with the language.

¹ Cf. Chiaro, 2009: 141. Also see Pavesi, Formentelli & Ghia, 2015; Taylor 2015; Denton & Ciampi, 2013; Taylor & Perego, 2012; Diaz-Cintas, 2015; Zanettin, 2014.

² Cf. Dusi, 2010: “[...] *transposition* carries with it the idea of something that survives the passage from one text to the other respecting differences and elements of continuity. However, in order to make this textual transformation successful, it is still necessary to keep in mind its objectives, among which that of addressing a specific target culture”.

Topolino vs Mickey Mouse – An Uneven Match



Figure 1: The Italian *Topolino* Giornale (on the left), in a tabloid format (1932-1949), was later replaced by the *Topolino* Libretto in a digest format (on the right).³

Since my reaction, in perfect consonance with the reaction of work colleagues who were also native speakers and teachers of English, was between shock and perplexity, it is interesting to explore the circumstances, both cultural and linguistic, leading to such diversity of positioning and alignment on the topic of the educational worth of *Mickey Mouse*. *Topolino* was and still is widely perceived in Italy as *the* Walt Disney creation par excellence, so much so that the Fiat car model best representing economic and social success in the post-war reconstruction was indeed named “*Topolino*”. This fact in itself speaks for the popularity of the genre and text type (see Figure 2): indeed, the icon developed an aesthetic, from cartoons to films to advertising, which rapidly annihilated age, gender and class boundaries. In so many Italian households today comic strips still mark the competence threshold between younger siblings who can read only images and elder ones who can access the whole text, when *Topolino* is not appropriated by dads wishing to relax.

³ Further details at <http://www.guidafumettoitaliano.com/guida/testate/testata/7232> and <http://www.guidafumettoitaliano.com/guida/testate/testata/7901>.



Figure 2: A popular model of the FIAT “Topolino” 500 C (1952)

Now, to justify our positioning on Mickey Mouse strips as native speakers or native members of the Anglo culture, wherein it had indeed originated, let us have a look at some frames/panels of a 1951 American edition of *Mickey Mouse* (Figure 3).

(Strip 1) Mickey Mouse and the Medicine Man by Walt Disney

(Strip 2) G (Goofy): Hey, Mickey, look whut I got!

(Strip 3) MM (Mickey Mouse): What is it?
 G: A free sample ... of some new stuff named Peppo!
 MM: Gosh, I'll get a spoon and we'll try it!

(Strip 4) G: Dibs on first taste!
 MM: Okay!
 G: Yum-yum-it tastes like choc-a-lit!
 G: YEOW! [Goofy is propelled towards the ceiling].

(Strip 5) CRASH! [depicting the lower part of Goofy crashing into the ceiling]
 MM: Now look what you did to my ceiling!
 G: Gawrsh, Mickey, 'tweren't me - it was tuh PEPPO!
 MM: Well, I'll just try it, myself!

(Strip 6) MM: ZOWIE! I'm gonna mow the lawn, paint the house, clean out the attic...
 Peppo is SUPER!

[Mickey Mouse convinces Goofy of the commercial possibilities of Peppo, so they visit the local Medicine Show. Without much ado they sign a contract with the shady-looking Peppo manager to market the miracle drug in Africa. When they finally reach their destination in spite of many hazards, they find all the village inhabitants, except for the medicine man, in a state of sleep].
 [...]

(Strip 17) MM [to a sleepy-looking doorman]: Good morning, sir! I've brought you just the thing you need – PEPPO!
 MM: One spoonful of this, sir, and you'll ... [Mickey is rudely interrupted by the local medicine man's spear].
 [...]

(Strip 28) [The medicine man tries to chase Mickey Mouse and Goofy from what he considers to be his territory, possibly because he keeps the king and his subjects drugged, thus managing to steal their riches. However, when Mickey Mouse and Goofy reach the king, they convince him to try their wonder product].

King (K): If you can make my elephant talk, I will buy Peppo, but ...
 If he doesn't talk, I will turn you over to the medicine man!
 Now bring on the elephant!
 MM: But, King! Can't you see your medicine man is nothing but a crook?

[The story has a happy ending. The elephant miraculously repeats what Mickey Mouse tells him, namely that the medicine man is a crook. The king chases the medicine man away and places a big order for Peppo. When Goofy enquires about the elephant's talking, Mickey confesses that he used ventriloquism, which he studied in the past].

Figure 3: Verbal excerpts from *Mickey Mouse and the Medicine Man* (1951)⁴

We can begin to see why so many “native” English-speaking parents did not consider Disney comic books suitable reading matter for their offspring. Beside the ungrammatical language, the stereotyping with its racist, ideologically discriminatory overtones is not educationally sound: anthropologically, here African natives are depicted as a tribe with an obese, authoritarian king. The medicine man is defined “a crook”, the person opening the door suggests a sluggish gait and expression. The very fact that Mickey Mouse and Goofy are sent off to Africa by a boss-like trader to sell the “wonder medicine” (see Figure 3) could even be interpreted as a form of ‘drug pushing’ nowadays. Parents thought this type of content matter poor and did not encourage or even openly discouraged this reading material. Later, experts and critics would in fact mention questions of political correctness.

Compared to such strong reservations on *Mickey Mouse*, was *Topolino* unquestionably innocent?

A number of relevant facts need to be foregrounded here. The Italian edition of the magazine, which started in 1928,⁵ actually preceded the American publication by a few months. Informed Italian critics, for example in the following well-known and often-quoted passage, comment on how Mussolini was keen on finding unusual depth or wisdom in *Topolino*: “varie fonti affermano che il capo del fascismo ricevette su sua richiesta il cartoonist americano. [...] Nell’occasione Mussolini parlò di *Topolino* ‘come se fosse un filosofo’.”⁶ (Barbera 2001: 66).

⁴ A fairly complete version of *Mickey Mouse and the Medicine Man* can be found at <https://the-compilers.com/2012/08/16/mickey-mouse-and-the-medicine-man/> (transcribed here on 16th November 2018).

⁵ There seems to be some disagreement about the actual year in which *Mickey Mouse / Topolino* were first published. Tosti (2011: 3) states that “la prima pubblicazione al mondo dedicata al personaggio fu realizzata in Italia, nel 1928” and (op. cit., 22) “*Topolino*, edito in Italia a partire dal 1928, fu in assoluto la prima pubblicazione mondiale dedicata al personaggio di casa Disney”. In 1928 *Steamboat Willie*, the first Disney film with synchronized images and sound and featuring Mickey Mouse, was projected in New York. As of 1930 Mickey Mouse cartoon strips started appearing in serial form in newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic, for example, in *L’illustrazione del popolo* in Italy. The year 1932 is when *Mickey Mouse Magazine* was first published in the USA (but only distributed in department stores and movie theatres where Disney films were shown). The Italian edition of *Topolino Giornale* appeared one month earlier.

⁶ My translation: Different sources state that the Fascist leader of his own accord received the American cartoonist. [...] On that occasion Mussolini spoke of Mickey Mouse ‘as if he were a philosopher’.

Mussolini was a Mickey Mouse fan – according to popular myth, the Italian leader had his own projection room, where he and his family watched Mickey Mouse films, and even received sympathizer Walt Disney twice in the 1930s.⁷ Interestingly, in 1938 the Fascist regime banned all American comic books except for *Mickey Mouse* alias *Topolino*.⁸ According to Carlo Scaringi⁹ the reasons for this lay not only in the love of the Mussolini family for Mickey Mouse but also in editorial and commercial interests as well as political/ideological affinities between Mussolini and Disney.

Mickey was extinguished from Disney's cartoon films in 1952 as a temporary measure and was never resurrected, but continued to live on in Disney's comic strips. On the Italian side, the best-selling weekly – first in a newspaper format and later as a booklet (see Figure 1) – continued to be issued in a weekly and monthly format and to this day survives in its weekly “libretto” format.¹⁰

2. Mickey, Topolino and the “speak as you write” ideology of education

In the experience of my generation, it was not so much the semiotics of cartoons, nor their proposed political/social models that were negatively received in “Anglo” discourses of education but their linguistic surface, notably their lexically, syntactically and above all socially and “educationally inappropriate” language choices. The strength of “prohibitionism” that we experienced as children and adolescents of course reminds one of Basil Bernstein's realisation that academically successful children were exposed to “socially appropriate” codes from a very early age, but more of this later. In contrast, my own experience of the Italian *Topolino* indeed revealed, as we shall see, a degree of linguistic sophistication/creativity unknown in the English genre and text-type.

⁷ Barbera (2001, 8) makes mention of meetings between Walt Disney and Mussolini in 1932 and 1937. This was described in more detail by Cesare Medail in *Corriere della Sera* (1st October 1995).

⁸ On 21st November 1938 as a result of Tommaso Martinetti's "Manifesto di Bologna" about the education of children the Minculpop [Fascist government's Ministero della Cultura Popolare] decided to ban all American comics. The only exception was Disney's characters “per il loro lavoro artistico e per la loro sostanziale moralità” [“For their value as works of art and for their morality”, my translation]. When Mussolini was handed (by Ezio Maria Gray) a list of comics to ban, he agrees to banning all “Eccetto Topolino” [“Except for Topolino”]. Topolino comics continued to be published in Italy until a few months after the US joined the war (Feb. 1942).

⁹ Scaringi, Afnews 10th November 2011.

¹⁰ A brief outline of the Disney comic book production, collaboration and reception on either side of the Atlantic might be useful. Mass media expert Andrea Tosti describes Mickey Mouse's graphic and psychological changes which to a large extent paralleled historical and social developments in the United States: at the time of the Great Depression Mickey was depicted as a poor down-and-out (reminiscent of Chaplin's Little Tramp), dressed in boyish red shorts. However, in just over a decade he was transformed into a middle class character of the Roosevelt New Deal era. He is considered to be one of the most significant testimonials of the twentieth century: “Pochi personaggi sono stati [...] capaci di raccontare, in prima persona e attraverso tutta una serie di adattamenti grafici, narrativi e spesso ideologici, il succedersi di mode, periodi storici, manie, correnti di pensiero...” (Tosti, 2011) [“Few fictional characters were capable of narrating in the first person and with a large number of graphic, psychological and often ideological adjustments, how fashions, historical periods, manias and trends of thought came about in rapid succession”, my translation].

Let us now look at some examples¹¹ taken from a *Mickey Mouse* comic book¹² (Figure 4).

Pluto the Racer	
1)	Mickey Mouse (MM) Gee! I'm sure glad to be home! Minnie Mouse (mm) I should think so! I never thought we'd get back alive from Umbrellastan!
2)	(MM) My goodness! That's something new! [indicating a poster advertising a dog race] Yeh! They musta built it while we were away!
3)	Horace (H) Lo, Mickey! Hope you're not thinkin' of enterin' that knee-action spaniel in a race! (MM) He's not a spaniel! He's a hound dog practic'ly pure-blooded!
4)	(MM) An' if y' think Pluto can't run, I will enter him An' he'll show you! (H) Haw! Haw! Haw! This is gonna be the laff o' the year!
5) - 6) - 7) - 8)	Thank y' sir! You'll see a swell race!
9)	If you're goin' to win that race, y' gotta train! C'mon – step on it!
10) - 11) -	
12)	Doggone it, Pluto! Who's trainin' for the race, you or me?
13)	Soon as I get over the hill you let 'im loose!
14) - 15) - 16) - 17) - 18) -	
19)	Gee! If he runs on the race track like he's goin' now, he's a cinch to win!
20)	Pluto (P) Arf! Arf! Arf! (MM) F' gosh sakes!
21) -	
22)	Goin' to the race, Horace? (H) You bet I am! I'm just spoilin' for a good laugh!
23) -	
24)	Thugs (TT): First time you ever raced, ain't it, son? (MM) Uh, yes, it is! (TT) We jus' thought we'd wise yuh up to sumpthin'!
25) - 26) - 27) -	
28)	(TT) Yuh see – yuh forgot to put lights on this pup's harness! (MM) Lights? In the daytime? (TT) Yeah! That's awful important!
29)	Sure thing! It'll be plenty dark when he gets to the finish line! Haw! Haw! Haw! Oh boy! Har! Har! That's a wow!
30) -	

Figure 4: Dialogue from *Pluto the Racer*.

For reasons of space, only the dialogues/frames containing non-standard grammar and spelling have been included. The use of forms such as *laff*, *gonna*, *gotta*, *musta*, *yuh* and *sumpthin'*, definitely instances of a colloquial spoken register and slang, must have been frowned upon by all those concerned with a negative influence on young language learners coping with the difficulties of English spelling, let alone sociolinguistic judgments on learning “appropriate” language. The colloquial abbreviation of gerunds and present participles (*thinkin'*, *enterin'*, *goin'*, *spoilin'*¹³) as well as *practic'ly* and *'im*, although clearly justified by the need to “visualize” spoken language, must as well have been looked down upon by those sharing a concern for their offspring not to deviate from the prestigious standard variety of the language. As for *'im*, for example, one can easily imagine how adult speakers of Cockney and other

¹¹ My selection of examples was purely eclectic. After examining vast numbers of cartoon strips from different periods, I chose to concentrate on and qualitatively analyse those which in my opinion proved my thesis of the uneven match between Topolino and Mickey Mouse.

¹² *Pluto the Racer* by Floyd Gottfredson (1935-1936).

¹³ The use of *I'm just spoilin' for a good laugh* (Frame 22) may look like modern day slang but the expression was already found in the mid-1800s. *To be spoiling for* usually collocates with some altercation (e.g. a fight).

British dialects featuring the “dropped H” would actually be at the same time proud of their local variety of English and yet disagree with texts which could possibly offer the wrong model of language use to children unaware of the difference between social contexts where the use of dialect is appropriate (or even imperative) and social contexts, such as the classroom, where use of the standard norm is a prerequisite for success. Adult speakers most likely rejected the educational risks of exposing their offspring to non-standard varieties.

I will now go back to my initial surprise with *Topolino*’s landslide success in Italy. Here were all these Italian parents regularly buying and sharing with their children their weekly issue of the magazine!

With time I was able to appreciate my Italian friends’ enthusiasm about *Topolino* as a language-learning tool for foreigners, irrespective of age. A brief glance at some *Topolino* comic book frames will show that there was very little of the slangy expressions and “sloppy” spelling of the American editions, a case of “write as you speak”, which would not have been of much use to me as an adult learner of Italian if *Topolino* had paralleled such language choices.

Figure 5 shows a few examples (with my translations) taken from Romano Scarpa’s.¹⁴ *Topolino e l’enigma di Brigaboom*. The language is informal and sprinkled with onomatopoeic transcriptions (*Aah! Yep! Fiuuh!*), which provides a colloquial flavor, emphasized by the exaggerated use of exclamation marks.

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topolino (T) Avventure e pericoli... finite, Bruto! Aah! Adventures and dangers Something of the past, Bruto! Aaah! • Bruto (B)¹⁵ Più nessuna preoccupazione al mondo! Yep, Yep! <i>No more worries in the world! Yep, yep!</i> • (T) Aah! Occuparsi solo di se stessi! <i>Aah! Only ourselves to think about!</i> • (B) Che sollievo, Topolino! Fiuuh! <i>What a relief, Mickey! Phew! [...]</i> • (T) Come innovazione promozionale è un po’ troppo efficace! Ti pare, Bruto?! <i>As a promotional gimmick it is a bit too effective! What do you say, Bruto?</i> • (B) Di’ pure negativo! Gasp! You might as well say negative! Gasp! • (A neighbour) Lo spot fantascientifico non poteva non fare colpo! Quel pericoloso prodotto è ben lanciato! <i>The science fiction ad inevitably had to be a hit! That dangerous product has been launched effectively!</i> • (T) Ma si tratta di Spray deleterio per l’ozono! Devo farmi sentire! But it is a spray which is harmful for the ozone [layer]! I must make my voice heard! (etc). |
|--|

Figure 5: *Topolino e l’enigma di Brigaboom*.

In this extract we do not only find standard Italian language use but also a positive social message – for children and their parents alike – namely the conservation of the earth’s atmosphere by protecting the ozone layer.

¹⁴ Romano Scarpa (1927-2005) is considered to be one of the best Italian illustrators and authors of Disney comic strips. This story (“Mickey Mouse and the enigma of Brigaboom”) originally appeared in *Topolino* in serial form in 1990 (Nos.1779-1991) and was later re-published in 1992 by Comic Art as a complete work for fans.

¹⁵ Bruto, a lively bird-like creature, who retained the original Italian name and has no English name. He is Mickey Mouse’s sidekick in numerous Italian stories.

But was *Topolino* so well received in Italian households *and* classrooms?

Not everyone viewed *Topolino* with the same unquestioning enthusiasm. Since the 1960s conferences had been held (e.g. in Verona in 1969) and books written about the educational/ideological merits and dangers of the Disney production. So the popularity of the original Italian *Topolino* edition was not so uncontroversial, after all.

After World War II, and in particular in the 1965-1978 period, a fair number of Italians regarded the USA with a certain suspicion: from their point of view the Disney production was seen as propagating “the American way of life” and representing an artificial picture of social relations. This resistance to what Disney stood for was mainly based on an anti-capitalist ideology.¹⁶ On the other hand, more moderate, conservative Italians passively regarded Disney as a master of entertainment, a neutral modern story-teller. In the long run the latter position won.

More significant for my present discussion is the attitude of teachers. Traditionally the mission of language teaching was identified with the teaching of literary masterpieces. Comics in general were rejected as low-brow reading, in contrast with the focus on formal registers to the exclusion of informal and especially of colloquial oral codes.

It was precisely this negative evaluation of comic strips as a low-level oral model so distant from the language of the classroom that reveals how Italian educators were not so far distant from the sociolinguistic distinction, much more extensively practiced in the English-speaking educational sphere, which for a long time made my own peers and me naïve perpetuators of the superiority of the linguistic code to which in 1971 Basil Bernstein attributed the apparent school failures of children from a proletarian background.

In the course of my documentation about Italian *Topolino* strips I came to realize that not all Disney stories could be transposed successfully, owing to cultural differences. On the one hand, some stories could indeed be considered to be ‘trans-national’ in terms of topicality and cultural contents. One example of the latter is Scarpa’s previously-mentioned *Topolino e l’enigma di Brigaboom* (1990) with its strong ecological message against the use of spray cans and drugs. In *Topolino e la Regina d’Africa* (1983)¹⁷ Scarpa makes clear reference to the imperialistic nature of the aspirations of white outsiders in Africa. *Topolino: Obiettivo Luna*,¹⁸ not the first *Topolino* comic book to deal with space travel, was published soon after the first Moon Landing on 21st July 1969.

On the other hand, some stories were comprehensible only to readers with a specific Italian cultural or linguistic background. *Topolino in ... Pista!* (1986, with illustrations by Cavazzano and the text by Marconi) is based on collaboration between the Walt Disney Company Italia SpA, RAI (the Italian state TV) and a very popular Italian actor/comedian *cum* film director of the time, Maurizio Nichetti. Owing to highly specific cultural and linguistic references, this comic strip was clearly not suitable for translation into other languages. Others included *Topolino e il panettone*¹⁹ *dell’Imperatore* (1969) and *Paperino e la scoperta dell’Italia* (1956),²⁰ to mention just a few.

¹⁶ Cf. Barbera (2001: 7).

¹⁷ This story was re-published in Latin in 1986 by the European Language Institute of Recanati with the title *Michaël Musculus et Regina Africa* (‘Michaël Musculus’ is what Mickey Mouse is called in Latin).

¹⁸ Published in “Almanacco Topolino” N° 164, August 1970, with illustrations by Carpi.

¹⁹ “Panettone” is the traditional Italian Christmas cake.

²⁰ A parody of Totò, Peppino e la malafemmina (1956).

For some reason the text handled by the previously-mentioned translation class, *Topolino e la rivolta delle didascalie* (2011, original Italian text and drawings by Casty),²¹ had not been translated into English but into eight other languages.²² In my opinion there was no real reason for not offering English-speaking readers this story, which could have been translated as “Mickey Mouse and the Caption Revolt”. It deals with a subtle metatextual satire of comic books in which the captions,²³ so largely present in comic frames, attack the very comic characters. Only one Italian expression, namely “latte solare” (sun lotion) would have had to be re-worked extensively because the pun “latte” (milk) was then satirized in “I didn’t know there were cows on the sun!”.²⁴

3. Changing ideologies: appreciating the social complexity of orality and sign

Propensity towards accepting spoken language models gradually made its way amongst teachers in Italy,²⁵ culminating in the so-called “Manifesto delle dieci tesi per l’educazione linguistica democratica”. Edited by linguist Tullio De Mauro in 1975,²⁶ it marked the beginning of a new era, that is to say the acceptance of orality and its progress from the media to the classroom, parallel to its success as a focus of linguistic research. Scholars started exploring “l’italiano neo-standard”²⁷ and devoting attention to the semiotics of media discourse, to the sociolinguistics of diastatic varieties of Italian, to the language of youth and the language and discourse of special domains, including the educational community. This new focus on orality also involved teachers of English as a foreign language and translators, who increasingly appreciated the synergy of language and sign in speech balloons in comics.

The combination of sounds and movements, creating a truly kinetic effect on the printed page, can be seen as unique to comic strips. Italians had become used to exclamations such as *GOSH* or noises such as *GRR...*, attitude markers such as *GRUNT* and *SIGH*, which they most often pronounced with the Italian vowels so that “grunt” invariably became [grunt] and “sigh” [sig], a domestication process in which “squeak” became [skwi:k] or “squik” and *SCRICC* (Figure 6).

- Maintaining the transcription of English “sounds” (but pronounced phonetically as one would do in Italian): *GULP*, *BANG*, *MUMBLE*, *PUFF*, *PANT*, *THUMP*, *SMACK*, *SLAM*, *SIGH*
- With an Italian “transcription” of the English sounds: *Scriscccc*, *GLOM*, *SGULP*, *UAO* (wow),

²¹ Casty is the pseudonym of Andrea Castellan (1967 -) who has been drawing for *Topolino* since 2003.

²² Brazil, 2012: *A Revolta Dos Quadrinhos*; Denmark, 2014: *Tekstkassernes oprør*; Finland, 2014: *Tekstilaatikkojen kapina*; Germany, 2014: *Rebellion der Textkästchen*; Norway, 2014: *Tekstboksenes opprør*; the Netherlands, 2014: *De opstand van de tekstblokjes*; Poland, 2014: *Bunt napisów*; Sweden, 2014: *Serieskyltarnas uppror*.

²³ E.g. however..., but..., meanwhile..., and so..., a little farther away..., however ..., in the meantime..., etc.

²⁴ In Italian *sun lotion* is called “latte solare” (sun milk). The remark “I didn’t know there were cows on the sun!” would clearly have been lost on English readers while Italians would have found the pun rather clever.

²⁵ The trend was particularly assertive within language associations such as G.I.S.C.E.L. (Gruppi di Intervento e Studio nel Campo dell’Educazione Linguistica), LEND (Lingua e Nuova Didattica) and SLI (Società di Linguistica Italiana).

²⁶ Cf. Dardano 1994: 375-377.

²⁷ Cf. Berruto 1987, Dardano 1994: 371-374.

- Volume of sound (indicated by font size): SBAM, BOOM
- Length of sound: EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE
- Silence (ellipsis) (-----)
- State of bewilderment and/or surprise (? !)

Figure 6: Examples of onomatopoeia found in *Mickey Mouse / Topolino*

However, in spite of the frequent exclamations, onomatopoeia and “domesticated” sounds, which had been dismissively treated by teachers devoted to the perpetuation of the traditional “speak as you write” approach, colloquialism was indeed mitigated in the Italian version. In my research I have found very few colloquialisms in *Topolino*. When I submitted a few “colloquial” examples for evaluation to a colleague, an Italian native speaker and linguist, she pointed out that they were in fact situationally appropriate and even elegant – albeit somewhat archaic – enunciations: *Bubbole* (nonsense), *Zitto lì e cuccia!* (Shut up and keep still), [...] *Topolino mi ha messo nel sacco!* (Mickey has got the better of me),²⁸ *Siete spacciato, amico mio!* (You’re done for, my friend!), *Beccati questo!* (Take this!), “*bamboccio*” (cute, big, good for nothing babe), “*panzone*” (Fat belly).²⁹

Further, one of the most interesting features of the Italian verbal text since the very beginning of the Italian official edition is their preference for standard language interspersed with sophisticated lexis (Figure 7) and, obviously a seductive trait for high schoolers and adults, subtle wordplay inviting readers to activate encyclopedic knowledge and even a sophisticated literary hypertext, enjoying a feast of parody.

LINGUISTIC SOPHISTICATION IN TOPOLINO

UNA VOLTA HO VISTO UN FILM IN CUI TUTTI VIVEVANO IN UN MONDO ILLUSORIO
CREATO DALLE MACCHINE! (I once saw a film in which everybody lived in a make-believe
world created by machines)

QUESTE COSE NON POSSONO SUCCEDERE, NELLA REALTÀ! (Things like these cannot
happen in real life!)

IO CONTINUO A NON CREDERCI, MA CREDO CHE FAREMO MEGLIO A... FILARE! (I
still can't believe it but I think we had better ... scam!)

PER UN SOFFIO NON CI SIAMO FATTI MALE! (We have avoided getting hurt by a hair's
breadth!)

Figure 7: Standard Italian interspersed with sophisticated lexis

Thus, for example, Alessandro Manzoni’s *I Promessi Sposi* (translated: “Engaged to be married” or “The Betrothed”), a literary masterpiece and setbook in Italian high schools, was parodied in *I Promessi Topi* (1989). The beginning of *The Betrothed Mice*³⁰ story clearly echoes the incipit of *I Promessi Sposi* which has been a must for the generations that have grown up memorizing “quel ramo del lago di Como...”. Similarly *L’Inferno di Topolino*,³¹ a

²⁸ *Topolino: Obiettivo Luna* (Almanacco Topolino N. 164, August 1970).

²⁹ *Topomouche: Storia di amori e spada* (Disney Anni d’oro 2011).

³⁰ The re-textualization of the famous incipit is even more faithful to the original in *I Promessi Paperi* (*The betrothed ducks*, 1976)

³¹ Published between 1949 and 1950 (Nos. 7-12). Texts by Guido Martina and illustrations by Angelo Bioletti.

parody of the Inferno in Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*, activates a certain literary background on the part of its adult readers who re-contextualize their previous knowledge. Or, on the contrary, it may offer youngsters a "soft" introduction to Dante.³²

However, the increasing propensity of the teaching community to build critical awareness of language and its social uses led critics to identify and highlight processes of typification, if not stereotyping, and the crude assignment of compartmentalized, set social roles in the social dynamics of comic strips.

So Topolino and his *ingroup* associates, Pluto and Bruto, move on the scene, interacting in adversarial fashion with, for example, Gambadilegno (Peg Leg Pete, Big Black Pete or Black Pete) who speaks the language of the *outgroup*,³³ in this case the criminals. The latter impersonate group deviation from the accepted social and legal norms, without any depth into the social making of deviance. Gambadilegno and his Bassotti gang were born and will remain deviant by authorial choice, which the reader is to accept. Their worldview and their agency is frozen and so is their language. Facial features, body features: something which is even "Lombrosiano"³⁴ and of course goes back a long way in studies of physiognomy which associated, for example, given skull shapes and other physical traits to idiocy and evil.

4. Conclusion

The language of balloons in the Italian edition of *Topolino* carries English sounds which have become successfully naturalized in Italian: *GULP!* and *GASP!* have become part – even a productive part – of the lexicon in colloquial Italian.

But there is more than such frequent exclamations to the entertainment offered in the verbal text. The narrative text and even the one-letter and one-sound balloons can be interpreted at different levels: *Topolino* induces readers to appreciate a diversity of registers, as well as to grasp and become aware of complex wordplay and even parody. Especially in the narrative segments the verbal text is predominantly consistent with standard language and an informal style with interspersed formal and even sophisticated locutions.

The sociolinguistic limitations of the English edition have never been supinely accepted in the Italian edition. In spite of the fixity and typification inherent in comic strip characters, the message of the Italian *Topolino* not infrequently carries positive social concerns and even echoes of "high-brow" literature.

In educational terms, the match between Mickey Mouse and Topolino has never been an even one.

³² The Disney "Classici della Letteratura" included 40 titles among which: *Paperino e il Conte di Montecristo* (Donald Duck and the Count of Montecristo), *Paperodissea*, *Paperino Don Chisciotte*, *Topolino e la Guerra dei mondi*, *I racconti di Edgar Alan Top*, *Relitto e Castigo*.

³³ For the notions of *ingroup/outgroup* and *ingroupness/outgroupness*, see Duszak: 2002: 6.

³⁴ Cesare Lombroso (1835 – 1909) was an Italian criminologist, physician and founder of the Italian School of Positivist Criminology. According to his theory of anthropological criminology criminality was inherited, so a person was "born criminal" and could be identified as such by particular physical traits. The Museum of Criminal Anthropology, originally known as the "Museum of Psychiatry and Criminology", was founded by Lombroso in 1898 in Torino, Italy, to document his beliefs and research to prove that criminality was reflected in specific physiognomies.

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