

## Do Special Powers Come with a Special Language? The Adaptation of Spider-Man Comics for an Italian Audience

By Diana Bianchi (University of Perugia, Italy)

### Abstract & Keywords

#### English:

In the history of comic books, Marvel superheroes represented a major innovation compared to traditional superhero comics such as *Superman*, with stories characterized by higher 'realism' in terms of setting and psychology and misfit superheroes having to grapple with everyday problems. Spider-Man was, arguably, the best embodiment of this new type of comics hero. He was also the first 'flawed' adolescent superhero, with typical teenage problems and an ironic and flippant language that was in tune with the times and deeply resonated with its target readers (Muszynski, 2016). Translated into Italian in 1970 as 'L'Uomo Ragno', Spider-Man's language represents a particular challenge for translators, both from a linguistic and a cultural perspective. Considering the different contexts and the problems inherent in the translation of comics as a genre (Kaindl, 1999; Borodo, 2015; Zanettin, 2018a, 2018b), this paper examines the way in which the American Spider-Man became 'L'Uomo Ragno', focusing in particular on the rendering of its verbal features and the repackaging of the comic books into a product suitable for a new audience.

**Keywords:** Marvel Comics, paratexts, Spider-Man, slang, surperhero comics, teenage language

### 1. Introduction[1]

On 1 August 1962, Spider-Man[2] made his first appearance on issue 15 of the US comics magazine *Amazing Fantasy*, published by Marvel Comics. The alter-ego of a teenager[3] named Peter Parker, Spider-Man was a very unusual superhero, so much so that his first adventure had been published as a sort of experiment in a magazine that was on the brink of folding. Little did his creators, writer Stan Lee and artist Steve Ditko, know that he would become one of the most famous characters in the history of comic books, a key protagonist of the so-called Marvel multiverse, appearing not only in comic books but also in TV series and many film adaptations. Defined by film critic Peter Bradshaw (2021) as "the most powerful teenage kid in pop-culture history", Spider-Man's phenomenal success[4] pre-dates the cases of other fictional teenage heroes who also obtained a large following thanks to their ability to strike a chord within their youthful fans; the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the *Harry Potter* novels and films fall into this category.

The success of these youth icons is generally based on their capacity to provide convincing characters who young audiences can identify with. Language plays an important part in this process as studies in the area of teen consumption of popular culture, particularly TV series, have shown (Davis and Dickinson, 2004; Adams, 2003; Overbey and Preston-Matto 2002; Saltidou and Stamou, 2014). This is also true when popular artifacts directed at youth are translated, as failure to 'reconstruct' a convincing dialogue in the target text may disrupt the target audience's experience and appreciation of the work. This area has been particularly explored within the field of AVT studies, with close attention being paid to the way in which the features of 'fictional' youth talk has been translated in other linguistic and cultural contexts (Bianchi, 2008; Fischer and Wirf Naro, 2012; Ranzato, 2015; Ciampi 2019).

Since the success of Spider-Man was partly based on the innovative language used in the comics, the question arises as to how such language was translated into Italian when the comic started to be published by Editoriale Corno in Italy in 1970. In this paper we will answer this question by analyzing the first twenty issues of the Italian Spider-Man to shed light on the way in which the verbal component of the comic has been rendered into Italian, focusing in particular on the language used by teenage characters.

At the same time, to better contextualize the results of the analysis we will also look at the paratextual elements, focusing in particular on the covers to get a better understanding of the way in which Spider-Man was introduced to an Italian audience at a time when Marvel comics were mostly unknown in Italy. Studies about the translation of comics have shown that contextual elements play a key role in the way in which comics are transferred into another language and culture, with interventions that can take place both at the visual and verbal level (Kaindl, 1999; Zanettin, 2018a; 2018b; Borodo, 2015). Considering that Spider-Man comics came to Italy almost ten years after their debut in the US, at a time when the country was on the brink of a decade of social and political unrest,[5] it has to be asked in what way Spider-Man comics fit within this context.

We begin with a discussion of how the original Spider-Man was strongly tied discursively to the figure of the teenager which had emerged as a distinct cultural presence in the US in the 1950s and then we show how this strong bond was diluted in the Italian version, both at the paratextual and textual level. The changes are then explained as the result of differences in the target culture genre conventions and in relation to the historical circumstances in which the translations took place.

### 2. Marvel Comics' new superheroes and the representation of teenagers

Marvel's new superheroes comics arrived at a time when American society was going through a period of uncertainty and disillusionment with scientific and technological progress. As Bradford W. Wright notes "Marvel spoke to the anxieties of the atomic age" (2001: 202), creating comics in the late 1950s and early 1960s that revolutionized the image of superheroes, hitherto dominated by DC Comics and characters such as Superman and Batman. Starting with *The Fantastic Four* in 1961 and *The Incredible Hulk* in 1962, Marvel introduced superheroes with an openly anti-heroic connotation (Reynolds 1993: 84), as flawed characters often struggling with their super powers and having the same problems as ordinary people. Nobody was more representative of this new type of hero than Spider-Man, an orphan raised by his aunt and uncle, a brilliant but shy high school student bullied by his classmates, continuously burdened by financial problems and troubled love stories, someone who, as Marc DiPaolo states, "is the quintessential loser-hero" (2011: 104). As a matter of fact, the origin of the character himself is fraught with moral doubts. After being bitten by a radioactive spider and acquiring his super powers (extraordinary strength and agility, and a 'spider' sense for danger), Spider-Man's main thought is on how to exploit such powers to resolve his financial problems. He starts fighting for money and it is during a TV show that he becomes indirectly responsible of his Uncle Ben's death. Asked by a police officer to help catch a thief, he refuses on the grounds that "From now on I just look out for number one—that means—me!" only to find out later that the thief is his uncle's killer (*Amazing Fantasy* 1962: 8). It is this event that led to the realization that "in this world with great power there must also come -- great responsibility" as the narrative caption in the last panel of the first Spider-Man story states and which will prompt the character's resolve to fight evil.

Like other Marvel characters, Spider-Man treads upon a much more slippery moral ground than that of previous superheroes who were basically embodiments of traditional American values and reassuring figures with a very clear idea of the difference between good and evil. In DC Comics, for instance, "There was nothing ambiguous about the hero's character, cause or inevitable triumph" and DC superheroes "were always in control, rarely impulsive, and never irrational (...). They were impossibly altruistic. Helping humanity was their only motivation" (Wright 2001: 184 and 185). Spider-Man, on the other hand, has a much more unstable status in the social world of the comic, where public opinion is often very divided about him, with some seeing him as a force for good and others as a public menace[6]. This representation of Spider-Man seems to point to the ambivalent representation of youth that had characterized Western society since the 1950s. While popular culture had seen the emergence of the rebellious and sometimes delinquent youth, represented in cinema by icons such as James Dean and Marlon Brando, and in music by Elvis Presley, marketing forces had identified young people, i.e. teenagers, as exploitable targets for consumption (Palladino 1996). In particular, teenagers had acquired a "recognized cultural identity" (Davis and Dickinson 2004) with their own specific fashion, music and also language. Usually defined as 'slang'[7], 'youth language' is key to identity not only because it contributes to separate young and adults along the age axis, but also because it fulfils a number of other functions, such as signaling that one belongs to the 'right tribe' and challenging the established authority (Dalzell 1996: xii). The subversive power of youth slang became evident in the 1950s with the rise of rock'n'roll and its association with black culture and speech. Although the vernacular spoken by black musicians had started to "migrate" in popular youth culture since the late 1930s (Dalzell, 1996:48), it was with rock'n'roll that it gained wider circulation thanks to the rapid success of the new genre among teenagers whose rapt listening included both black musicians and white performers adopting the style of black speech, Elvis Presley being the most notable case.

Given these contextual elements, it is not surprising that when Stan Lee tried to recapture teenage readers after the crisis of comic books in the 1950s, he used language as one of the key means by which the new superheroes could appeal to a young audience. In contrast with the bland and "carefully measured sentences" spoken by DC superheroes like Superman and Batman (Wright 2001: 185), Marvel's characters speak a language that not only sounds 'real' but also allows them to better connect with their readers. Spider-Man, "a wisecracking teen-ager whose cheeky lines of dialogue were never more noticeable than while he was fighting a villain" (Muszynski 2016: 341), represented the perfect point of reference not only for adolescent readers but also for college students who were going through the changes of 1960s counter-culture and saw Spider-Man as another symbol of rebellion against the establishment[8].

Considering that Spider-Man comics appeared in Italy right at the time of the students protest in high schools and universities (Lumley 1990), it is worth asking whether this oppositional connotation was retained or whether the Marvel hero was represented in a different way through translation.

### 3. Spider-Man goes to Italy: repackaging Spider-Man as L'Uomo Ragno

#### 3.1 Negotiating between source culture and target culture conventions: the Italian Spider-Man's covers

The first issue of the Italian Spider-Man was published by Editoriale Corno[9] in April 1970, with the title *L'Uomo Ragno*,[10] a literal translation of *Spider-Man* that probably capitalized on readers' previous knowledge of masked superheroes, for instance it recalled *L'Uomo Mascherato*, the Italian version of *Phantom*, which had circulated in Italy since 1936. This choice already hints at the main translation strategy adopted for the Italian Spider-Man, which, on the whole, remained quite close to the original American comics, but also shows the influence of Italian genre conventions in relation to the publication of comics. For instance, unlike other Italian superhero comics the publisher kept the classic US format for comic books, as *L'Uomo Ragno* was a 17x26cm stapled booklet (Brambilla 2013). The pages, however, were not fully coloured as in the American original but alternated with black and white images, something that was typical of Italian comics at the time and which was due, as the editor explained to a reader in the letter page of issue 6 of

*L'Uomo Ragno*[11], to issues of cost. However, since the Italian Spider-Man became fully coloured from issue 50, published in March 1972, we may presume that by that time the comic had been successful enough to justify this glossier format.

While the overall translation strategy appears to have been one of fidelity, some changes were still made, particularly in relation to the covers. A comparison of the Italian and American covers[12] has shown that the Italian ones strongly resemble the originals as they generally retain the main composition of the visual elements, i.e. the central image, usually showing Spider-Man fighting one of his adversaries, and the position of the cover blurbs, namely caption boxes and speech balloons. Figure 1 shows a typical *Spider-Man* cover, with the title "The Amazing Spider-Man" at the top and the central image surrounded by sales pitch captions and speech balloons. In the Italian edition (Figure 2) some visual changes involved graphic effects on the cover: the slightly gothic graphic style used in the American issues that shows the name *The Amazing Spider-Man* in block upper case letters, slightly curved downwards and placed at the centre of a spiderweb (Figure 1), is replaced by a simpler and more linear title as *L'Uomo Ragno* is written in big block upper case letters and without a spiderweb in the background (Figure 2).



Figure 1: *Spider-Man* 3  
© Marvel Comics



Figure 2: *L'Uomo Ragno* 3  
© Marvel Comics

Also, in the first seventeen issues, Spider-Man's head in the top left corner was replaced by a coloured box containing information such as the price, the issue number, etc. While these changes may appear marginal, they, nonetheless, have an effect since "comics are seen before they are read" (Zanettin 2014: online). Spider-Man's head and the spiderweb on the cover reiterate the identity of the main character and provide cohesion with textual elements as they can be seen as visual translations of Spider-Man's nicknames "Web-Head" and "Web-Slinger".

An important change involves the verbal content of the cover blurbs. In the original comics these are used to create a strong advertising effect, with "outrageous sales pitches" (Wright 2011: 217) i.e. generally hyperbolic and tongue-in-cheek statements about the story to come, and speech balloons related to the characters in the central scene. This was part of the so-called "Marvel style", built around the idea of a "hip happening" (ibid.), which had the effect of creating an immediate connection with the readers, drawn by the playful tone and the lively scenes on the cover. In the Italian comics this verbal material has been completely replaced with simpler statements which have a commercial-informative function and caption boxes and other textual 'containers' are used for informative-promotional material. In the first issue of *Spider-Man* in Italy (Figure 3), for instance, they inform the reader that the issue has stickers and posters. As a result, the Italian covers appear much less 'busy' than the original ones, their aspect is simpler and neater and more in line with the typical cover style of other Italian comics.[13]



Figure 3: The cover of the first issue of *L'Uomo Ragno*  
© Marvel Comics

This domesticating strategy may have been more in line with Italian paratextual conventions and perhaps it was chosen because readers would be more familiar with this visual style. However, such changes, apart from reducing the playful aspect of the comics, sometimes caused problems of coherence between the visual and the verbal elements. This happens especially when caption boxes and speech balloons with verbal elements closely associated to the visuals are replaced with elements unrelated to the visual scene. For instance, in *Spider-Man* 5, the cover shows Spider-Man fighting against Doctor Doom who, while throwing some type of lethal ray against the hero, challenges him with the words "This is your finish Spider-Man! If the Fantastic Four themselves could not stop me, what chance have you?" (SM, 5). These words were replaced in Italian by "Il Dottor Destino", a labelling statement that seems uttered by Doctor Doom and which is at odds with what is happening in the scene (Figure 4 and 5).

In many other cases, the informative-promotional verbal elements are used to replace the content of captions that refer to the main characters in the central image, producing strange effects. In *Spider-Man* 3 (Figure 2), the main visual element is represented by Spider-Man caught in the metal tentacles of Doctor Octopus, with a scream balloon on top of Spider-Man declaring "America's most exciting super-hero captured by the world's most dreaded super-villain!". This blurb is replaced with the words "Contiene inoltre: Dr. Strange il supermagico!" [It also contains: Dr. Strange the super magician!] and, given the spatial proximity, it gives the impression that the words come from Spider-Man himself.



Figure 4: *Spider-Man* 5  
© Marvel Comics



Figure 5: *L'Uomo Ragno* 5  
© Marvel Comics

### 3.2 Which superhero for which readership?

The simplified style of the covers and the addition of extras such as stickers and posters seem to indicate that the Italian version of Spider-Man was directed at, or sought to embrace, a younger readership than the American one. This was clear from the first issue[14] whose cover simply showed an image of Spider-Man and box captions informing readers that the title included a story about Doctor Strange ("Contiene inoltre Doctor Strange il super mago") [It also contains Doctor Strange the super magician] and that the issue came with a poster ("Regalo manifesto gigante"). On the other hand, a long editorial inside the front cover aimed at introducing the character seemed to be directed to older readers who could appreciate the more complex nature of Spider-Man compared with other superheroes. The editorial states that there is a fundamental difference between Spider-Man and other superheroes, which are described as "esseri sovranaturali" [supernatural beings], probably alluding to Superman. Spider-Man, as the editorial goes on to explain, is a new kind of superhero, a positive one as he fights criminals but also a flawed one whose moral compass is not always well calibrated, so much so that he is described as arrogant and as having personality complexes. This feature, however, is a significant aspect of his appeal, as it makes him closer to real people; he is "a slave to his complexes and, thus, very close to us all" [Schiavo dei propri complessi e, quindi, molto vicino a noi tutti]. The editorial does not make any references to Spider-Man's age, avoiding the connection to a specific demographic.

In the original issues, since Spider-Man had been primarily conceived with the aim of attracting adolescent readers, the word "teenager" on the cover was key to establishing an immediate bond with the comic's potential readers. It appeared on the cover of *Amazing Fantasy* where Spider-Man made his first appearance and introduced himself as a teenager ("Though the world may mock Peter Parker, the timid teen-ager... it will soon marvel at the awesome might of... Spider-Man!"). It was also used on the cover of issue 8 (January 1964) which shows the image of Spider-Man with the Human Torch (another young super-hero, member of the Fantastic Four). A caption box running horizontally under the title states that that was a "Special 'tribute-to-teenagers' issue!". This caption was omitted in the Italian translation of issue 8, published on 6 August 1970 which, however, maintained all the other visual elements of the original cover. While the word "teenager" existed as an Anglicism in Italian at the time (especially in media language[15]) it was not sufficiently widespread in everyday language to be used in the same way that it was used in English, i.e. to evoke immediately and directly a very specific demographic group with a definite identity. In the original comics the word "teenager" was used throughout, both in the narrative captions and in speech balloons, to refer to Peter Parker/Spider-Man and other young people. In the Italian version, the word "teenager" was generally replaced with words such as "giovane" [youth], (Table 1, examples 1, 3,) "ragazzo" [boy] (examples 4, 5) or "ragazzino" [young boy] (example 2). All these words have a less precise meaning with reference to age than the word "teenager"[16]. While, given the linguistic constraint, this was unavoidable, the use of more general words to render 'teenager' contributes to the reduced connection with a specific target readership that seems to characterise the Italian version of Spider-Man.

	Original text	Italian translation
1	...for some being a <b>teen-ager</b> has many heart breaking moments (Narrative caption, <i>Amazing Fantasy</i> )	...per alcuni essere <b>giovane</b> , può significare avere molti momenti di tristezza (UR 1)
2	I can't imagine how a <b>teen-ager</b> like you does it! (J.Jonah Jameson's speech, SM 3)	Non so davvero come faccia un <b>ragazzino</b> della vostra età! (UR 3)
3	Even <b>teen-agers</b> in a local bowling alley interrupt their game to view the program (Narrative caption in SM 5)	Anche i <b>giovani</b> che stanno giocando in un locale da bowling interrompono le partite per osservare la trasmissione (UR 5)
4	A <b>teen-ager's</b> life is at stake, so I had no choice! (Spider-Man's speech in SM 5)	C'è in gioco la vita di un <b>ragazzo</b> , così non ho scelta! (UR 5)
5	Bitterly disappointed, the masked <b>teen-ager</b> leaves the office... (Narrative caption, SM 18)	Amaramente deluso, il <b>ragazzo</b> mascherato lascia l'ufficio... (UR 15)

Table 1: Renderings of the word "teenager" in *L'Uomo Ragno* (my bold).

The difficulty of targeting the readership in a more specific way is also suggested by the fact that the first Marvel comics to be published in Italy were two issues of *The Fantastic Four* which appeared in *Linus*, a magazine addressed to an educated and adult readership, aimed at presenting comics as worthwhile cultural products (Manai 2000: 331). These were "I Fantastici Quattro" (Issue 1, *The Fantastic Four*, June 1966) in *Linus Estate* and "Prigionieri del Dottor Destino" (Issue 5, *The Fantastic Four*, "Prisoners of Doctor Doom", July 1962) published in *Provo Linus* in February 1967, an indication that the Marvel comics were perceived as innovative enough to be suitable for an older audience than was usually ascribed to superhero comics

New, different characters could be proposed in Linus without the risk of frightening the reader, who was used and trained to a more mature and careful reading. The Fantastic Four were a break with what had been seen in Italian comics up to that time. (Brambilla 2013, my translation)

This isolated episode[17] however also indicates that at the time it was not easy to identify a suitable audience for Marvel Comics. While in the US the target reader was clearly defined, Marvel comics were more difficult to position in Italy.

#### 4. Translating the spoken language of Spider-Man

One of the most innovative features of Marvel's new super-heroes was the "vernacular" spoken by the characters and the "ironic hipness" of the narrative captions (Jozviak 2016: 323). A number of critics have commented on this unique language, highlighting its greater 'realism' and contribution to the creation of an active fan base. Abraham Riesman, for instance, states that Stan Lee reinvented the language of comic books as

[h]is rhythmic, vernacular approach to dialogue transformed superhero storytelling from a litany of bland declarations to a sensational symphony of jittery word-jazz — a language that spoke directly and fluidly to comics readers, enfolding them in a common ecstatic idiom that became the bedrock of what we think of now as 'fan culture' (Riesman 2016).

This highly idiomatic, often 'slangy' language obviously represented a huge challenge for Italian translators[18] who had to deal not only with its cultural specificity but also with its chronological distance as this was the slang of the early 1960s, placed between the 'beatniks' and the 'hippie counterculture' (Dalzell 1996: 87-131). Francesco Meo notes how the language spoken by Spider-Man was, in fact, a combination of idioms coming from Stan Lee's own youth in the 1940s, 1960s youth slang and newly invented colourful expressions (1994: 31), a linguistic mixture that would be difficult to re-create.

This problem was especially evident in the translation of the language spoken by the young characters, namely those involving interactions between Peter Parker and his classmates or Spider-Man and his enemies. The Italian renderings often lack the liveliness and imagery of the originals and are characterized by a higher register. Examples of these are words like "square" and "groovy" (SP 17), two "hip" words associated to the youth vocabulary of the 1960s, the word "gasser" (SP 5) a slang term used to refer to something wonderful and exceptional (Dalzell 2009: 422) and the non-standard use of "wow" which is used as a noun in *Spider-Man 5*. With the exception of "groovy" that was rendered with "forte" [great, cool], all the other terms were rendered with words that manage to convey the main semantic meaning but do not have the 'subversive' nuance associated with the language of subcultures (Table 2).

One of the most interesting examples can be found in a scene where it is clearly stated that Peter, in spite of being a misfit and labelled as a 'bookworm' by his peers, belongs, linguistically speaking, to his 'tribe'. This is a dialogue that takes place between Peter and his Aunt May at the end of "The Sinister Six" (SP, Annual 1). After Aunt May has been saved by the villain, Peter asks whether she is "all shook-up" and Aunt May scolds Peter because he speaks "that awful slang". Aunt May's scolding is repeated when Peter states that she is the "ever lovin' greatest". Peter's knowledge of these expressions shows that he speaks the language of his peers: "shook-up" is a non-standard variation of "shaken-up" and it came into wider usage after Elvis Presley's hit song "All shook-up" in 1957 while "ever lovin' greatest" was used by Stan Lee himself in his regular column in *Spider-Man*. Peter's employment of these particular expressions is important not only in terms of 'linguistic alignment' with his peers but also because they show that he is a 'competent teen', i.e. up to date with the popular culture of his time. These highly non-standard expressions, however, were translated with terms that, while semantically correct, are not particularly marked as 'slangy' (Examples 5 and 6, Table 2) so that Aunt May's reproach which was literally translated into Italian as "non usare quel terribile slang" [Do not use that terrible slang] sounds rather strange.

	Original text	Italian translation
1	Spider-Man: Man, wouldn't that be a <b>gasser</b> ? (SM 5)	Ma sarebbe proprio <b>divertente</b> ! [But it would be really funny!] (UR 5)
2	Spider-Man: Say, I'll bet you'd be a <b>wow</b> at a Coney Island Fun House! (SM 5)	Ehi, credo che faresti un <b>successone</b> alla fiera dei divertimenti di Coney Island! [Ehi, I think you'd be a great success at the fun fair in Coney Island!] (UR 5)
3	Liz: It sounds <b>groovy</b> (SP 17, p. 219)	Sembra <b>forte</b> ! [It sounds great] (UR 13, p.3)
4	Flash: Does that <b>square</b> have to pop up wherever we go? (SM 17)	Ma quel <b>tipo</b> deve comparire ovunque andiamo? [But must that guy appear wherever we go?] (UR 13)
5	Peter: You mean, you're not all <b>shook-up</b> , or anything?? (SM Annual 1)	Peter: Vuoi dire che non sei tutta <b>secombussolata</b> ? [Do you mean that you are not all upset?] (UR 14)
6	Peter: In case I forgot to tell you, you're the <b>ever lovin' greatest</b> (SM Annual 1)	Peter: Nel caso abbia dimenticato di dirtelo, sei <b>sempre la più forte</b> ! [In case I forgot to tell you, you are always the greatest] (UR 14)

Table 2: Examples of 1960s youth slang in *Spider-Man* and its translation.

Above all, there doesn't seem to have been a homogeneous translation strategy. In point of fact, there are several examples of linguistic inconsistency. One of the most evident ones is the uneven use of appellative pronouns. In the first issues (up to issue 4) Spider-Man and his adversaries use the formal pronoun 'voi' to address each other. Not only this choice clashes with the typical irreverence showed by Spider-Man towards his enemies but, sometimes, it was also inconsistent within the same issue. In "Lo strano Dottor Octopus" (UR 3) Spider-Man switches from the familiar "tu" when speaking to petty criminals to the polite form "voi" when speaking to the main villain Doctor Octopus, suggesting a more respectful attitude towards his adversary. Doctor Octopus, on the other hand, uses "voi" when speaking with his colleagues and "tu" when speaking with Spider-Man as if to establish a sort of social hierarchy. In issue 4, where Spider-Man fights Sandman, the discrepancy is created between the dialogues on the cover and those inside the issue, as Spider-Man and Sandman talk to each other using "tu" on the cover while they use "voi" within the comic. The use of "voi" was an archaism, clearly due to the influence of the target culture tradition where this pronoun continued to be used up to recent times in Italian comics (Belardinelli 2008; Macedoni 2010). It must be noted that the "voi" was finally abandoned with issue 7 of *L'Uomo Ragno*, with characters using the familiar "tu" for informal situations, including the verbal exchanges between Spider-Man and his adversaries, and the polite "lei" when a more formal register was necessary, for instance among strangers and in institutional settings.

#### 4.1 Words as weapons: Spider-Man's verbal fights

Peter's language becomes particularly interesting and full of humorous and imaginative expressions when he dons his costume and mask and takes on the role of Spider-Man. Aptly defined the "quipslinger" by Daniel Malloy (2012: 218), Spider-Man fights his adversaries with verbal weapons as well as physical ones. His super-hero's speech is characterized by self-deprecating irony, frequent bantering and irreverent epithets, directed towards foes and friends alike, a feature that contributes to the character's appeal, as noted by DiPaolo "the character is often very funny, and his sense of humor can be one of his most endearing traits. He certainly teases friends and allies as often as he needed his enemies" (2011: 108).

This ceaseless stream of striking idiomatic expressions, references to popular culture, creative and funny name-calling, is generally aimed at disorienting the adversary but it also clearly works as a challenge to his adversary's 'authority'. Spider-Man is a teenage superhero fighting against overconfident middle-age villains (Wright 2001: 212) whose language is often, by contrast, characterized by a bombastic quality. From their part, villains are generally aware that they are fighting a young person and often refer to Spider-Man's age in a disparaging way, using their adult status to establish a social hierarchy. They are also clearly riled up by Spider-Man's flippancy and they often comment on his linguistic dexterity. In these scenes, language clearly fulfills one of the functions of slang, to separate youth from adults and convey the idea that youth are better than adults.[19]

The language used in the Italian comics only partially succeeds in communicating the spirited and entertaining exchanges between Spider-Man and the villains. In *L'inarrestabile Uomo Sabbia*, issue 4 of *L'Uomo Ragno*, released in June 1970, Spider-Man fights against an enemy called Sandman, who can transform his body into sand. During the fight, the two exchange taunts and verbal jabs delivered in a very colloquial language. Examples of these are Sandman's response to a move by Spider-Man with "Nice try, Spider-Man! But a fat lot of good it'll do ya!" and Spider-Man's ironic retort when Sandman shows off his abilities "I'll bet you'd be great at a party! You're just a barrel of fun, aren't you?!" (SM 4). These segments were translated respectively as:

1. Sandman – Bel colpo Uomo Ragno! Ma vi servirà proprio? [Nice try Spider-Man! But will it be really useful?] (UR 4)
2. Spider-Man – Scommetto che avreste un grande successo a un party! Non siete che un istrione! (UR 4) [I'll bet you'd have great success at a party! You are just being a histrionic]

In Example 1, "Ma vi servirà proprio?" is a question in standard Italian that has replaced the exclamative clause and does not express the same 'sneering' effect of the original. In Example 2, the heavy irony of Spider-Man's words is lost in what sounds like an irate comment, while the funny image evoked by "barrel of fun" is replaced by the more formal and abstract "istrione".

In this respect, the Italian renderings are generally more effective when they have to express the villain's grandiose speeches, probably because of inherent linguistic differences between English and Italian. As Bruno Cavallone points out, one of the problems of translating American comics is rendering the "fragmentary and onomatopoeic" character of such language into Italian, which is "elaborate and baroque" (Cavallone, 2009: 50, my translation). But this issue may actually be an advantage in the case of verbal items characterized by a formal register.

One area where the Italian translations often succeed in reproducing Spider-Man's highly informal and irreverent talk was the rendering of the nicknames used by Spider-Man to mock his adversaries. The nicknames are coined through different strategies, for instance by shortening or distorting the villain's name or by using a descriptive element related to the villain's body or costume. These are generally rendered with convincing equivalent terms in Italian (Table 3), as shown by the case of "Ringo" (UR 13) "Volty" (UR 14) and "sabbione" (UR 19) which are inspired choices as they perfectly transfer and even intensify the humorous effect of the original terms. The rendering of nicknames with descriptive elements is slightly more problematic. In the example in Table 3, the English nicknames for Doctor Doom are a mocking reference to the fact that he is wearing an armor, which may be noisy, "rattle-trap", and get rusty "rustpot". The Italian translations are less imaginative, while "ferraglia" [scrap metalware] is an effective choice, "vecchia carcassa" [old carcass] is less irreverent and has a slight affectionate nuance.

	Original text	Italian translation
1	Ringmaster ⇒ Ringy	Ringo
2	Vulture ⇒ Vulchy	Volty
3	Doctor Doom ⇒ rattle-trap	Ferraglia [scrap metalware]
4	Doctor Doom ⇒ rustpot	vecchia carcassa [old carcass]
5	Sandman ⇒ Sandy	Sabbione [big sand]

Table 3: The translation of the villains' nicknames.

#### 4.2 References to popular culture

The last area that I would like to consider is the translation of references to popular culture. These, as noted earlier, play an important role in teen language as they allow the speakers to show that they are 'competent teens', i.e. that they share a common ground as they know the culture of their place and time. They are also notoriously difficult to translate, especially in genres such as comics where spatial features make it difficult to resort to solutions that can be adopted in other genres, for instance the insertion of internal glosses and footnotes (Aixela 1996). In the Italian translations of Spider-Man, cultural references are often transposed or translated literally, sometimes even when they would be obscure to Italian readers. On the other hand, an effort seems to have been made when the cultural references were part of Spider-Man's speech and had a humorous, self-deprecating function, although the Italian choices are not always clear. Some examples are shown in Table 4: in 1 Marlon Brando, famous movie star and symbol of rebellion, works well as a replacement of Albert Schweitzer, an American philanthropist and scientist not very well known in Italy. Less inspired was the choice of "Babbo Natale" for 'Fats Domino', the famous 1950s rock'n'roll singer, which seems rather bland and loses the connection with the music scene, so important for young people. Even more inexplicable is the decision to retain the political reference to ex-Republican presidential nominee Thomas E. Dewey which would be unfamiliar to most Italian readers. The choice of retaining Dr. Kildare, however, is acceptable since the TV series had been broadcast on Italian main TV national channel, RAI 1, and most readers were likely to be familiar with it.

	Original text	Italian translation
1	Well, I sure ain't <b>Albert Schweitzer</b> (SM 3)	Beh, non sono proprio <b>Marlon Brando</b> [Well, I'm surely not Marlon Brando] (UR 3)
2	Well, it's not <b>Dr. Kildare!</b> (SM 4)	Beh, non è il <b>Dr. Kildare!</b> [Well, it's not Dr. Kildare] (UR 4)
3	Well, it's not <b>Fats Domino!</b> (SM 6)	Beh, non è certo <b>Babbo Natale!</b> [Well, it's surely not Father Christmas] (UR 6)
4	"You never give up, do you? I bet you' re still wearin' a <b>Vote-for-Dewey</b> button!" (SM-Annual 1)	"Non rinunci mai vero? Scommetto che porti ancora una spilla <b>"votate per Dewey"</b> (UR-14)

Table 4: Translation of references to popular culture.

#### 5. Concluding remarks

The aim of this article was to examine the translation of the American comic Spider-Man into Italian to identify the verbal strategies adopted by the Italian translator to render the innovative features that characterized this cultural artifact at a time when Spider-Man and Marvel comics were not much known in the Italian context. We have found that the overall translation strategy was one that favoured fidelity towards the original texts, although the results did not always succeed in transferring the slang that characterized the talk of the young characters, so important to establish a connection with the potential readers. This strategy was indeed unusual in relation to the translation of US comics which had been characterized by radical interventions both at the visual and verbal level (Zanettin, 2018). The turn towards a more respectful translation policy was probably due to changed perceptions in relation to comics that took place in Italy from the mid-1960s. Critics such as Umberto Eco and Oreste del Buono had spear-headed a re-evaluation of comics as cultural products (Spinelli 2021), which had started to lose their juvenile connotation. The superhero genre, however, was probably more difficult to place from this perspective and, as we have shown, several elements in the Italian translations indicate uncertainty in relation to the target readership, at least in relation to the first year of publication of the comics. Since this was a limited study, conducted on a small corpus of texts, it would be interesting to see whether, with time, a more homogenous strategy developed and what this meant for the projected readership. It must also be noted that there appears to be very little scholarly research on the translation of Marvel comics, which is limited to studies of radical adaptations in other contexts (Antola 2021; Stein 2013) or is mentioned within the wider scope of the comics translation (for instance Zanettin, 2014). It is therefore hoped that this article can stimulate research on this genre.

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## Notes

[1] The author and publisher gratefully acknowledge the permission granted to reproduce the copyright material in this article.

[2] References to *Spider-Man* and *L'Uomo Ragno* within brackets will be shortened respectively as SM and UR.

[3] In this paper we have used the non-hyphenated spelling of "teenager" as this is the most common form nowadays. However, the hyphenated word, "teen-ager", has been retained when used in quotations from primary and secondary sources.

[4] A further indication of Spider-Man's global success is shown by the number of dedicated websites and major newspapers that celebrated the character all over the world in 2022, which marked the 60th anniversary of his debut on the pages of *Amazing Fantasy*.

- [5] The 1970s are known in Italy as the 'years of lead', with reference to the violent political clashes and terrorist acts that ravaged the country at the time.
- [6] The idea that Spider-Man is a public menace and a criminal is skillfully stirred up by J. Jonah Jameson, the ruthless publisher of the *Daily Bugle* newspaper, who runs a hate campaign against him mainly to sell his newspaper.
- [7] Slang is notoriously difficult to define. In Larry Trask's volume on key concepts in linguistics (1999:185-86) it is described as "language at play", characterized by informal and ephemeral linguistic forms, with vivid and witty expressions. Within a group slang may serve as a badge of identity.
- [8] According to a survey conducted among campus students by the magazine *Esquire* in 1965, Spider-Man was seen as a revolutionary figure, together with Bob Dylan and Che Guevara (Wright 2001:223).
- [9] Founded in 1960, Editoriale Corno had become known as the publisher of adult comics *Kriminal* and *Satanic*, dealing with themes such as sex and violence.
- [10] The possibility of retaining the original name of *Spider-Man* was excluded because of another "Spiderman" that had appeared in Italy between 1967 and 1968, a British series whose main character was called *The Spider* (Brambilla 2020).
- [11] Reply to the letter of Umberto Canfora (UR 9 August 1970: 22)
- [12] Covers have been compared through the data contained in the following digital databanks: <https://www.coverbrowser.com/covers/amazing-spider-man> and <https://www.ragnoman.com/index.html> (Accessed 27 April 2022)
- [13] A cursory check of the Italian covers of *Superman* (*Nembo Kid* in Italian) and other superheroes has shown that indeed a 'simple' cover style was the preferred visual convention for comics published in Italy. Gianluca Trogi, for instance, in an article about the Italian translation of *Daredevil*, another Marvel comic published by Corno in 1970, praises its covers for being 'simple and straightforward' compared with the American ones (2022).
- [14] The first issue of *L'Uomo Ragno* did not use the cover of *Amazing Story* where Spider-Man had first appeared in the US. According to Brambilla (2020), it reproduced the image from a panel in issue 48 of *Spider-Man* (1967) which was drawn by John Romita, the artist who replaced Steve Ditko after he left Marvel.
- [15] The word was used, for instance, by journalist Ugo Zatterin in a TV debate about young people's fashion which was broadcast in 1967. The journalist uses the word "teen-ager" several times but he explains its meaning, an indication that at the time the term was not widely understood (Zatterin's words are quoted in Merlo, 2012:33).
- [16] Dictionaries are very precise in this respect. The Merriam-Webster online, for instance, defines "teenager" as "someone who is between 13 and 19 years old". <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/teenager> (accessed 21 June 2022).
- [17] The *Fantastic Four* started to be published by Corno from 6 April 1971.
- [18] The person responsible for the translation of *Spider-Man*, and other Marvel comics, at Editoriale Corno was Maria Grazia Perini (Benenati 2015).
- [19] See also Berger (1972) about the representation of young people as better than adults in *Spider-Man*.

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