

## **“Ayuh!”: Stephen King’s accented characters go to the cinema**

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### ABSTRACT

Stephen King is one of the most popular and best-selling contemporary American writers, as well as one of the most prolific ones. Moreover, he is one of the most adapted authors ever. Apart from the distinguishing horror atmosphere and the presence of supernatural elements, there are other features that characterize his works, and one of them is undoubtedly the use of accents to describe the way his characters speak (and, consequently, their geographical origins), through the technique of eye dialect (Krapp 1926), which consists in using unconventional spelling to indicate particular pronunciations. Distinct geographical accents generally tend to be used also in the dialogues of the audiovisual adaptations of King’s works. This study investigates the use of geographical accents in Stephen King’s *Pet Sematary* and in its two film adaptations (1989 and 2019), as well as the strategies (if any) used to transpose them in both the Italian translation of the novel and in the Italian dubbed versions of the two films. It is a well-known fact, indeed, that the translation of geographical varieties turns out to be particularly challenging both for literary translators and for dubbing dialogue writers.

Keywords: dialect translation, Stephen King, accent, language variation, literary translation, dubbing.

### **1. Introduction**

This paper intends to provide a contribution to current research on dialects in fiction, more specifically on dialect translation in novels, in film adaptations, and in dubbing. The use of dialects in literary texts has been investigated

broadly in recent years (see, among the others Hodson 2014, 2018; Hodson – Broahead 2013; Montini – Ranzato 2021; Ranzato 2016a, 2016b), as has the difficulty of translating them. Many scholars have focused on the (un)translatability of dialects in literature (see, among the others, Altano 1988; Balma 2011; Bonaffini 1995, 1997, 2000; Braga Riera 2016; Brett 2009; DuVal 1990; Federici 2011; Koch 2020; Marco – Tello Fons; Rosengrandt 1992; Sánchez García 2020). Indeed, the translation of geographical dialects, which are loaded with connotations related to the area where they are spoken, has always been problematic for translators.

In fact, as noted in a previous study, “dialects are the result of specific historical, geographical, and social factors: each dialect is unique and cannot be transposed into another language with a corresponding variety” (Parini 2022: 388). There can be no full correspondence between a variety spoken in a geographical area of a country and another one spoken in another country, and this is the reason why most often the peculiarities connected to the presence of a dialect in fiction turn out to be lost in translation and translators opt for strategies of standardization of the target language.

However, it ought to be noted that literary translators can avail themselves of various aids (such as explanatory notes, glossaries, explanations added in the text through strategies of expansion and explication) in order to help readers understand the connotations implicit in the use of a specific dialect in the source text (Parini 2022).

The first purpose of this paper is to investigate the strategies (if any) used by the Italian translator (Hilia Brinis) of Stephen King’s novel *Pet Sematary* (1983) when approaching the translation of the passages in the book where it is possible to identify the presence of a geographical accent. Since the book was adapted into a film twice (in 1989 and in 2019), the second aim of this research is to analyze the presence of such accent in the two films and the strategies used in their Italian dubbed versions. Indeed, an increasing number of academics have been investigating the issue of dialect translation within the field of AVT. For the purposes of this paper, particularly interesting are the studies conducted in the field of dubbing (see Bonsignori 2009, 2012; Bonsignori – Bruti 2008, 2014; Bruti 2009; Bruti – Vignozzi 2016; Dore 2006, 2020; Minutella 2016, 2021; Parini 2009a, 2009b, 2013, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2022). Also in the case of dubbing, the use of a corresponding variety connoted from a geographical perspective in the target language tends to be avoided, especially in dramas. This, in fact, would provoke an estrangement effect upon the spectators, with the resulting disruption of their suspension of disbelief (the audience’s intentional acceptance of a work of fiction, in

order to believe it for the sake of enjoyment). On the contrary, it seems to be accepted if used to achieve a comic effect, as in the case of comedies (Parini 2009, 2017) or in animation (Bruti 2009; Dore 2006, 2020; Minutella 2016, 2021; Parini 2019).

The two films that constitute the object of study in this paper are not meant to make the audience laugh, but rather the opposite, as they belong to the supernatural horror genre. Therefore, the assumption behind this research is that their Italian dubbed versions will not reveal any use of Italian geographical accents.

Finally, the essay will present the results of a small survey aimed at establishing the reactions of Stephen King's avid American and Italian fans to the issue of accent in the two film adaptations.

## 2. Stephen King

Born in Portland, in the state of Maine, in 1947, Stephen King is one of the most famous authors of horror literature. During his career (which started in 1974) he has published 63 novels, five non-fiction works, and about 200 short stories, which have been translated into over 50 languages, all of which have become bestsellers, and for which he has been awarded various prizes. Moreover, he is one of the most adapted authors ever, with at least 50 film adaptations, as well as television series, miniseries, and comic books, with some works adapted even more than once (*Carrie*, *Pet Sematary*, *Salem's Lot*, *It*, *The Dead Zone*, and *The Mist*, among others). Some of these adaptations have been directed by renowned filmmakers; for example, the first adaptation of *Carrie* was directed by Brian De Palma in 1976, *The Shining* by Stanley Kubrick in 1980, *The Dead Zone* by David Cronenberg in 1983, *Christine* by John Carpenter in 1983, *Stand by Me* and *Misery* by Rob Reiner in 1986 and 1990 respectively, *Dreamcatcher* by Lawrence Kasdan in 2003.

Stephen King is often referred to as the "King of Horror", a play based on his surname as well as his high standing in pop-culture. Indeed, his novels mainly belong to the horror genre and are characterized by elements of supernatural, suspense, crime, science fiction and fantasy. Moreover, he is a fine portraitist of the United States and its culture and society. In fact, as observed by Faeti (1998: 13), in his works there is always a strong tendency to include extremely detailed references to elements which are typical of the American culture, which allow King to always be "in America's veins". Such elements include references to geographical places (names

of countries, cities, towns, streets and squares), local places (restaurants, bars, supermarkets, shops, banks, hospitals), music and songs (titles or lyrics), television (broadcasters, channels, programmes), newspapers, magazines, books, famous people (actors, singers, politicians, TV presenters, sportspeople), fictional characters, organizations, and others. Furthermore, his depiction of the various characters and their characteristics contributes to the construction of their identity and their contextualization of the various social strata of American society. As stressed by Faeti (1998: 13):

Intorno al tema centrale di una specifica figura dell'orrore, di una nuova icona dell'orrore che ogni suo libro contiene, ci sono i benzinai, gli allevatori, i camerieri, gli assicuratori, le infermiere, le cuoche, i pensionati, gli insegnanti, gli alcolizzati, i sacerdoti, gli albergatori, i bibliotecari [...]. (Around the central theme of a specific horror figure, of a new horror icon that each of his books contains, there are petrol station attendants, farmers, waiters, insurance agents, nurses, cooks, pensioners, teachers, alcoholics, priests, hoteliers, librarians [...]) [my translation].

The detailed representation of America and of Americans quite often includes the linguistic sphere. Indeed, Stephen King's works are often characterized by references to the characters' use of accents and dialects typical of their social class and geographical area of origin. Some memorable examples include Dolores's Maine accent in *Dolores Claiborne*, Dick Hallorann's and John Shooter's southern accents in *The Shining* and in *Secret Window*, respectively, Rose O'Hara's Irish accent in *Dr Sleep*, to quote a few.

### 3. Accent and language variation in Stephen King's works

The representation of accent and language variation in King's works is achieved in various ways. Firstly, King often makes explicit reference to the fact that the characters speak with a specific accent in the narrative parts of his books. Secondly, he often uses the technique of eye dialect (Krapp 1926), which consists in the use of deliberately nonstandard spelling to emphasize how a word is pronounced. Eye dialect, as intended by Krapp, does not necessarily reflect the geographical origins of the speaker, but it can also be a means of characterizing the speaker from a social perspective. Indeed, as noted by Brett (2009: 49), "One may envisage these spellings as a sort

of insinuation on the part of the author that the character whose speech is depicted so would spell these words in this way, hence demonstrating a level of education and literacy substantially lower than the average". However, the author also claims that "eye dialect may be used simply to indicate that a given speaker has such and such an accent", and King uses it to convey connotations on both levels: to characterize the characters' level of education as well as their geographical origins.

Stephen King himself has explained the rationale behind this practice in his book *On writing. A memoir of the craft* (2020). The book is defined on the author's webpage as both a textbook for writers and a memoir of his life<sup>1</sup>. It is divided into five sections: 1) "C.V." which narrates the events in his life that influenced his writing; 2) "What Writing Is" where King urges the reader to take writing seriously; 3) "Toolbox" where King discusses English mechanics; 4) "On Writing" where he gives specific advice to aspiring writers; 5) "On Living: A Postscript" where he describes the serious roadside accident that he suffered in 1999 and explains how it affected his life. It is in sections 3 and 4 ("Toolbox" and "On Writing") that he makes reference to the use of language variation. Stephen King (2020: 180) stresses the importance of dialogue in the construction of the identity of his characters:

It's dialogue that gives your cast their voices, and is crucial in defining their characters – only what people do tells us more about what they're like, and talk is sneaky: what people say often conveys their character to others in ways of which they – the speakers – are completely unaware. You can tell via straight narration that your main character [...] never did well in school, never even *went* much to school, but you can convey the same thing, and much more vividly, by his speech... and one of the cardinal rules of good fiction is never tell us a thing if you can show us.

Moreover, the importance of language variation is explicitly mentioned a few pages later, where the writer claims: "Dialogue is a skill best learned by people who enjoy talking and listening to others – particularly listening, picking up *the accents, rhythms, dialect, and slang of various groups*" (2020: 183, emphasis mine).

As far as accent is concerned, King's suggestion is to write words as we hear them, and he refers to this strategy as "phonetically rendered language"

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<sup>1</sup> <https://stephenking.com/works/nonfiction/on-writing-a-memoir-of-the-craft.html>.

(2020: 117,132) and gives some specific examples, such as *dunno* for *don't know* and *gonna* for *going to* or the lack of the final *g* in present participles/gerunds, with no apostrophes, for example *writin* rather than *writin'* (2020: 132-133).

Taking into account these peculiarities present in many of King's novels, it is interesting to investigate the strategies used in translation to transpose them in a target language. Translating accents and language variation is no doubt an extremely challenging activity. In fact, as already mentioned, it is usually impossible to transpose a variety typical of the source language with a corresponding one in a target language.

#### 4. *Pet Sematary*: The novel

The novel *Pet Sematary* was published in 1983 and nominated for a World Fantasy Award for Best Novel in 1984. It tells the story of the family of Louis Creed (his wife Rachel, their daughter Eileen – familiarly called Ellie – and their son Gage) who move from Chicago to the small town of Ludlow, Maine, as he is appointed doctor at the University of Maine's campus health service. The choice of this novel as object of study was due to the fact that there are quite a lot of instances of language variation and use of eye dialect, or "phonetically rendered language". Indeed, Jud Crandall, the Creed's family new neighbour, whom they befriend as soon as they arrive, is an elderly man who speaks a variety which strongly deviates from the standard and is clearly identifiable as typical of the area of Maine.

When Jud first meets the Creeds, Gage has just been stung by a bee and the old man gives them some advice regarding what to do. When King introduces his character (Chapter 2), he immediately makes references to the peculiar way in which he pronounces words, describing the way Jud speaks as *drawling*. The Cambridge Online Dictionary defines the verb *drawl* as "to speak in a slow way in which the vowel sounds are made longer and words are not separated clearly"<sup>2</sup>. A drawl is a distinguished feature of some varieties of spoken English. This particular speech pattern exists in a few varieties of English, the most noticeable of which is Southern American English. The Southern American English drawl, or "Southern drawl", involves vowel diphthongization of the front pure vowels, or the "prolongation of the most heavily stressed syllables, with the corresponding weakening of the less stressed ones, so that there is an illusion of slowness

<sup>2</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/drawl>.

even though the tempo may be fast" (McDavid 1968: 562). As can be noted in Table 1 below, the Italian translation does not really refer to the way Jud speaks, but rather to the quality of his voice, so that any particular reference to his accent is omitted:

Table 1. Reference to Jud's peculiar accent

English version	Italian translation	Back translation
"Got to get the stinger out," a voice behind them <b>drawled</b> .	"Bisogna tirar fuori il pungiglione", disse alle loro spalle <b>una voce calma calma</b> .	"It is necessary to get the stinger out", <b>a very calm voice</b> said behind them

In Table 2, the passage continues with Jud giving the Creeds more specific advice on how to best manage the situation with the bee sting, and once again King refers to the man's peculiar way of speaking, and more specifically to his dialect, his accent and his pronunciation:

Table 2. Reference to Jud's peculiar accent and examples of "phonetically rendered language"

English version	Italian translation	Back translation
"That's the ticket. Get the stinger out and put some backing soda on it. Bump'll go down." But <b>the voice was so thick with Down East accent</b> that for a moment Louis's tired, confused mind refused to translate <b>the dialect: Got t'get the stinga out 'n put some bakin soda on't. 'T'll go daown.</b>	"È l'unica. Tirar fuori il pungiglione e poi metterci su un po' di bicarbonato. Va via il gonfiore." Ma era <b>una voce dall'accento dialettale così marcato</b> che lì per lì la mente stanca e confusa di Louis stentò a tradurre <b>il senso delle parole</b> .	"That's the only option. Get the stinger out and then put some backing soda on it. The bump will go down." But <b>the voice was so thick with dialect accent</b> that for a moment Louis's tired, confused mind refused to translate <b>the meaning of those words</b> .

In the translation of this passage, we can note first of all a strategy of generalization, as the translator refers to the fact that Jud speaks with a thick dialect accent, but it is an unidentified accent, as no reference to the geographical area is made. In the original version, instead, the accent is said to be specifically from the Down East area. Secondly, it is possible to observe the use of a strategy

of omission. Indeed, the passage ends with a whole sentence uttered by Jud in dialect (as stated by the narrator/King), which has been re-written using “phonetically rendered language” to make the reader better understand how he actually speaks. However, in the Italian version, the sentence has not been translated at all, and the translator simply refers to the fact that Louis is so tired that he barely understands the meaning of Jud’s words.

Jud then continues making comments about the situation and about the stinger (Chapter 3), and King keeps using his strategy of “phonetically rendered language”, so that the reader is constantly reminded that the character does not speak standard American English. As can be noted in Table 3 below, the Italian translation does not contain any non-standard forms whatsoever:

Table 3. Examples of “phonetically rendered language”

English version	Italian translation	Back translation
“Not to tell you <b>y’business</b> , Doc,” he said. [...]	“Non è per insegnarle il mestiere, dottore,” aggiunse. [...]	“Not to teach you your job, doctor,” he added. [...]
“Big <b>’un</b> ,” he remarked. “No prize-winner, but it’d do for a ribbon, I guess.” Louis burst out laughing.	“Era grossa,” commentò lui. “Non sarà un primo premio, ma una medaglia se la merita, direi.” Louis scoppiò a ridere.	“It was a big one,” he remarked. “Not a prize-winner, but it deserves a medal, I guess.” Louis burst out laughing.

He then continues to make comments about the stinger, once again speaking non-standard American English:

Table 4. References to Jud’s dialect

English version	Italian translation	Back translation
“ <b>Ayuh, corker, ain’t she?</b> ”	“Vero che è qualcosa di fenomenale?”	“Isn’t it something amazing?”

The word *ayuh* is an interjection used as an expression of affirmation, which is typical of the area of rural New England, especially Maine (the Macmillan Online Dictionary defines it as “a word used in Maine meaning ‘Yes’”<sup>3</sup>). Jud

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/ayuh>.



uses it through the whole novel (for a total of 19 occurrences), so that the reader is continuously reminded of his origins. The word *corker* is a slang word for something very good (labelled by the Collins Online Dictionary as informal and old-fashioned<sup>4</sup>). Finally, he uses the non-standard form *ain't* in the tag question; the Italian translation uses standard Italian throughout the sentence. It would obviously be impossible to transpose the connotations related to the geographical origins of the character, although it might have been possible to use a corresponding informal old-fashioned word to translate *corker* in order to make Eileen's subsequent reaction plausible also in Italian. The child, in fact, does not understand what Jud is saying, as can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Eileen's reaction to Jud's peculiar way of speaking

English version	Italian translation	Back translation
"What did he say, Mommy?" Eileen asked, and then Rachel burst out laughing, too.	"Che cosa dice, mamma?", domandò Eileen. E allora Rachel cominciò a ridere a sua volta.	"What is he saying, Mommy?", Eileen asked. And then Rachel burst out laughing too.

In the Italian translation it is not entirely clear why Eileen does not understand what Jud has just said, considering the fact that he has just spoken standard Italian.

Further explicit references to the fact that Jud speaks in an unusual way can be found a few lines later (see Table 6), when Louis apologizes for laughing and explains that they are just tired, and the old man replies that he understands perfectly. In this case, the translator attempted to convey in Italian the fact that he speaks with non-standard pronunciation, using a similar strategy as the one employed by Stephen King (what he defines "phonetically rendered language"):

Table 6. Reference to Jud's accent and example of "phonetically rendered language"

English version	Italian translation	Back translation
"Course you are," he said, which came out: <i>Coss you aaa</i> .	"Ma ci credo", disse, e la frase suonò suppergiù: <i>Mo ci cree'o</i> .	"I can undestand", he said, which more or less sounded: [ <i>Mo ci cree'o</i> ].

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/corker>.

A few lines later (Table 7), King once again makes explicit reference to Jud's non-standard accent, even comparing it to a foreign language. In this case, however, the translator opted for a strategy of omission, eliminating the whole sentence, thus showing some sort of inconsistency in her translational approach:

Table 7. Reference to Jud's accent and example of "phonetically rendered language"

English version	Italian translation	Back translation
"Looking forward to having young ' <b>uns</b> around again." Except that the sound of this, as exotic to their Midwestern ears as a foreign language, was <i>youwwuns</i> .	"Non vedevamo l'ora di avere intorno un po' di gioventù."	"We were looking forward to having some young people around".

As previously observed, references to Jud's accent can also be found in the narrative parts of the book, for example when King comments on Louis's attitude towards Jud (Chapter 4, in Table 8):

Table 8. Reference to and description of Jud's accent

English version	Italian translation	Back translation
He liked Crandall, liked his crooked grin, his offhand way of talking, <b>his Yankee accent, which was not hard-edged at all but so soft it was almost a drawl.</b>	Crandall gli era simpatico, gli piaceva quel sorriso sornione, quel modo di parlare alla buona, <b>quell'accento yankee, che non era affatto duro ma, al contrario, morbido e strascicato.</b>	He liked Crandall, he liked his sly smile, his offhand way of talking, <b>his Yankee accent, which was not hard-edged at all but, on the contrary, was soft and drawling.</b>

Plainly, in this case the translator has opted for maintaining the reference to Jud's Yankee accent and his peculiar way of speaking.

Another reference to Jud's accent can be found in a dialogue between Louis and his wife Rachel which occurs later on the same day (Chapter 5, Table 9):

Table 9. Reference to Jud's accent and example of "phonetically rendered language"

Character	English version	Italian translation	Back translation
Louis	"That old fella across the street –"	"Quel vecchio là di fronte mi ha invitato a bere una birra. Credo che lo prenderò in parola. Sono stanco, ma anche troppo teso per riuscire a dormire."	"That old man over there has invited me over for a beer. I think I'm going to take him up on it. I'm tired, but I'm too anxious to sleep."
Rachel	"Road. You call it a road, out in the country. Or if you're Jud Crandall, I <b>guess you call it a rud.</b> "		
Louis	"Okay. Across <b>the rud.</b> He invited me over for a beer. I think I'm going to take him up on it. I'm tired, but I'm too jived-up to sleep."		

Once again, the Italian translator has opted for a strategy of omission, as Rachel's words and her comment on the way Jud pronounces the word *road* have not been translated, and Louis's first part of the sentence continues as if Rachel had not interrupted him.

In Chapter 20 there is one more reference to Jud's peculiar accent as he is having a conversation with Louis. Also in this case, the translator has opted for a strategy of omission, as the comment on Jud's pronunciation of the words has not been translated (see Table 10 below).

Table 10. Reference to Jud's accent and example of "phonetically rendered language"

Character	English version	Italian translation	Back translation
Louis	"Jud, I want to go get Ellie so she can finish her trick-or-treating."	"Jud, voglio tornare da Ellie perché possa finire il suo giro come gli altri bambini."	"Jud, I want to go back to Ellie so that she can finish her round like the other children."

Jud	"Yeah, course you do." <b>This came out as <i>Coss y'do</i></b> . "Tell her to get all the treats she can, Louis."	"Sì, certo. Dille di portare a casa più dolcetti che può."	"Yes, sure. Tell her to get all the treats she can."
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In the following chapters, the explicit references to Jud's accent and the way he pronounces words decrease. However, King keeps using non-standard spelling throughout the whole the novel whenever the man speaks, which is meant to indicate that his pronunciation deviates from the standard. The Maine accent, which the man is supposed to speak, is characterized by a variety of features, particularly among older speakers, including *r*-dropping (non-rhoticity), resistance to the horse–hoarse merger, and a deletion or "breaking" of certain syllables (Labov et al. 2006: 225–232). Other typical characteristic elements that recur throughout the novel in Jud's dialogues are, for example, the fact that he constantly drops the final *g* in gerundive forms of verbs (which is not replaced by an apostrophe, as indicated in King's book *On Writing*), and is a common feature of New England English, where the final "-ing" ending in multi-syllable words sounds like "-in"; he drops the initial *th* consonant cluster in the pronoun *them* (which becomes *em*); the pronoun *you* and the adjective *your* become 'y, and as a general rule an apostrophe is placed whenever a phoneme is not pronounced (examples: *fact'ry*, *'fraid*, *prob'bly*, *wa'n't*, *s'pose*, *b'lieve*). Moreover, phenomena of coalescence and apocope are reproduced orthographically, for example with *looka* for *look at*, *s'much* for *so much*. Finally, another characteristic of the Maine accent is that it is non-rhotic. Like in all traditional Eastern New England English, the "r" sound is pronounced only when it comes before a vowel, but not before a consonant or in any final position (see Ryland 2013; Erard 2015), and this is reproduced orthographically, for example, when Jud talks about a "hen paaaty" (which is not written in italics).

In all these cases, the Italian translator has opted for standardizing the language, using standard Italian spelling and standard Italian lexis.

## 5. *Pet Sematary*: Film adaptations

As already mentioned, the novel has been adapted for the screen twice. The first adaptation, entitled *Pet Sematary*, was released in 1989, directed by Mary Lambert, and based on a screenplay written by Stephen King himself. The character of Jud Crandall was played by Fred Gwynne, who portrayed him

in a way which was very faithful to the book, speaking with the Southern accent and the peculiar drawl that is so often mentioned in the novel.

The second adaptation, still entitled *Pet Sematary*, was released in 2019, directed by Kevin Kölsch and Dennis Widmyer, and based on a screenplay written by Jeff Buhler. Stephen King was not involved at all in the production of this film, which was characterized by many changes, including remarkable adaptations to the plot and to the characters. The character of Jud Crandall was interpreted by John Lithgow, who opted for not characterizing him from the point of view of the accent.

The general reaction of Stephen King's fans to this second adaptation was outrage, both regarding the changes in the plot and also John Lithgow's performance of Jud's character. Indeed, in online communities of Stephen King's fans it is possible to find various comments on the interpretation of the characters by the two actors, and how the fans show an evident preference for Gwynne's impersonation, specifically because of his accent. The following comments are taken from the Stephen King's Reddit community<sup>5</sup> (the names in square brackets are the usernames of the authors of the posts):

- "Fred Gwynne as Jud Crandall. I say he got it right." [bloodypancakes1122]
- "Ayuh". [Kustomdeluxe]
- "It is very close to what I pictured before seeing the movie." [Big-GreenYamo]
- "Yeah, Fred Gwynne was pretty spot on as Jud." [gogogidget]
- "Agreed. The accent, his performance, just perfect." [LowPEZ]
- "Fred Gwynne nailed the role." [LaChanz]
- "Fred nailed it so much that I felt true pity for John Lithgow." [boyderrific]
- "Being a native, it's usually cringy how Hollywood does the Maine accent. He [Fred Gwynne] nailed it." [LaChanz]
- "Still surprised Lithgow either chose against or was instructed to not use the accent. He's incredibly talented and could have easily nailed it. I wonder if he was worried about playing the role too close to Gwynne." [LowHangingLight]

Fans also designed various memes which made reference to Fred Gwynne's accent, specifically to his pronunciation of the words *better*, *what* and *stop*, where the typical South Eastern drawl is recognizable in its orthographic representation:

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.reddit.com/r/stephenking/>.



Figure 1. The meme plays on the household name of the spread “I can’t believe it’s not butter”™. The logo and the font used are the same<sup>6</sup>



Figure 2. The meme refers to the famous quote “Sometimes, dead is better”, first mentioned in the novel by Jud’s character, and then reposed in both film adaptations. The quote even appears on the poster of the 2019 film adaptation<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This meme is publicly accessible at the link: [https://www.reddit.com/r/stephenking/comments/axs4t2/im\\_excited\\_for\\_the\\_new\\_pet\\_sematary\\_movie\\_but/?rdt=47775](https://www.reddit.com/r/stephenking/comments/axs4t2/im_excited_for_the_new_pet_sematary_movie_but/?rdt=47775).

<sup>7</sup> This meme is publicly accessible at the link: <https://forums.nasioc.com/forums/showthread.php?t=2865265>.



Figure 3. The meme simply mocks Jud's accent (more specifically as far as his pronunciation of the words *what* and *stop* are concerned) in the first film adaptation<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, they also designed memes which specifically compared John Lithgow's interpretation of the character to Fred Gwynne's, once again making reference to the actor's accent:



Figure 4. The meme compares the two actors' accents<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> This meme is publicly accessible at the link: <https://itsunderthebed.wordpress.com/tag/jud-crandall/>.

<sup>9</sup> This meme is publicly accessible at the link: <https://ifunny.co/meme/hal-sometimes-dead-is-better-i-it-sometimes-dead-ghost-NKoKFHs18>.

John Lithgow commented on his interpretation of the character and on the decision not to watch Fred Gwynne's performance before filming his own take on the character, claiming that the choice not to put on the accent was a deliberate one which had been carefully pondered:

Stephen King writes him with a very strong accent and they described Fred as making a real meal out of the accent. To me, even a perfectly accurate accent, draws attention to itself and people are familiar enough to me, to know when I'm putting on a different accent from myself and I thought he should have a country quality to him but, the old down east accent would have immediately taken me out of the story and I thought it was so important for people never to be taken out of this story, not for a second. So, we just discarded it. I did experiment with it. We did an entire table read of the script in which I used just a little bit of it. You know, I listened to my aunts and uncles who're all from Boston. My father was born in Boston. I went to Harvard. I know that accent. But, you can tell. [...] Unless, you're playing a comedy. You know? It's a tricky thing, choosing an accent (quoted in Foutch 2019).

Basically, the actor opted for not playing the role with an accent as he did not want the audience to focus on that specific feature rather than on the character. He mentioned the issue of the accent also in another interview, stressing again the importance of not drawing the spectators' attention to it:

We all talked about it [the Maine accent], and we even tried it different ways. I did a whole reading with a Maine accent. I personally felt that even for people who are from Maine, even actors who get it absolutely right, an accent like that kind of takes you out of the story. I myself think that, especially how they have reimagined this script, which is changed from the book, to the first film, to this, it has evolved, and Jud has become a more serious character, in a sense. And because of that, I just felt he had to be a very genuine person. Listen, I have Boston roots. My father was born there, all my uncles and aunts were from there, I went to Harvard, and I know Boston well. I can do an accent. But as soon as I start, that's all you're listening to (quoted in Evangelista 2019).

As far as the Italian dubbed versions of the two films are concerned, it is a fact that both dubbing actors (Sergio Rossi in the 1989 adaptation and Dario Penne in the 2019 adaptation) played the lines of the character in standard



Italian, with no particular accent. This comes as no surprise because the use of accents in Italian dubbing tends to be used only in specific cases, as already mentioned. More specifically, geographical accents are mainly used in comedies, where language variation aims at adding to the comicality of the characters to the point of making them caricatures (Parini 2009, 2017), or in animation, where it aims at conveying specific features usually associated with the various accents (Bruti 2009; Dore 2006, 2020; Minutella 2016, 2021; Parini 2019). In dramas, on the contrary, language variation from a diatopic perspective apparently tends to be avoided in order to prevent any undesired and unrealistic characterization which may result in the disruption of the spectators' suspension of disbelief.

## 6. Readers' and spectators' perception

From the comments of Stephen King's fans retrieved in the Reddit online community pages, it would appear that the issue of Jud Crandall's accent and its absence in John Lithgow's portrayal of the character is an issue that did not go unnoticed and was not appreciated by them. In the section of the paper dedicated to the Italian translation of the novel, it was possible to observe that on some occasions the translator attempted to maintain at least some of the references to Jud's accent and his peculiar pronunciation. Indeed, in a couple of cases the translator maintained the explicit references present in the narrative descriptions (the references to his thick dialect accent and to his Yankee accent, which was not hard-edged at all but was soft and drawling) and in one case she even tried to transpose a case of "phonetically rendered language" (*Coss you aaa* translated as *Mo ci cree'o*), although it did not represent any specific identifiable geographical Italian accent.

Starting from these presuppositions, a perception study was carried out in order to investigate the reactions of both Anglophone Stephen King fans who watched the two films in their original versions and Italian fans who watched them in their Italian dubbed versions. The survey was carried out in July 2022 on the Facebook pages "Stephen King Fan Club"<sup>10</sup> and "Stephen King Constant Readers"<sup>11</sup> for the English native readers/spectators, and on the page "STEPHEN KING – Italia"<sup>12</sup> for the Italian

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/stephenkingsfanclub>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2087306191493834>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/40433042773>.

readers/spectators. The Anglophone speakers were asked to reply to the following question:

In the book *Pet Sematary* Stephen King often refers to the fact that Jud Crandall speaks with a Maine accent. In the film adaptation from 1989 Fred Gwynne played the role with a thick accent, whereas in the 2019 adaptation, John Lithgow did not. As a Stephen King's constant reader, did you notice this difference?

Similarly, Italian speakers were asked the question:

Nel romanzo *Pet Sematary* Stephen King fa continui riferimenti al fatto che Jud Crandall parla con un forte accento dell'area del Maine. Il traduttore italiano del romanzo ha spesso mantenuto i riferimenti all'accento (ad esempio il fatto che Jud parla in maniera strascicata, o che pronuncia "*Ma ci credo*" come "*Mo ci cree'o*"). Nel doppiaggio italiano di entrambi gli adattamenti (del 1989 e del 2019) il personaggio di Jud non parla con nessun accento particolare. Da lettore/lettrice appassionato/a di Stephen King, hai notato questo particolare?<sup>13</sup>

A total of 30 replies were collected from the two American pages and 30 from the Italian page. The results of the Anglophone readers/spectators confirmed what had already been noted through the analysis of the comments posted on the Reddit community page. Indeed, 27 respondents out of 30 (90%) gave a positive answer (most of them also provided various comments to justify their reply, mainly stressing the importance of the accent for Jud's characterization). The respondents who gave a negative answer stated that they were too outraged by the changes in the plot to be concerned about the accent.

As far as Italian readers/spectators are concerned, instead, it is possible to observe an opposite situation: only 6 respondents out of 30 (20%) replied that they had noticed the lack of accent in dubbing, whereas the other 24 (80%) replied that they did not take any notice of it, and provided comments,

<sup>13</sup> In the book *Pet Sematary* Stephen King often refers to the fact that Jud Crandall speaks with thick a Maine accent. The Italian translator of the novel often maintained the references to his accent (for example Jud's drawl or the fact that he pronounces the sentence "*Ma ci credo*" as "*Mo ci creeo*"). In the Italian dubbing of both film adaptations (released in 1989 and 2019), the character of Jud does not speak with any particular accent. As a Stephen King's constant reader, did you notice this difference?

most of which claiming that it is impossible to reproduce an accent in dubbing, unless you want to obtain a comic or an unrealistic effect. This actually reflects what was mentioned in the introduction of the paper about the use of accents and language variation in dubbing, namely the fact that the use of Italian geographical varieties would most probably provoke an estrangement effect upon the spectators, and it seems to be accepted only if used to achieve a comic effect, as in the case of comedies or in animated productions.

## 7. Conclusions

This analysis of the novel *Pet Sematary* has shown the importance of accent and dialect in the construction of the identity of Jud Crandall in the book. Indeed, as has been seen, Stephen King often uses language variation in his dialogues, or, alternatively, he makes explicit references to his peculiar way of speaking and of pronouncing words, constantly reminding his readers that he speaks with a thick South-Eastern accent.

The importance of the use of dialect in literature and the difficulty of translating it in novels has been studied extensively by various scholars (see references in the introduction). The analysis of the Italian translation of *Pet Sematary* has shown a basic lack of consistency in the behaviour of the translator. In fact, she often simply resorted to a strategy of omission, eliminating those parts of the text where King explicitly referred to the character's accent, whereas in some cases she attempted at maintaining them, mentioning the character's peculiar accent or pronunciation, or even trying to reproduce their peculiar features.

As far as the two film adaptations are concerned (1989 and 2019), the study has demonstrated how differently the issue of Jud's accent has been approached, with the first film maintaining this peculiar characteristic and transposing it on screen, and the second one showing a total lack of characterization from this perspective. These two different approaches did not go unnoticed among Stephen King's fans, who generally criticized John Lithgow's interpretation of the character in the 2019 adaptation.

The two Italian dubbed versions, on the contrary, show a similar *modus operandi*. Indeed, the dubbing professionals who worked on the two films opted for a total lack of characterization from a phonological perspective in both cases, and both dubbing actors (Sergio Rossi and Dario Penne) performed the role speaking standard Italian with no particular accent. The tactic is in line with the strategies usually employed in the Italian dubbing

panorama, where the use of geographical accents tends to be avoided in dramas in order to prevent any undesired and unrealistic characterization which may disrupt the spectators' suspension of disbelief.

This lack of characterization is generally accepted by Italian spectators with no particular qualms. That seems to be true also in the case of Stephen King's avid fans, who may be aware of the fact that the character of Jud speaks with a thick accent in the novel, a fact which is occasionally mentioned also in translation, as observed above. The results of the survey conducted on Facebook appear to confirm this lack of awareness on the part of Italian readers/spectators, which reflects an opposite attitude on the part of American readers/spectators.

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