This special double edition of R.I.L.A. – Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata – edited by Annamaria Caimi (Sept. 2002, XXXIV, 1-2) contains the proceedings of Cinema: Paradiso delle lingue – I sottotitoli nell’apprendimento linguistico, a successful formula that combined a scientific conference on subtitled films with a film festival (Pavia, 19-22 Sept. 2001). The papers, most of which were delivered during the conference, are grouped into three sections. The first is devoted to a state-of-the-art description of translation through subtitles from both a linguistic and a socio-historical perspective. The second is focused on the role of subtitles in foreign language teaching and learning. The third contains two bibliographical repertories: (a) an extensive bibliography on the literature on inter-linguistic subtitles from the birth of subtitled films to the present, and (b) a list of the most important references to studies devoted to three kinds of subtitles (e.g. inter-linguistic, intra-linguistic, and “reversed”; cf. below).

In the opening paper Annamaria Caimi and Elisa Perego offer a description of historical, geographical, terminological (the various types of subtitles, e.g. intra-linguistic, intra-linguistic for the hearing impaired, inter-linguistic or standard, reversed intra-linguistic, i.e. L1 dialogue and L2 subtitles) and technical aspects of subtitling that are meant to clarify the field of enquiry for both students, scholars and technicians. The paper also concentrates on subtitles as a three-stage translational strategy that turns an oral L1 text into a written L2 text. This transfer, Caimi and Perego claim, entails three transformations: a translation proper, i.e. from one language into another, a diamesic shift from oral to written and a reduction from longer units to shorter ones. The latter aspect depends on both objective and subjective constraints: on the one hand
factors such as viewing time, good readability, synchronisation but on the other also the audience’s reading skills, which in turn depend on its age and on its linguistic and cultural background, and the balance between length and informative load.

Alberto Farassino’s paper offers instead the viewpoint of a film historian who objectively evaluates the pros and cons of subtitling. Although as a film critic he cannot but recognise that subtitles are intrusive elements that heavily interfere with images thus disturbing the inter-semiotic balance of a film, he also concedes that they become a useful instrument in foreign language teaching/learning. He therefore proposes two different kinds of viewing, an “artistic” one that preserves the quality of images, and a “post-modern” one that instead makes use of the hypertextual material provided by the various combinations of soundtracks and subtitles.

More overtly in favour of subtitling is Giorgio Gosetti, who sees this means as the key strategy to make Italian movies known abroad, at the same time preserving the peculiar features of Italian language and culture. He also purports that despite globalisation Italian culture is very appealing especially in the US, also thanks to the prestige of its cinema.

The object of Gianguido Manzelli’s paper is the double process of translation that affects Maria Zef, a novel by Paola Drigo (1936) that was made into a film by Vittorio Cottafavi (1981). The novel is in fact written in Italian, whereas the film version is spoken in Friulan with Italian subtitles. After illustrating the linguistic features of the Friulan language from a diachronic perspective, Manzelli punctually compares the use of Friulan in the novel and in the film and then considers the Italian translation provided in the film subtitles, thereby showing consistencies and discrepancies among the three texts (i.e. novel, film, subtitles).

Mariateresa Oldani sketches a survey of the status of Indian cinema today. She illustrates how the once popular technique of multiple versions that was meant to solve the problem of making films understandable to people speaking different languages has been more recently replaced by dubbing or subtitling. In fact, imported films are either dubbed or subtitled in English or Hindi, the two official languages of the country since 1949.

The second section starts with Marcel Danesi’s contribution on the nature of “conceptual fluency” in the translation of subtitles. Danesi explains that whenever a text is translated from one language into another the translator needs to translate the source language conceptual system into the target language conceptual system. The transfer can be rated as successful when not only the lexical systems of the two languages involved match, but also when
the underlying cognitive schemes in the two languages correspond to one another. According to Danesi, such a parallelism is the result of a careful contrastive analysis in foreign language teaching and in translator training.

Maria Pavesi also deals with translation problems, concentrating on the translating universal of simplification, which is particularly pervasive in subtitling. She shows how simplification affects different linguistic levels, from micro-linguistic to semiotic ones. This discussion provides the background for the proposal of possible applications of subtitling to language learning/teaching. It is in fact explained that simplification in subtitling creates a useful semiotic cloze test that can be exploited at different levels, depending on learners’ skills.

In his paper Christopher Taylor discusses the features of subtitles in nature documentary films by showing how a multimodal transcription and analysis allows the researcher to fathom the sub-genre of nature documentaries and, consequently, to create subtitles that are appropriate both to the genre requirements and to the needs of the audience.

Anthony Baldry pursues a similar line of research with his MCA, a multimodal concordancer that can segment films into functional units and identify recursive patterns. Even though MCA was conceived as an analytic instrument to examine dynamic multimodal texts, it has proven useful as a self-access learning tool that students can use to watch and listen to films at their own pace.

The teaching applications of subtitled films are also the topic of Elisa Bussi Parmiggiani’s paper. This time, however, teaching proposals are put forward in relation to Scorsese’s film The Age of Innocence. After reviewing the practice of subtitling in film translation, Bussi Parmiggiani focuses on some special forms of attention that subtitles elicit from the viewer. She suggests a whole series of opportunities to exploit the film in the language class in order to teach not only linguistic aspects, but also cultural, social and artistic values. Through a detailed parallel analysis of some sequences and their subtitles, the author shows how modal, thematic and affective aspects are the areas where translating inconsistencies are typically perceptible.

Barbara Airò outlines a profile of subtitling in Arabic-speaking countries by emphasising how relevant a role diglossia and bilingualism play. Airò explains that the standard Arabic that is used in subtitles differs from the dialects that are spoken in everyday interactions. This intricate sociolinguistic scenario has become more complicated because many Arabic-speaking countries, due to the effects of colonialism, largely take recourse to European languages such as French, English or Spanish. As a consequence, the understanding of subti-
titles requires a certain degree of competence on the part of the audience as Standard Arabic is nobody’s native language. In language teaching as well, subtitles can can profitably be used with advanced learners.

Cristina Mariotti shows instead how DVD technology can profitably be used in an English language teaching unit in secondary school. After insisting on the priority of spoken over written communication, Mariotti argues that films offer students more or less the same decoding situation of natural spoken messages. She also suggests various stages of viewing/hearing using the various combinations allowed for by DVD technology – no subtitles, original subtitles, subtitles in the students’ L1, soundtrack/subtitles in other languages – to best meet each teacher’s objectives to promote communicative competence in his/her learners.

The last section in the book contains two bibliographies. The first, compiled by Henrik Gottlieb, is a very comprehensive repertory of all known works on inter-lingual subtitling, covering the period 1929-1999. The bibliography lists 1200 titles from all over the world and includes both scholarly and non-scholarly works. The author adds precious information about each title with various symbols that give immediate access to both source and content. As Gottlieb himself announces, a sequel to this bibliography including post 1999 titles and titles previously unknown to the author will be will be published in a future issue of R.I.L.A.

Elisa Perego organises her bibliographic material in three sections: the first is devoted to titles related to inter-lingual subtitling in general; the second includes the titles of the works that deal with subtitles in second language teaching and learning; the third is devoted to subtitles that are devised for the deaf and hard of hearing. These distinctions make access and search easier and faster. The bibliography will be updated and will be available for consultation on the website of the Department of Linguistics of the University of Pavia (http://dobc.unipv.it/linguistica/).

On the whole, this issue of R.I.L.A. provides both the novice and the researcher with a comprehensive overview of a fascinating topic whose multiple facets are revealed in turn in the various articles. The appeal of the subject, confirmed by the huge success that Cinema Paradiso achieved, is the result of the interplay of various scientific disciplines such as linguistics, psycholinguistics, translation theory, language teaching and cinema studies, and of the attraction films have as an inter-semiotic medium of narration.