

DOCTORAL THESIS

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TRANSLATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN
DIALECT LITERATURE – BOUNDARIES, POTENTIALS
AND PROSPECTS

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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The Subject and Method of the Study

In my dissertation I aim to examine a special concern of literary translation: the problems and potentials of the translation of literary texts written fully in an Italian dialect or containing dialect elements in significant frequency.

To this day, a great many dialects have great importance in Italy alongside the standard language. The inhabitants of many regions still use the dialect of their ancestors among friends or family members; it is also an essential component of many people's identity. Many dialects differ so greatly from standard Italian that the government acknowledges them as independent languages. In certain regions the local dialect is becoming the primary language of administration, displacing Italian, the official language of the country.

A speaker's words not only reflect his or her regional origin when they speak their dialect, but their immediate homeland also affects their use of standard Italian. Besides almost inevitably speaking with the typical inflection of their region, speakers also tend to mix dialect words into their Italian sentences.

As the dialects of the various regions are present in the daily life of Italy, they naturally also appear in its literature. In many literary works, it is of major importance when, how correctly and how much a character speaks in standard Italian, in dialect or in a regional version of Italian. It is also significant what dialect the character speaks: they may use their own dialect as well as the dialect of another region of Italy. Apart from the above, there are many other ways of using dialects in a literary text; it may also happen that the dialect used in the text is not in fact one that exists in any region of Italy. This is a frequent characteristic of the recent new dialect poetry (*poesia neodialettale*), for example (see Reina, Bonaffini and Corti 1963, Pasolini 1980, 1982).

The authors' own testimony may illustrate many reasons they use dialects in their works. Motives vary from the purpose of reproducing common parlance to the intentional accentuation of otherness or unfamiliarity. For diverse reasons the attempts to translate these texts into other foreign languages are numerous (see Haller 2002 and Buonocore 2003). Most editors and translators decide to translate these texts for the literary value they represent. There are different types of publications of these translations, including full-length books as well as specific anthologies of Italian dialect literature (mainly poetry) or of Italian literature not specifically concentrating on the presence of dialects (see Healey-Healey 1998).

In my dissertation I aim to summarize the various methods adopted in translating literary works that contain dialect elements. I examine a great number of approaches, taking into consideration the statements of translators as well as pertinent published criticism.

The presence of a regional linguistic variant different from the current standard language is undoubtedly an inherent part of a literary work – and it is particularly difficult to transmit its nature and significance to the readers of a different culture. These texts have a high semantic content, often remarkably higher than those written in the standard language. This is a result of elliptical style, allusions and metaphors, and other features. Dialect expressions are often connected to concrete situations, everyday events, and connotations that are obvious to any Italian. All these factors contribute to the challenge of transmitting these literary works into a different culture. It is difficult to describe to a foreigner all the ideas an Italian associates with a dialect and, indeed (more importantly for the subject of this dissertation), even the mere fact that a dialect appears in a literary text.

Also important is what the target-language reader thinks when seeing any allusion to a dialect. In many countries all over the world readers would have an idea of what a dialect is and how it may differ from the standard language. In their daily life, though, the difference between these two variants is not present (or no longer so) or manifests itself in quite a different manner (see the essay by Ferguson (2002) and the articles by various translators such as Kahn, 2004; Parcz, 1994 and Bényiné 2002). When dealing with the translation of dialect literature my purpose has not been to describe an ideal way of translation defined by objective criteria; I consider such an approach foreign to the essence of literary translation. The sociolinguistic approach plays an important role in my study, which often focuses on an analysis of the sociocultural context of the source and target audience.

Language and dialect – issues of a standard language and bilingualism – are usually looked upon in different ways in various cultures. In the chapter on terminology I describe in what sense I use these terms. Literary use is often an important defining criterion for languages as opposed to dialects: several terminologies only recognize a variant as a “language” if a number of literary works in the national canon have been written in it (see Pellegrini, 1970 and Grassi, 1996). Considering this requirement we may recognize a contradiction: if a dialect boasts critically acknowledged literature, it may well claim the title of being a language. Although in this case, strictly considering the distinction between language and dialect, we cannot classify these works as dialect literature. This would be the case, for example, with many works of new dialect literature: the poets of this movement tend to choose distinctly marginal dialects with no literary (and often no written) tradition

whatsoever. In many cases it is the new dialect poets who historically first put these vernaculars in writing (Pasolini 2007b, Piga 1991).

We might also mention that the recent Language Law of Italy (482/999) has given the legal status of language to a number of dialects. Strictly speaking, of course, if a dialect is so self-sufficient that it is considered a language, it should not be the object of my study. The theory of literature does not differentiate these varieties: all literary works written in them – other than standard Italian – fall under the heading of dialect literature. I will follow this tradition, examining the translation of literature written in the dialects evolved from Latin over centuries. Following the practise of literary theory, I shall call all these varieties – other than Italian – “dialects,” reserving the designation “language” for standard Italian alone.

This dissertation provides a brief summary of the history of literature in Italian, and in dialects in Italy, both synchronically in the present day and diachronically, examining linguistic changes over time (Haller 2002). It would be difficult to appraise clearly the present situation without understanding its antecedents. Still, in the 20th and 21st centuries, a great number of literary works are written in dialect, or contain a significant amount of dialect text. My research concentrates on the translation of these writings and the dilemmas their translators may face.

A fundamental issue when translating dialect literature is the decision whether we intend to let the target-language reader know that the original writing was written in or contained some text in dialect. I first examine the background of this decision, looking into the arguments both for and against the transfer of the dialect element (Altano, 1988, Rognlien (in Agrosí, 2005), Quadruppani (in Lombardi, 2003) etc.). I follow then by analysing the possible problems arising when the translator aims to transmit the linguistic characteristics of the source text. It is particularly difficult to reproduce such characteristics in another language. Whether or not the translator decides to do so, they often have the possibility to attach an explanation to the text. These explanations may be of various types, and may appear both before and after the text, as well as in other media such as literary reviews or conference lectures. These various sources of information imply a variety of anticipated readers. A chapter on the subject analyses these possibilities.

The approach of the translator is of course different from the way a non-professional native speaker reads the same text: this entails several consequences. It often happens that dialect literature contains problematic expressions difficult even for many Italians to understand. To help them many authors provide support: most typically, the dialect text is immediately followed by its translation into standard Italian. Another technique is to place a

glossary at the end of the book covering the dialect expressions that may cause problems (see novels by D'Arrigo, Consolo, Atzeni, etc.). All of these methods, however, pose a new dilemma for translators: if they decide to create a target text with no signs of dialect elements, then it is meaningless to provide these explanations. Also, if the translator uses a dialect in the target text, problematic words will often be different, so they will need to omit the explanations in their original place and may need to use others where the target text requires it.

The language of the original is often not the translator's mother tongue; it might therefore happen that they experience difficulties in fully comprehending certain passages. The same thing happens, of course, with dialect literature; here the presence of a dialect, often as different from Italian as an entirely different language, can make the translator's task even harder. It is important to identify dialect elements, distinguishing them from standard Italian words. Translators claim to have encountered this problem several times (Lombardi, 2003). It is often not obvious whether an expression unfamiliar even to many native speakers is a real or pseudo-archaism, neologism, dialect word, or the like. Footnotes or the typography of the original rarely indicate which are the non-standard Italian elements of the text and still less what their source may be (see Eco, 2003).

The dissertation analyses the specific problems that translators of dialect literature encounter and examines the various ways they attempt to tackle such problems. Means of support apart from dictionaries and other reference works may include collaboration with the author as well as a wide variety of electronic resources (Guarnieri, 1998; Agrosí, 2005).

Dialect literature involves mono-, bi-, and multilingual texts with a variety of mixtures of dialects and standard Italian. All these types of texts create their own specific dilemmas that I analyse thoroughly.

The dissertation ends with the description of a translation method that a few translators – such as Kahn in German and Chigusa in Japanese – have employed successfully. They create a variant of the target language that appears to be a dialect, but in fact does not correspond to any existing dialect, nor does it give a clear indication as to where in the country it may be spoken. This technique may be a good solution, avoiding a number of pitfalls associated with the translation of dialect literature.

Results of the study

The dissertation aims to examine the various methods employed by translators dealing with Italian dialect literature. I analyse a number of possible solutions and consider the possible benefits and drawbacks of each approach. I cover a wide range of possibilities and examine the criteria from both objective and subjective angles. I consider it inevitable and inherent to the examination of literary translation also to engage subjective aspects of the analysis.

I demonstrate the different attitudes of authors that often call for various approaches in translation. A great many authors have chosen dialect as the language of their work because this is their mother tongue, and thus by far the most familiar idiom for them. A radical change occurred in the course of the last decades: dialects are more and more neglected while the standard language is spreading through all regions and social classes, becoming the mother tongue for a majority of Italians (Dardano, 1986; Beccaria, 1986; Fogarasi, 1987). Many modern authors have chosen to write in dialect, but for many of them it has nonetheless become almost a foreign language that they must learn as adults. This is the case with many authors of the above-mentioned movement of new dialect poetry.

I mention the reasons why this change occurred, but what really matters here is the phenomenon itself. The translator may approach these two types of texts with different attitudes. As it appears from many resources, translators often chose to translate a dialect text into the standard language of the target audience because, they say, the dialect used in the original was similarly the mother tongue of the author and the target audience (see Weaver's translation of the *Pasticciaccio* (Gadda 1965) and Altano's essay (1988) on the subject). This, of course, does not apply to those authors who use a dialect not really familiar to them.

Another issue to consider when translating the writings of the latter group (e.g. some texts by Gadda or Pasolini) involves the translation of grammatically or lexically inaccurate passages. (It is also difficult for the often non-native Italian translator to notice these errors.) They then must decide whether to transmit them in any way.

Criticism and the testimony of translators and authors on the subject mostly concern individual translations. Overarching ideas appear sporadically, and largely just allusively. I wish to outline some approaches regarding the general aspects of the translation of dialect literature in the hope that they may inspire those interested in the subject. Admittedly, translating dialect literature into another language is a difficult task. In the course of my work however, I have found the translator's solution in a number of cases successful, even

estimable. I have also encountered many translations that have met with a favourable response from the audience, critics and the authors themselves. An analysis of the dilemmas that translators of dialect literature encounter may reveal new dimensions of this question. By considering these issues I hope to present new approaches or even constructive objections that may inspire all participants in this process.