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Local, Regional, and Transnational Identities in Translation: the Italian Case

Elisa Segnini  and Gigliola Sulis 

KEYWORDS multilingualism; translation; transnational; Italian literature

Introduction¹

This special issue features a dialogue among scholars in comparative literature, national literatures, or translation studies and translators. Our joint aim is to explore the role played by translation in the international circulation of texts that challenge expectations of ethnic, cultural and linguistic homogeneity within national literatures. Through distant and close readings that draw on sociology of translation, world literature and literary criticism, among other approaches, the contributions investigate how translation is embedded in texts marked by cultural and linguistic specificity; which ones, among these texts, are selected for translation; and the agency of translators, writers, editors and publishers in this process. Particular attention is paid to how ethnic representations are crafted in translation, to the aesthetic, social and political implications of these choices, and to the use of translation as a device to negotiate individual and collective identities. The focus is contemporary Italy. Individual case studies consider the mediation of internal and external linguistic alterity for foreign readership, the treatment of local idiosyncrasies on a global scale, the role of (self) translation in the articulation of transnational identities, and the strategies used by writers, translators, editors and publishers to position their texts in different literary contexts. The translation and international circulation of Italian texts – mostly fiction, but also theory – become a testing ground to explore the refractions of non-hegemonic identities, especially those ascribed to the subnational and the above-national. The dialogue between scholars and translators aims to contribute to current debates on questions of translatability in relation to world literature, on the formation of national and transnational literary canons, and on the changes brought by globalisation to national and international book markets.

Translation between national and world literature

From Benjamin ([1923] 1999) to Berman ([1984] 1992), from Brisset ([1990] 1996) to Spivak (1993), scholars have written in defence of the preservation of the alterity of the source text and against the standardising tendencies that prevail in the

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translation process. In 1995, Lawrence Venuti concluded *The Translator's Invisibility* with a call to action, inviting translators to envisage new ways to 'signal the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text' (1995, 310). In *Translation and Identity*, Cronin (2006, 15) suggested that a renewed attention to linguistic and cultural differences is necessary to engage in translation at a time in which the study of literary texts is no longer limited to the territorial boundaries of the nation-state. While Venuti and Cronin see in translation the potential to facilitate the appreciation of cultural diversity, others have considered it a threat. As Gisèle Sapiro has underlined, the emergence of multinational publishers and the success of authors coming from ethnic minorities or from the periphery indicate the increasingly de-nationalising of cultural production, but the international book industry continues to rely on the identification of language and nation (Sapiro 2010, 240). When we enter the bookstore, so-called 'international literature' is still organised according to categories that essentialise the foreign and erase its internal variety, thus simultaneously playing against texts characterised by the use of regional languages or the representation of migrant identities (Sapiro 2009, 197). Emily Apter has similarly warned that, in an international global market, preference tends to be given to works that underwrite cultural equivalence and exemplify unequivocal 'nationally or ethnically branded differences' (2013, 2), thus leaving little space for local references or for the 'creolization of culture' (Lionnet and Shi 2011).

The presence of linguistic difference within a narrative in the language of the nation-state inevitably touches on issues of power, hegemony and colonialism by underlining the composite nature of societies. Against the evidence of increasing multilingualism, monolingualism is imagined worldwide as the linguistic norm (Tymoczko 2006, 16). The 'one language one nation' model was key to the construction of the modern national state and to the ideological definition of collective citizenship, and still constitutes a powerful framework that conceptually neutralises the manifestations of multilingualism (Yildiz 2012; Pandey 2015; Gramling 2016). In this light, the choice to make non-hegemonic languages resound in the text, implicitly or explicitly, marks individual, cultural, or social attitudes towards the acceptance of both the foreign and the internal other, and has political implications (Lennon 2010, 121). The manifold challenges involved in translating literature that does not abide by the monolingual paradigm or align with fixed national stereotypes have been emphasised by scholars. In particular, Rainer Grutman (2006, 18) has shown that translators find themselves faced with the task of rendering not only languages, but also the tensions and power dynamics between them, in terms of poetics and ideology. Translating this type of texts involves engaging with multiple levels of negotiation, as well as with acts of linguistic appropriation.

Linguistic, geographic and cultural distance between source and target context, literary conventions in the receiving country, and assumptions made by publishers, editors and translators about readers' interest and their willingness to engage with linguistic complexity are determining factors in regulating the international circulation of books. As a result, works inscribed with local references or written in dialects and minority languages tend to attract little interest beyond the culture in which

they are produced. Even when they do cross national borders, their linguistic multiplicity and its poetical and ideological implications are often reduced in favour of a readable, homogeneous standard in the target language – the ‘regime of fluency’ that dominates in the Anglo-American context (Venuti 1995, 1–13).

The Italian Case

A mosaic-nation such as Italy offers an ideal ground to evaluate the translatability of local, regional and transnational identities. Unified only in 1861 after centuries of fragmentation and shifts in internal and external borders, the country’s collective identity is defined by tensions between the national dimension and longstanding regional loyalties, and further complicated by outward and inward transnational connections. As the national language, Italian coexists with hundreds of spoken dialects, with twelve minority languages recognised and protected by national and regional laws (van der Jeught 2016) and with the languages of the migrant communities living in the country (Chini 2011). In literature, polycentrism and multilingualism are endemic to the Italian tradition since its inception in the late Middle Ages, and works written in more than one language occupy central positions in the national canon (Contini [1963] 1970; Dionisotti 1967; Paccagnella 1983; Asor Rosa 1989). The richness of the tradition of poetry in dialect is well exemplified in the three-volume anthology collected by Franco Brevini, *La poesia in dialetto* (1999). Even if we limit the focus to the 20th century, the use of dialect underpins the dramatic production of internationally renowned figures such as the Sicilian Luigi Pirandello, the Neapolitan Eduardo De Filippo and the Milanese Dario Fo. In prose, exemplary cases are the geo-centred and linguistically multifaceted masterpieces by Carlo Emilio Gadda (set in Milan and Rome), Pier Paolo Pasolini (Rome), Beppe Fenoglio (the Langhe, in Piedmont), Luigi Meneghello (Veneto) and Vincenzo Consolo (Sicily). Moreover, while in Anglophone countries the presence of significant quantities of languages other than English is mostly found in books issued by independent publishing houses, at the margins of the mainstream literary scene (Lennon 2010, 9), in Italy these works have found a venue with both emerging and established publishers.

Policentrism and multilingualism are also widely present in 21st century Italian fiction, from Andrea Camilleri’s ‘Sicilianised’ idiolect in his Montalbano series and historical novels to the regional schools of crime fiction or the Sardinian *nouvelle vague*; even authors geographically rooted but tendentially monolingual, like the Neapolitan Elena Ferrante, make dialect a central element of their stories on a thematic level. In addition, after Italy turned from a nation of emigrants into a destination for international migration in the 1990 s, we have witnessed the emergence of numerous postcolonial writers or writers who engage with the theme of migration (Parati 2006; Burns 2013; Negro 2015; Romeo 2017). These new voices enrich transnationally the variety of cultural references and languages of Italian literature and contribute to the lively global debate on mobile identities and identitarian crossings (Polezzi 2012). Italian literature, in other words, defies the assumption that individuals ‘possess one “true” language only, their “mother tongue”, and that through this possession they are ‘organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture and nation’ (Yildiz 2012, 2).

The presence, in literary texts, of words and phrases in languages other than the standard – dialects, minority languages, international languages – is by now customary for Italian readers and publishers, and yet it remains a challenge for international circulation. Multilingual works tend to be excluded or marginalised, to the extent that the national canon as constituted in Italy looks substantially different from the sets of books considered ‘Italian classics’ abroad. The world-wide visibility of Italo Calvino’s crystal-clear Italian prose and its contrast with the limited, elitist reception of Gadda’s complex multilingualism and baroque style is a case in point. Nevertheless, today an increasing number of translated texts is reaching Anglophone readerships. Meneghello’s *Libera nos a malo* (1963), a novel which was already considered canonical in Italy in the 1970s, was translated for the first time into French by Christophe Mileschi in 2011, and into English in 2012 by Frederika Randall. The Italian migration literature and postcolonial novels of the 2000s and 2010s are also increasingly translated, and writers like Gabriella Ghermandi, Amara Lakhous and Igiaba Scego are all present in the global scene. Furthermore, multilingual classics are presented in new translations: it is the case of Pasolini’s *Ragazzi di vita* (1955), for example, first translated in English in 1968 by Emile Capouya, and then retranslated by Ann Goldstein in 2016.

Contributions

The essays in this issue address two main questions: In what ways do translation practices contribute to a global understanding of Italian literature as a multifaceted production that is local and transnational, as well as multilingual? And to what extent are linguistic dynamism and cultural polycentrism erased, maintained or even foregrounded when these texts travel through translation?

Elisa Segnini investigates the global reception of two successful series of novels rooted in specific local contexts and concerned with the representation of diglossia: the Inspector Montalbano crime novels by Andrea Camilleri (1990–2020 s) and *My Brilliant Friend*, the four-volume series by Elena Ferrante (2010s). Rainier Grutman focuses on the use of translation by migrant writers to forge a literary persona. Tracing the coordinates of the northward trajectory of the Algerian Amara Lakhous, who reached fame in Italy in the 2000s, he reads the writer’s ambivalent declarations and the belittling of self-translation from Arabic as a positioning strategy aimed to reinforce Lakhous’ status as a writer in the receiving culture. Valerio Ferme reflects on his work as co-translator of Franco Cassano’s essays in sociology of culture, *Il pensiero meridiano* (1996); he justifies the choice of reducing the evocative polysemy of the original in *The Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean* (2012) to make key concepts accessible to Anglo-American readers.

Ferme’s article is also a bridge between the case studies and the conversation pieces, where the theoretical tenets of this special issue are discussed with two key figures among the English translators of local, regional and transnational Italy, Frederika Randall and Ann Goldstein. These dialogues, that aim to close the distance between scholars and practitioners of translations, follow Andrew Chesterman’s invitation to enrich the contributions to the field of ‘translator studies’ by working on translators’ ‘activities or attitudes, [and] their interaction with their social and technical environment’ (Chesterman 2009, 20). Speaking respectively to Elisa Segnini and

Gigliola Sulis on the role of translation within the global Anglophone literary scene, Randall and Goldstein open their working laboratory of translators of multilingualism and comment on specific textual passages as well as on the underlying principles of poetics and ideology. Randall focuses on the use of irony in two Italian writers of the Northeast, Ippolito Nievo and Luigi Meneghello, while Goldstein offers an overview of lexical choices from her translations of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Primo Levi, Elena Ferrante, Milena Agus and Amara Lakhous. Both translators underline the importance of preserving the alterity of the foreign text. What changes in their translations is the approach to linguistic otherness, which relies on their individual habitus (as defined by Bourdieu) and on the expectations of editors and publishers. This results in a distinctive interest for and acceptance of dialects, accompanied by an extensive apparatus of footnotes, in Randall's translations, inspired by her antihegemonic stance in support of minority cultures, in opposition to Goldstein's minimum but strategic preservation of the linguistic variety of the source texts.

The contributions to *Local, Regional, and Transnational Identities in Translation* present the Italian case in order to highlight both structural trends and individual strategies in the reshaping of 'local' references, regional specificity and linguistic difference for multiple audiences: from Segnini's analysis of the international trajectories of the Sicilian and Neapolitan identities expressed in Camilleri and Ferrante's novels to Grutman's study on how self-translation is concealed in Lakhous' construction of his authorial persona, from Ferme's acceptance of the limited translatability of a sociological concept such as Cassano's 'pensiero meridiano' to Randall and Goldstein's assessment of their own individual approaches to the translations of Italian modern and contemporary culture. As in the trivial story on the hornet, which due to its body shape and weight should not be able to fly, and yet does so, these articles prove that the untranslatable text – too rich in local references, too multilingual – is nevertheless translated, and, against all difficulties, continues to live new lives beyond national and linguistic borders.

As we close this special issue of *The Translator*, our thoughts are for Frederika Randall (Pittsburgh, 1948 – Rome, 2020), who shared with us her competence and infused her militant passion and intellectual generosity into the debates that inspired this collection of essays. *Local, Regional, and Transnational Identities in Translation: The Italian Case* is dedicated to her memory.

Note

1. The inspiration for this special issue comes from a conference of the same title, organised by Elisa Segnini with the support of the *Canadian Social Sciences and the Humanities Research Council*, and held at University of British Columbia in Vancouver (31st of March – 2nd of April 2016), and from the discussions originated on the occasion of the *Ferrante Fever* event held at the University of Leeds on the 13th of October 2016, led by Olivia Santovetti and co-organised by Gigliola Sulis.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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