

IRVINE WELSH'S *PORNO*:
A TRANSLATION QUALITY ASSESSMENT

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In an interview by *La Stampa* journalist Mario Baudino, during the 2002 Literature Festival in Mantua, the novelist Irvine Welsh, commenting on how rapidly language changes, stated that as soon as he finishes writing something, the language has already changed and so he begins writing again¹. All varieties of language are subject to constant change, but the restricted language codes used by youth today seem to have speeded up in their transitivity², aided by global communication systems which allow a term used on one side of the globe to be accessed almost immediately by young people on the other³. This tendency to rapid change is the greatest challenge a translator faces when working on young people's language. Not only must the translator have knowledge of the particular language code used by one particular group of young people in one particular place of the planet at a specific time in history, but he must be able to match it in the same

¹ *Il «bravo ragazzo» Welsh*, in «La Stampa», 06/09/02. In the interview, in the reply to the question: «Ma da un libro all'altro, quali sono le motivazioni che la spingono ad andare avanti, le sorprese possibili?» Welsh replied: «Tante. Il linguaggio cambia rapidissimamente. Quando ho finito di scrivere è già un'altra cosa, si può ricominciare».

² See for example D. CRYSTAL, *English as a Global Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1997, M. CRONIN, *Across the Lines*, Cork, Cork University Press 2000 and S. DENT, *The Language Report*, Oxford, OUP 2003.

³ In S. ELMES (ed.), *The Routes of English*, London, BBC Adult Learning 2000, Melvin Bragg comments: «Of all the microdialects of Britain at the start of the twenty-first century, this language of youth is the fastest-moving ...».

dimensions⁴ to the restricted code used by young people in the target language.

Welsh has been called «the king of British youth literature»⁵ and continues the trend of reproducing restricted language codes, particularly the dynamic, ever-changing, unconventional variety used by young people, found in literature since the 1950s⁶. Irvine Welsh's latest novel, *Porno*, published in 2002⁷, is a torrent of jargon, slang, innovative expressions and terms which pose a tremendous challenge for the translator. The present assessment will be carried out using the framework offered by Juliane House's recently revisited model for translation quality assessment⁸. House's model aims first at obtaining a text profile through a systematic linguistic-pragmatic analysis of the source text (S.T.). The translated text (T.T.) is then analysed using the same situational dimensions. Finally, a comparison is made between the various dimensions of the two texts. Using this model, it has been possible to identify the problems that have to be dealt with when translating young people's language, examine how such problems have been resolved in the translation and see what shifts of meaning, if any, have occurred.

⁴ U. ECO, *Dire quasi la stessa cosa*, Bompiani, Milano 2003. Eco describes how a translator must negotiate in creating his translation: «Dire quasi la stessa cosa è un procedimento che si pone... all'insegna della *negoziazione*» p. 10.

⁵ This term was used by journalist B. WAZIR, in a review of *Porno* in «The Observer», 11 August 2002.

⁶ A group of English writers of the 1950s, whose heroes share certain rebellious and critical attitudes toward society, used the typical language of youth in their time. They became known as *Angry Young Men*, a term originally taken from the title of Leslie Allen Paul's autobiography, *Angry Young Man* (1951), and which became current with the production of John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956). Included among the 'angry young men' were the playwrights John Osborne and Arnold Wesker and the novelists Kingsley Amis, John Braine, John Wain, and Alan Sillitoe.

⁷ I. WELSH, *Porno*, London, W. W. Norton 2002. Translation by M. BOCCHIOLA, Parma, Guanda 2003.

⁸ For reasons of space it is impossible to give a detailed description of the model in this article. For a full description of the model see J. HOUSE, *Translation Quality Assessment - A Model Revisited*, Tübingen, G. Narr 1997.

In the novel *Porno*, the various characters, who are identified and continually distinguished by their particular idiolect, occupy entire chapters in a first person narration. The language code used in the first person narration consequently changes as the characters/chapters change to reappear as the story progresses. Within this article, it has only been possible to consider one particular aspect of *Porno*, and that is, the language used by one of the characters in the story, Nikki Fuller-Smith⁹. An analysis of the register (field, tenor, mode) and genre was made of the language she uses in the original text and a profile of the individual text function formulated, following House's indications. This analysis¹⁰ was then compared to the same language dimensions in the T.T. and conclusions drawn.

Given the impossibility within the scope of the present article of reporting all the aspects of the above-mentioned comparison, only the parts of T.T. considered to be 'mismatches' (to use House's terminology) or problem areas will be here described.

Use of phrases and words typical of British upper-middle classes

This element is extremely difficult to negotiate in translation. In Italy the identification, through language use, of a person's social class is much less well-defined than it is in England¹¹. In the following examples, an English reader would immediately identify the type of expression used as that typical of upper-middle classes.

⁹ The chapters taken into consideration are: 2, 4, 6, 8, 11, 16, 26, 29, 31, 37, 39, 42, 47, 53, 60, 63, 72, 74, 79.

¹⁰ The analysis is not included for reasons of space in this article but can be obtained directly from the author at rowenacoles@libero.it.

¹¹ T. PARKES in *Italian Neighbours*, London, Minerva 1992, comments: «I am tempted at this point to the rather grand reflection that thus, while the English have their lower classes, their middle classes and their upper classes,

e.g. ... somewhat upset (p. 267) → ... un po' sconvolti (p. 297); And what would his name be? (p. 214) → E come si chiama? (p. 239); McClymont, in particular, is pretty drunk. (p. 220) → McClymont, in particolare, è piuttosto brillo. (pp. 245-6); Princess! How's chilly Jockoland? – Quite warm, actually, Dad. (p. 153) → Principessa! Come va nella gelida terra dei kilt? – Nemmeno troppo gelidamente, papà. (p. 171)

There is inevitably little in the translation of Nikki's speech that identifies her with a particular social class. Only in the last example is there a suggestion of upper-middle social class in the use of 'principessa/papà', otherwise the language seems to be socially levelled out. The difficulty of matching the speech according to social class means that a part of the humour of the original (a well-bred young lady from a 'good' upper-middle class family getting involved in a porno film together with people well below her class) is lost.

*Use of varied and often erudite vocabulary,
frequent eloquence and use of metaphorical language*

The translated text seems to lack this aspect of Nikki's language. The impact, for example, of Nikki's use of Latin terms which frequently gives a scholarly tone to her language is not matched in the translation.

e.g. ... to the status of bona fida lover. (p. 13) → ... al rango di amante in piena regola. (p. 20); I don't think porn per se is the real issue. (p. 266) → Non credo che il problema sia la pornografia in sé. (p. 297); ... she ripostes vehemently. (p. 43) → ... ribatte con veemenza. (p. 51)

the Italians in turn have their *dipendenti*, their *statali*, and their *autonomi*, ... there is more mobility between these groups than one would expect to find in class structure» A. ROSS in *U and Non-U* in N. MITFORD (ed.), *Noblesse Oblige*, London, Hamish Hamilton 1956, also observed: «... among European languages, English is, surely, the most suited to the study of linguistic class-distinctions».

One of the problems for the translator in this regard is the fact that the impact of Latinate terms on a reader whose language is of Germanic origin is not equivalent to the impact of such terms on a reader whose language is of Latin origin.

Nikki's language often displays eloquence of expression and originality of word association structured in an elegant, flowing syntax, showing skilful language use. In the T.T., this elegance of expression is not always matched. The translator tends to use either more common terms and syntax:

I rise, wrapping my dressing gown around me and head to the kitchen. (p. 16) → Mi alzo, mi metto la vestaglia e vado in cucina. (p. 24); Now I choose to discard the sapless shell that's left ... (p. 39) → Ora ho deciso di buttare via il guscio vuoto che sei rimasto ... (p. 47); I feel despondency setting in ... (p. 40) → Mi sento prendere dallo sconforto ... (p. 49)

or terms and syntax of a more substandard type:

I don't like arriving abruptly in a place. (p. 213) → Non mi piace arrivare in un posto di botto. (p. 238); This is one of those places, so overwhelmingly like stepping back into another age that its tawdriness dazzles. (p. 49) → Questo è uno di quei posti, è così sconvolgente quanto sembra di tornare in un'altra era che la sua pacchianeria lascia a bocca aperta. (p. 58); It badly needs editing. (p. 51) → Servirebbe montaggio come il pane. (p. 61)

Play on words with humorous effect

Playing on words is one of the greatest challenges for a translator¹² because different cultural frames are often invol-

¹² D. KATAN, in *Translating Cultures*, Manchester, St. Jerome 1999, suggests a 'chunking up and down' procedure to negotiate the translation of words with comic effect. See Figure 26, *Translating with the Chunking procedure*, p. 152.

ved. As Neubert and Shreve¹³ note: «Matching cultural frames is an extremely important and difficult translation task». Nikki frequently plays with words, but the T.T. has not always been able to match this aspect. One example, «erections lost» (p. 12), brings to the mind of a normally educated British person John Milton's classic *Paradise Lost*. This recall is suggested by the unusual, marked syntax (adjective following noun) and particular choice of lexis – 'lost' erections instead of 'failed' or 'lack of'. The reference is clear for a British reader and produces a pleasing humorous effect. The translator offers «*erezione perduta*» (p. 19), with normalisation of the syntax in Italian and inevitable agreement due to Italian language code of the adjective 'perduta' with preceding noun. Milton's poem in Italian is usually translated as *Paradiso perduto*. The normally educated Italian reader would probably not be able to grasp the hidden reference to Milton, due to different cultural and linguistic circumstances and would therefore miss out on the humour of the original. It may have been possible, through the chunking procedure, to have identified the title of a classic in Italian literature and made an equivalent and culturally appropriate play on words.

In another example, Nikki invents a title for the pornographic film the group is making: *Seven Rides for Seven Brothers* (p. 189). She plays humorously with the title of a film entitled *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* – a film likely to be known to the average American and European reader. The translation gives: «*Sette troie per sette fratelli*» (p. 212). Although the reader is informed that the group sniggers, («*Almeno il titolo li colpisce. Ridacchiano tutti quando leggono sul frontespizio: *Sette troie per sette fratelli**»), the humour – if indeed it can be called humour – created in the translation is produced only through the use of common vulgar word 'troie'. The comic association in English between the new ti-

¹³A. NEUBERT, G. SHREVE, *Translation as Text*, Ohio, The Kent State University Press 1992.

tle and the original film, which has as its subject a decorous, moral, law-abiding family, does not find its equivalence in the T.T. The S.T. produces laughter because of its clever, ironical use of euphemism¹⁴ and rhyme. The T.T. produces laughter (perhaps) by changing a socially acceptable term into a vulgarity. Of course, a literal translation of the words of the title obeying an informative language function would lose the humorous effect produced in the expressive language function that is created in the original. However, it is this latter effect and the way that the humour has been produced that should be captured in translation¹⁵. Here, too, the chunking procedure may have helped to produce the title of a morally upright film, well-known in Italy, which could contrast with the vulgar, immoral reality of the pornographic film being made in the story. For example, a humorous play on the wording of a well-known film could be *Via con la castagna*, playing with the title of the famous film *Via col vento*. The play on words in this proposal involves the same humorous use of euphemism as the word 'ride', which can refer either to an act of riding a horse, bicycle or motorcycle or, in vulgar slang, to an act of sexual intercourse. 'Castagna' can refer either to the fruit of the chestnut tree or, in vulgar slang, to the female genitals. There is equivalence of effect on the reader with regard to euphemism, although inevitably the recall of words through rhyme (bride/ride) is lost¹⁶. Alternatively, a play on words could use the sound and letters of one of the words in the title, as in the S.T. For example, the well-known film *Fronte del porto* would undoubtedly be recalled in an enter-

¹⁴ P. HOWARD claims in, *The State of the Language*, Penguin, London 1986, that: «There is a natural human tendency to euphemism about naming sex and its bits and pieces».

¹⁵ With reference to word-play, K. REISS, in *Translation Criticism - the Potentials and Limitations*, Manchester, St. Jerome 2000, states: «It should be represented by some parallel structure».

¹⁶ U. ECO, *Ibid.* p. 1, states: «Di qui l'idea che la traduzione si fondi su alcuni processi di negoziazione, la negoziazione essendo appunto un processo in base al quale, per ottenere si rinuncia a qualcosa d'altro ...».

taining way by an Italian reader in *Fronte del porno*¹⁷. Alternatively, a title like *Sette pose per sette fratelli* would play on the Italian translation of the film in reference in the S.T.: *Sette spose per sette fratelli*. Here the euphemistic substitution of 'spose' for 'pose' has a comic effect similar to the euphemistic substitution of 'brides' for 'rides' and follows the same linguistic pattern. In the three proposals, the humour provoked by the T.T. title finds near-equivalence in the type of humour experienced by a S.T. reader.

Another example of word-play shows how sometimes it is important to convey the meaning of the lexis to the disadvantage of the humorous word-play in itself. Nikki describes a bank clerk she intends to con: «Poor Alan. The wisdom of youth married to the dynamic energy of old age. A banking combination but not a bankable one» (p. 310) is translated: «Povero Alan. La saggezza della gioventù unita all'energia e al dinamismo della vecchiaia. Una combinazione da bancario, ma non di quelle pagabili al portatore» (pp. 344-345). Even if in Italian the same play on 'bank' is not feasible, the translator has found an admirable equivalence of the humorous concept behind the word-play in English by keeping the same metaphor.

Use of overloaded nominal groups

Nikki's speech frequently contains frequent long nominal groups. Abundant pre-modification together with frequent use of nominalisation are ever-increasing features of modern day

¹⁷ In an article in *TuttoLibri* in «La Stampa», 14/02/2004, G. L. BECCARIA talks of «moduli sempre pronti» when commenting on the use of film titles in newspaper headings and publicity. He states: «La citazione di una formula nota è per esempio uno dei terreni comuni d'intesa, un modo spiccio e insieme ironico di comunicare. Lo fanno moltissimo i giovani, che citano spesso i titoli dei film di maggior successo ...».

English¹⁸ and young people, in particular, seem to have a predilection for it. This creates a problem for the translator, as Italian syntax does not foresee long nominal groups, preferring to use post-modifying prepositional phrases¹⁹. Long nominal groups can concentrate a lot of information into few words and this has a sort of brainstorming effect on the reader. The strings that Nikki formulates are often very original. Information, which in standard spoken English would probably have been conveyed in prepositional clauses, is concentrated into a nominal group. For example, «a hearty, dental-filling-exposing laugh» (p. 173) would have been conveyed more usually by 'a hearty laugh that exposed his dental fillings'. The latter is the form found in the T.T.: «Lui fa una risata cordiale, che mostra lo stucco nei denti» (p. 193). Standard Italian syntax has been used but it does not reflect the originality and vivacity of the S. T. However, it would indeed seem difficult to re-propose the same syntactical process in Italian because of the difference in the language systems.

Similarly, in the expression «... in respect to his lighthouse-like smile» (p. 174) translated as «... in reazione al suo sorriso splendente come un faro» (p. 195), the conciseness of the image in English is expanded in Italian (note that 'splendente', implicit in the original, is made explicit in the translation, supporting the explicitation hypothesis²⁰), producing a

¹⁸ M. HALLIDAY, *New Ways of Meaning*, in M. PUTZ (ed.), *Thirty Years of Linguistic Evolution*, Philadelphia, Benjamins 1992, pp. 59-95, uses the term 'thinginess' to describe nominalisation and is concerned about «the trend towards thinginess» fearing «a world made entirely of things».

¹⁹ For further details see R. BACCHIELLI, *Syntheticity and analyticity in the syntactic make-up of English*, in *English Diachronic Syntax*, Bergamo, Guerini 1993, pp. 55-66.

²⁰ The so-called 'explicitation hypothesis' was formulated by Blum-Kulka in 1986 and refers to the technique of making explicit in the T.T. information what is implicit in the S.T. According to the explicitation hypothesis, it is the process of translation itself, rather than any specific differences between particular languages, which bears the major part of the responsibility for explicitation. For further details see M. BAKER (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, London, Routledge 1998, pp. 81-82.

normal form of simile and losing some of the creative dynamism of the original. Greater explicitness and a process of normalisation, leading to a loss of the S.T. originality, can also be seen in «fetid, exhaust-fume-filled spring air» (p. 373) translated as «un'aria di primavera ma pestilenziale, satura di gas di scarico» (p. 412) where, besides the necessary conversion of the S.T. pre-modification into post-modification with prepositional phrases, the translator adds explicitness by use of the explicative connective 'ma', which seems to diminish some of the irony of the original.

Other examples, which show how Nikki's ability to capture an image in a concentrated nominal group is not reflected in translation, are:

... lobster pink from steam-room excess (p. 172) → ... di una rosa aragosta per l'eccesso di tempo tra il vapore (p. 193); ... a fucking little fresh-meat goddess (p. 67) → ... una fottuta dea dalle carni fresche (p. 78); ... gungy, synthetically herbal-flavoured detergent (p. 367) → ... il detergente viscoso, al profumo artificiale di erbe (p. 405); ... the fucking best-case scenario (p. 69) → ... la meglio delle fottute ipotesi (p. 80)

At times, however, the translator bends the Italian syntax and finds lexical solutions that do manage to reflect the originality of this particular aspect of Nikki's language. The following examples show that it may be possible to find a more exact equivalent of this feature by creating post-modifying nominal groups which are as dynamic in their originality of image concentration as the S.T. and which create an equivalent effect on the Italian reader.

... the man of my sweaty little persecution nightmares. (p. 276) → ... l'uomo dei miei piccoli incubi di persecuzione tutti sudore. (p. 304); ... that closet lesbo frigid little moraliser (p. 93) → ... questa piccola moralista frigidina criptolesbo (p. 106); ... that couldn't-give-a-toss critical mass (p. 13) → ... quella massa critica di chissenefrega (p. 20)

Continual register change giving humorous effect

One of the most salient characteristics of Nikki's speech is the continual change in register, often within the same sentence. She intersperses her often quite erudite language with vulgar slang, producing a humorous effect²¹. For example:

... where you know you're fully empowered enough to just tell them to fuck off. (p. 13)

The formal register of the first part of the sentence drops unexpectedly at the common vulgarity 'to fuck off', creating a humorous anticlimax. The translation maintains the same mix of registers, creating an equivalent anticlimax.

... all'interno della quale acquisisci definitivamente abbastanza potere per mandarli, semplicemente, affanculo. (p. 20)

Another example lies in the following description of Nikki's now ex-lover:

On Colin: a middle-aged fuck of whom we must now add declining sexual prowess to reducing social and intellectual interest. (p. 12)

The informality and crudeness of 'a ...fuck' contrasts dramatically with the formal syntax 'of whom' and the use of 'we' as an impersonal pronoun, both of which add elegance to the articulated use of vocabulary. The translation again reflects this mix of two distinct registers:

A proposito di Colin: un coglione ultraquarantenne, al cui sempre più magro interesse sociale e intellettuale dobbiamo ora aggiungere un vigore sessuale in calando. (p. 19)

²¹ Literature often uses unexpected and inappropriate register changes for comic effect – a well-known example is Eliza Dolittle's exclamation: «Not bloody likely!» at an upper-class tea-party in G. B. SHAW'S, *Pygmalion*.

As Nikki's speech is so frequently interspersed with vulgar speech, it is necessary at this point to consider the difficulties posed in the translation of vulgar terms, bad language and swear words. Such language predominantly involves parts of the body, particularly sexual organs, and bodily functions. As such experiences are universal and non-cultural bound, all languages have ways of referring to them in different registers. For example, referring to the same part of the body, a doctor will refer in English to 'a penis', a young lad to 'a cock'²². In Italian the equivalent terms are 'pene' and 'cazzo'. These terms may change from generation to generation, for example 'joystick' is now used for 'penis' among the younger generation. In translation, it is a question of finding a term in the target language that has dynamic equivalence²³. In fact, it is the effect that vulgar terms have on the audience that is important rather than their lexical significance. A translator has to be acquainted with terms that have equivalent frequency of use and function in the age group at the period of time being referred to.

A particular difficulty is posed by the word 'fuck' which Nikki uses, like so many young English-speaking persons nowadays, with great frequency. It is the most frequently used four-letter word in English. The problem lies in the fact that this word acquires a great variety of uses with different meanings/nuances according to the context in which it is used²⁴. In

²² Further terms can be found in L. MCCOLLAN, *Bad Words*, Vimercate, La Spiga 1994, p. 14.

²³ E. NIDA, C. TABER, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Leiden, Brill 1969. Nida claims: «Dynamic equivalence is therefore to be defined in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receiver language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language. This response can never be identical for the cultural and historical settings are too different, but there should be a high degree of equivalence of response ...».

²⁴ In G. SCATASTA, *Turpiloquio*, in R. ZACCHI, M. MORINI, (eds.), *Manuale di traduzione dall'inglese*, Milano, Mondadori 2002, Scatasta states: «Il verbo *to fuck* e i suoi innumerevoli derivati... creano interessanti problemi.

fact, although its frequency may on the surface seem monotonous, it shows flexibility in its syntactical function as well as in meaning. It can be used as a verb, in its literal sense of 'to have sexual intercourse with' (Concise Oxford Dictionary), or as a noun referring to the sexual act itself. It can be used as an insult or as an expression of anger, annoyance, impatience or contempt. It is also commonly adopted with very little semantic meaning, simply giving emphasis to what is being said. To be noted are a number of associated phrasal verbs: 'to fuck about/around/off' and 'to fuck someone or something up' and the expressions 'Fuck it! Fuck you! Fuck that!' that express anger or the fact that the person speaking does not care about something or someone. 'Fuck' can be used as a pre-fix in 'fuckhead/ fuckwit/ fuckface/ fuckwad'. The noun 'fucker' can be used to insult someone. The -ing form, 'fucking', is often used as an adjective and has produced interesting word formations such as 'im-fucking-possible, un-fucking-believable; ri-fucking-diculous; fan-fucking-tastic'²⁵. To cover this variety of functions and meanings of one single word²⁶, Italian has many different terms and expressions, each covering a particular semantic and pragmatic area of the word. The translator has to match 'fuck' to a specific, equivalent term in Italian according to the function of the English word in its particular context.

When the verb 'to fuck' maintains its literal meaning, referring to sexual intercourse, it can find communicative equivalence in register and frequency in the Italian 'scopare'. This is the translator's choice in the following examples:

Since then I associated wanking a boy with **not fucking** him
(p. 55) → Da allora ho associato il fare seghe a un uomo al

Se non altro per l'impossibilità di trovare un unico termine con cui tradurli in italiano».

²⁵ See R. CHAPMAN, *American Slang*, New York, Harper & Row 1987, for further details of such expressions.

²⁶ In B. BRYSON, *Mother Tongue*, London, Penguin 1990, the author states: «'Fuck' must be one of the most versatile of all English words».

non scoparci (p. 65); **Fucking** is a good way of getting to know people (p. 42) → **Scopare** è un modo simpatico per conoscere la gente (p. 51)

The translator has used a number of different terms, adopted by Italian youth today in similar contexts, for ‘fuck’ used as an insult or expression of anger, all of which have pragmatic equivalence:

... so do us all a favour and **just fuck off out of my face** (p. 39) → ... perciò fai un favore a noi tutti e **levati dal cazzo** (p. 47); ... a middle-aged **fuck** (p. 12) → ... un **coglione** ultraquarantenne (p. 19); What you need is to do less **fucking** coke (p. 445) → Quello che ti serve è tirare meno coca, **porco schifo** (p. 492); What **the fuck** is this, Simon! → **Cazzo** è ‘sta roba, Simon! (p. 410)

When ‘fuck’ is used with very little meaning other than that of intensifying what is being said, dynamic equivalence has often been found in the term ‘cazzo’ which is equivalent both in frequency of use and in pragmatic function.

Worked too well with Colin. Worked too **fucking** well (p. 26) → Con Colin ha funzionato al bacio. Fin troppo bene, **cazzo** (p. 34); But we’re here. I’m here. I’m an actress, a **fucking star**, here, in Cannes (p. 444) → Ma siamo qui. Ce l’ho fatta, sono un’attrice, **una star del cazzo**, proprio qui a Cannes (p. 490)

Sometimes the translator shifts a particular connotation given by ‘fuck’ (in the following example, one of scorn) into a single lexical choice.

Don’t **fucking bleat** ... (p. 39) → Non **frignare** ... (p. 47)

Sometimes the translator uses terms of different semantic meaning but which refer to bodily activities in equivalent vulgar register.

As I hear the door crash, I think to myself: **thank fuck** for that (p. 445) → Quando sento sbattere la porta, penso: **che culo**, se n'è andato (p. 492); ...embarrassing the **fuck** out of her (pp. 39-40) → ... imbarazzandola **come una cacca** (p. 48)

It is clear that the translation of vulgar language requires up-to-date knowledge of the vulgar language used in the target language by an equivalent set of people in an equivalent context in the same period of time. Such language variety is common to all languages, but a translator has to consider both the effect made on the message receiver by this type of language and its linguistic function in context. He/she cannot depend on a literal translation of the term.

It is interesting to note in this regard that, although the word 'fuck' has 16th Century origins²⁷, until recently many standard English dictionaries did not carry it. This non-acceptance of the word's existence²⁸ had Protestant undertones and also involved the moral aspect of the function of dictionaries. Chapman, in the preface to his 1987 abridged edition to *New Dictionary of American Slang*²⁹, states «A dictionary like this, which specialises in terms not to be lightly used in polite society, is therefore thought of as teaching and advocating these terms, and hence akin to pornography». Such a situation may

²⁷ It has been suggested that 'fuck' may have sprung from the Latin *fu-tuo*, the French *foutre* or the German *ficken* all of which have the same meaning. The word «fuck» first appears in print in 1503 in a poem by the Scottish poet William Dunbar.

²⁸ For example, neither *Chamber's Etymological English Dictionary* (1961) nor *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1981) carry 'fuck'. The editors of the *Random House Dictionary* of 1966 decided not to insert any four-letter word. Four-letter words appeared for the first time in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1972. The 1987 *Collins-Cobuild English Language Dictionary* carries the word but gives a moral judgement instead of a word definition: «An extremely rude word which most people find offensive. It is used in very informal English and most speakers do not use it at all».

²⁹ R. CHAPMAN, *Ibid.* p. 11.

cause a translator difficulty. A translator would have found little guidance from such dictionaries in translating 'fuck' just two decades ago. Nowadays most dictionaries give detailed definitions. However, this problem may present itself in reference to other terms used by young people. Although dictionaries are continually being updated, they contain an inevitable 'freezing' of the language³⁰. It is also impossible for dictionaries to report on every single new word or expression coined³¹, and in particular those coined by the youth of a particular sub-culture, since many of the terms appear suddenly in the language and then disappear just as quickly. This is the aspect of language that fascinates Welsh, who realises that it is impossible to stop the flow of language. The translator of young people's language inevitably have to rely on his/her own encyclopaedic knowledge of the source language and target language, as he will often be devoid of the practical support and comfort of the dictionary.

Use of verb tenses

Nikki uses the present tense as the base for her narration of events. Such use has a different effect on an English reader than on an Italian one. This is because the present is not nor-

³⁰ In this regard we can remember Samuel Johnson's words in the Preface to his *Dictionary* published in 1755: «When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, from century to century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language ...».

³¹ There are now many specialised dictionaries of slang and vulgar terms such as R. A. SPEARS, *Forbidden America. Essential Dictionary of Taboo American English*, Bologna, Zanichelli 1991 but even so they still freeze the language at the time of publication. Moreover, as G. SCATASTA, in *Tradurre il Fumetto*, in R. ZACCHI, M. MORINI (eds.), *Ibid.*, p. 11, points out, most dictionaries regard American slang and those describing British slang «sono praticamente assenti».

mally used for narration in English, whereas in Italian it is more frequently found. For English readers it is as if they were reading the script of a play/film³². The use of the present tense re-enforces the attitude that Nikki has towards life, which she seems to see as a sort of video unrolling before her eyes and reminds us of her role as a Film and Media student. This effect is inevitably lessened in the T.T. because of the different verb tense usage in the two language codes.

e.g. I head to the toilet ... I look into it (rf. the mirror) ... I apply some eyeliner ... and quickly brush my hair. Then I take a deep breath and walk out ... (p. 49) → Vado alla toilette ... Mi ci guardo ... Uso un po' di eye-liner e altro rossetto viola, poi mi do una spazzolata veloce ai capelli. Quindi respiro lungo ed esco fuori ... (p. 59); At the end of my shift I notice I'm out of towels and I head into the massage room next door. ... As I exit, I hear what sounds like, «harder ...» I eventually see Bobby and make a shift switch. (pp. 172-173) → Alla fine del mio turno mi accorgo che ho finito gli asciugamani e vado nella sala dei massaggi adiacente. ... Mentre esco, sento qualcosa che suona come, «Più forte ...» Alla fine trovo Bobby e faccio lo scambio di turni. (pp. 192-193)

Another interesting verb tense use regards Nikki's use of the present progressive aspect. She tends to use it when describing thoughts and emotions. In this way, unmarked verb usage is reversed. Emotions and thoughts are usually linked to a more permanent state communicated through the simple present. The use of the progressive seems to mirror Nikki's unstable emotional and mental state where emotions are fleeting

³² R. QUIRK et al., in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, London, Longman, 2000 (1985), pp. 181-183, points out that the use of the simple present in fictional narrative «is stylistically marked in contrast with the normal convention of the past tense for story-telling. A special exception is the use of the present in stage directions. Here the present is used by convention, as if to represent the idea that the events of the play are being performed before our eyes as we read the script».

and ever-changing³³. In regard to young people's use of tenses, S. Dent³⁴ talks of 'tense swapping', identifying a present pattern in current speech to replace the present tense with the progressive aspect, in particular with verbs of approval. Dent declares that: «... the swapping of tenses is now becoming a serious phenomenon, and *I'm liking that* is a turn of phrase which is establishing itself in all sorts of contexts». The T.T., as can be seen in the examples given, has not reflected Nikki's marked use of tense and aspect that has particular connotations in the S.T.

e.g. *I'm wondering if we embarrassed him ...* (p. 310) → *Mi domando se l'abbiamo messo in imbarazzo ...* (p. 344); *This is doing my head in.* (p. 266) → *Di questo passo vado fuori di testa.* (p. 296); *I'm hoping it's the dark-haired, younger one, but I'm expecting that it's the other.* (p. 214) → *Spero che sia il moro, che è più giovane, ma mi aspetto sia l'altro.* (p. 239); *I wink back at him, because I'm starting to feel better.* (p. 371) → *Io gli strizzo l'occhio perché comincio a sentirmi meglio.* (p. 409)

Use of American English syntax

There is an ever-increasing tendency in British youth today to mix American English usage with British English usage not only in vocabulary but also in syntax. Many older British people still find American English usage undesirable³⁵, with the consequent effect that young people often use it rebelliously and as a way of being 'with it'. Nikki occasionally uses American syntax in such a way. It is extremely difficult,

³³ At p. 25, Nikki declares: «But for me academic courses are like men; even the most fascinating only seem to hold the interest for so long».

³⁴ S. DENT, *Ibid.*, p. 115.

³⁵ For further details regarding the continued rivalry between Br. Eng. and Am. Eng. see R. MCCRUM *et al.*, *The Story of English*, New York, Viking 1986, pp. 343-351.

if not impossible, in translation to reflect this difference in variety with all the nuances of culture and generation there contained, because Italian has no equivalent linguistic circumstance. The translator has logically opted either to normalise the different syntax:

Simon had a joiner friend make up a pair of false stocks. (p. 273) → Simon ha fatto fabbricare da un suo amico falegname un paio di falsi ceppi. (p. 304); She's got the work ethic big time. (p. 310) → È una ragazza svelta e con una grande etica del lavoro. (p. 344); I'm up for it but it's never as good as I anticipate. (p. 273) → Lo faccio volentieri, ma non è affatto forte come pensavo. (p. 304)

or to use non-standard phrases popular with Italian youth, which have an equivalent effect of a rebellious, group-identifying use of language:

Lauren has taken the strop with me big time. (p. 213) → Lauren me l'ha messa giù durissima. (p. 238); I'm thinking gym-squared. (p. 367) → Ci dovrò dare sotto con la ginnastica. (p. 405)

However, there is an inevitable loss of the cultural implications involved in Nikki's use of American standard syntax.

Nikki also occasionally uses 'upspeak', the use of a raising tone within a statement where a fall might be expected, so that it sounds like a question even when it is not. The written equivalent is to put a question mark at the end of such a sentence.

I've had to work at nights? (p. 26) → Ho dovuto lavorare di sera (p. 34); I really, really, really enjoyed the lecture? (p. 27) → La lezione mi è piaciuta molto ... moltissimo (p. 35); Actually, I'm English? (p. 214) → Veramente, sono inglese (p. 240)

This speech pattern has uncertain origins – the most popular theory is that the pattern started in Australia or California,

but as S. Dent³⁶ states: «What is not in doubt is its spread within Britain. [...] Like ‘Valspeak’³⁷ or ‘mallspeak’, two features of West Coast language in the US, ‘upspeak’ is used to signal group identity among the young». This pattern, with its cultural implications, does not exist in Italian and therefore the translator has no option but to normalise the sentence.

Frequent use of deixis proper to informal, spoken mode

There is an abundance of deixis in Nikki’s speech and, as can happen in informal styles of English, it is sometimes difficult to relate back to the item referred to. Sometimes the translator mismatches the deictic reference, as can be seen in the following examples:

Colin gets up and out of bed. ... My eyes fall upon his hanging **cock**. **It**’s almost guilty-looking, caught as **it** is in a triangle of moonlight as **he** opens the blinds (p. 12) → Colin si alza e scende dal letto. ... I miei occhi finiscono sul suo affare pendulo. Quando **apre** gli scuri **ha** un’aria quasi colpevole, **sorpreso** così com’è in un triangolo di luce lunare (p. 19)

The English code allows the reader to unequivocally refer the pro-form ‘it’ back to ‘cock’ and ‘he’ to Colin. However, in the translation, the unmarked non-use of personal pronouns required by the language system means that it is not clear whether it is Colin, or his ‘affare pendulo’ that has ‘un’aria quasi colpevole’³⁸. Indeed, if the rule of referring back to the immediate possible reference is applied, the reference would

³⁶ S. DENT, *op. cit.*, pp. 135, 139.

³⁷ For a description of Valspeak see also R. MCCRUM et al, *Ibid*, p. 139.

³⁸ M. HALLIDAY, R. HASAN, in *Cohesion in English*, London, Longman 1976, state that, with regard to reference: «It is the meaning that enables us to disambiguate... Therefore, if there is more than one referent... the referent is the one that makes more sense». In the T.T. there is ambiguity of reference but, in fact, both make sense.

seem to erroneously refer to Colin. Not even the masculine gender of 'sorpreso' helps, as it could refer either to Colin or to 'affare'. The solution to this problem would be to clarify with a noun: 'Quando apre gli scuri, il cazzolino ...'

In the next example, in the S.T. the pro-form 'it' has been overlooked, so in the translation it is Colin instead of the relationship who is mistakenly desiring to be authentic:

... I mean, this is a real relationship, Nikki, and I want **it** to be, well, real (p. 13) → ...cioè, questo è un autentico rapporto, Nikki, e io voglio essere, be' ... autentico (p. 20)

The reverse has happened in the following example. The translator has understood a deictic form, mistaking 's' for the saxon-genitive and not as the abbreviation of 'is':

Last night I was up all night marking papers. **Miranda's** giving me a hard time ... (p. 12) → Son stato alzato tutta la notte scorsa per assegnare i voti alle relazioni. **Quella di Miranda** mi ha dato filo da torcere (p. 19)

In the S.T. the two sentences are not linked deictically. In fact, the reader learns after a few paragraphs that Miranda is Colin's wife. The translator has mistaken Miranda for one of the students who has written a paper. The examples, though so few in comparison to the abundance of correctly interpreted reference items, shows the attention needed in the correct interpretation of this common feature of youth speech.

It is hoped that this article has shown the type of difficulties facing a translator of texts containing the variety of language used by a particular generation of young people. It would seem that the basic translation process differs little from other text types in that dynamic equivalence must always be sought for, with reference to expressive, informative or persuasive language functions³⁹. The main difficulty lies in

³⁹ For a further explanation of Bühler's definition of language functions, see A. HILL (ed.), *Linguistics*, Washington, Forum Series 1969, pp. 259-268.

obtaining the necessary up-to-date knowledge of the S.T. vocabulary and syntax, much of which will not appear in standard dictionaries or grammars, as the language usage may be considered sub-standard and will have entered the language only very recently. It is a test of the translator's ability to match this transitory type of language with equivalent forms in the target language. This requires knowledge acquired directly in the field and notable creative skill⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ The author thanks R. Bacchielli and E. Catani for their invaluable suggestions in reviewing this article.