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TRANSLATING CULTURES:
THE IMPORTANCE OF “HISTORICAL MEMORY”
IN A CLASS OF BUSINESS ITALIAN

As far as the complex relationship between two different languages is concerned, in the context of global business languages I would like to investigate a fundamental aspect of the contemporary discussion on language acquisition, namely the inevitable mis-translation of any linguistic expression or terminology since language, in all its manifestations, is always “culturally charged.” Business language has been traditionally perceived as a jargon free of any connotative determination. Since business language, unlike literature, does not investigate individual identity *per se*, but rather a “network” of social practices and knowledge, it is traditionally envisioned as unambiguous and unequivocal. However, the acquisition of this “incontestable,” scientific idiom is in fact exposed to the ambiguities of any language acquisition. In this brief essay I shall consider the act of “mis-translation” from Italian into English both at its lexicographic and its syntactical level. Lexicon and syntax are the two essential aspects of the process of cultural translation. After analyzing Italian terms particularly significant from a cultural/historical standpoint, I shall examine how Italian and English construct their business language from a syntactical point of view. As I shall point out in the final section of this essay, business Italian acquires a rather different connotation in its spoken and its written form. Whereas at its written level business Italian tends to be much more indirect, impersonal, and abstract than business English, at its spoken level it appropriates many of the mannerisms typical of colloquial Italian. Body language, so to speak, is an essential “rhetorical device” in spoken business Italian.

In *Beiträge zur einer Kritik der Sprache*, Fritz Mauthner highlights the central role played by memory in any form of language articulation (185–90). According to Mauthner, every linguistic sign is in fact a “memory sign” (*Gedächtniszeichen*), in that every sign *embodies* the

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speaker's remembrances connected with his or her expression of that sign (when he/she became familiar with that word; when someone used it in his/her presence on a particularly significant occasion; when that word was inserted in a discourse directed to the speaker; etc.). As the Greek anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis explains, "memory cannot be confined to a purely mentalist or subjective sphere. It is a culturally mediated material practice that is activated by embodied acts and semantically dense objects" (9). In other words, every linguistic expression has a double nature. On the one hand, a word has a certain meaning, which is transferable from one historical language to another with no significant misinterpretation. On the other hand, every term means *more* than what it actually means. At this "second" level of articulation every linguistic expression manifests the speaker's relationship with that expression. More interestingly, Mauthner underscores that not only does every word reflect its speaker's personal and cultural memories, every word influences its speaker himself. We might say that, according to Mauthner, language actually molds its speaker. Not only do the speakers connote their language with their private experiences, they are also reflected in and modified by the language they use.

This mutual influence occurs with different modalities within one homogeneous linguistic area (same social class, same historical language, same geographic zone, etc.) and between two distinct historical languages. As far as the first element is concerned, we may refer to Pier Paolo Pasolini's analysis of the pernicious influences of "standard" Italian (as it is "taught" by the media, primarily TV news), on Italian regional dialects. In *Eretical Empiricism*, a collection of his most interesting essays on Italian culture and language, Pasolini points out that both Italian syntax and lexicon have been simplified and "vilified" by the overbearing business jargon. For Pasolini, capitalism, and thus capitalism's language, causes a "de-humanization" of linguistic expression. Pasolini's openly Marxist views respond to a crucial moment in the history of contemporary Italy. Writing at the beginning of the so-called "boom," the economical transformation that took place in Italy after the Second World War, Pasolini testified to the radical changes occurring in the Italian language. We may say that Pasolini, the major Italian poet of the second half of this century, witnessed the birth of business Italian, a language that is widely influenced by the social and cultural tensions within the Italian society.

Indeed, it is crucial to understand that the unavoidable act of mis-translation can and must be understood within the actual relationship between the two linguistic cultures involved in the act of translation itself. For instance, it is almost superfluous to stress that terms like “welfare” (*stato sociale*), “health care” (*assistenza sanitaria*), “unemployment” (*disoccupazione*), “unions” (*sindacati*), “administration” (*amministrazione, governo*), “strike” (*sciopero*) mean something quite different in Italian and in American English. Some expressions typical of business Italian still manifest a clearly Marxist connotation. For instance, the expression “stato sociale” (welfare) is almost never used in Italian, as if it were unnecessary. Italians often refer to the “governo” (government) or “stato” (state) both as the sole source of all their problems and the only viable solution to their difficulties. In fact, “stato sociale” is often present in Italian articles analyzing American politics. The rather rare occurrence of this term in contemporary Italian reflects Italians’ deep-rooted belief that “stato” (government) almost identifies with “stato sociale” (welfare). On the contrary, Americans tend to despise “welfare,” interpreting this word as the expression of the Federal Administration’s “intrusion” in the citizens’ private lives.

As a consequence, in the context of a class of business language, teachers are often reminded of their role of cultural “interpreters.” As Bruce Fryer points out, “[in the future] foreign language teachers will become translators and interpreters of international developments for their students and communities” (6–7). However, it is imperative to keep in mind that a “translator” plays a role in a sort of borderline zone, in that he/she operates *between* two concrete, and not theoretical, fields. In other words, the relationship between “strike” and “sciopero” is quite different from that between “sciopero” and the French “grève,” since the history of these words reflect strikingly dissimilar social realities.

Language teachers are not mere translators and interpreters. In the act of translating one culture into another, they inevitably create a third linguistic/semiotic field, in which the two languages come to coexist. This is a particularly important aspect of language acquisition. This third linguistic field is inhabited both by the teacher and his/her students. It is a “common ground,” where two linguistic cultures share their histories and cultures. However, this common area is where most often a subtle, and extremely dangerous pedagogically speaking, form of appropriation/colonization takes place. In the act of transferring data/memories/

words from one linguistic field to another, both the teachers and their students cannot help but judge those very linguistic/cultural units. In other words, the field where the two languages meet is in fact a battle field in which words and expressions acquire an almost moral connotation. For instance, “sciopero” (strike) essentially reflects Italians’ laziness, whereas “strike,” almost absent in American spoken language, is perceived by Italian speakers as an English term somehow necessary to translate the Italian word “sciopero,” since Americans “never” go on strike. For an Italian speaker, “sciopero” has seen its connotative implications modified throughout the years. Whereas at the beginning of the Italian republic “sciopero” was interpreted as the quintessential expression of the democratic condition, in recent years “sciopero” has acquired a rather negative undertone. “Sciopero” has come to manifest “what does not work” in Italy. Moreover, in the late eighties a series of restrictive laws have dramatically narrowed the freedom of strike. The widespread cliché about the far too frequent strikes in Italy has become in fact outdated. On the other hand Americans, whose “religion” of work plays a crucial role in their culture, primarily read the word “sciopero” as the indication of a dramatic social unrest. Teachers of business language must be aware of this insidious process of mutual influence that is exclusively based on clichés and “received ideas” (Americans are superficial; Italians are indolent; Germans are racist; etc.).

The relationship between American English and Italian is particularly complicated because of the active presence of Italian-American culture. Whereas Germans or French are essentially perceived as radical “foreigners,” Italians from Italy are constantly confronted with and assimilated to Italian Americans. As a consequence, an American student of business Italian cannot help but perceive the Italian language both as an amplification of those linguistic *débris* present in everyday American English and as a totally “other” language. Moreover, it is important to note that the image of Italian Americans has been going through a dramatic change in the last few years. As John and James Mitrano point out, in the past Italian Americans “were largely depicted as artistic or violent . . . , comical and ludicrous or terrorizing and menacing” (74). Speaking of business Italian, no student will be able to avoid the image of the “mafioso” and of the “Guido,” a derogatory term indicating a working-class, uneducated Southern Italian immigrant, but also that of Giorgio

Armani and Robert De Niro. In other words, Italy and Italian culture conjure up a variety of contradictory responses.

Teachers of any business language must be particularly careful in their act of “translating” one language into another, given that every business language, more than any “special” language (the language of sciences, of music, etc.) essentially foregrounds a confrontation. One might say that, unlike other aspects of language acquisition, to learn a given business language primarily means to acquire the tools that enable the subject to compete with, as well as to cooperate with, a given culture. Paradoxically, business languages facilitate both communication and competition; they allow a financial “duel” to take place in a third, and at least theoretically impartial, field of communication.

We might say that to be a language teacher means to be at once a translator and a historian. In order to avoid any moralistic and judgmental influence, a language teacher *must* explain the historical aspects of any key word or expression. To clarify this central point, I shall examine the term “moda” (fashion). Thanks to the enormous success of Italian stylists, the word “fashion” has come to acquire a distinct Italian, more than French, connotation. “Fashion” almost exclusively *means* “Italian fashion.” However, in a highly religious, moral, and pragmatic country such as the United States, “fashion” also conjures up Italians’ *dolce far niente*, *dolce vita*, their inborn longing for “superficial” pleasures. Although a scrupulous study of business Italian cannot avoid the financially influential field of fashion, students will question the intrinsic, cultural “seriousness” of such a linguistic field.

In fact, even though “moda” indicates what is transient (“moda” equals “trend”), it also reflects a much deeper aspect of Italian culture. An American student would appreciate and understand better the signification of such a word, if the teacher explained that the almost obsessive care for clothes displayed by Italians is already theorized in the Renaissance. In their attempt to achieve a perfect, classic image of themselves, sixteenth-century Italian writers, such as Giovanni della Casa and Baldassar Castiglione, speak at length about the coincidence between inner and outer self. What the subject is results both from his/her inner presence and his/her outer appearance. In *Il Galateo* Giovanni della Casa, ambassador of the Vatican state and author of the most important collection of poetry in the Italian Renaissance, discusses how a “respectable” and noble man should speak, walk, relate to women and to his superiors,

and what he should wear (50–56). In *Il Cortigiano* Baldassar Castiglione stresses that a courtesan should never stand out both literally and metaphorically. When he converses with his prince or with other members of the court, a “perfect” courtesan should wear clothes showing a “delicate” elegance. The most elegant outfit is that which can almost be overlooked. In other words, “moda” is not just a superficial attitude; it rather embodies Renaissance theorization of “classic” perfection. Therefore, a student of business Italian should become familiar with Italians’ rather strict conventions concerning colors and clothes, social events and their suitable outfits.

External appearances are in fact essential constituents of spoken business Italian. Mannerisms, gestures, and physical contact are parts of the “syntax” of business Italian. It is almost superfluous to remember that Italian is a very “physical” language in that it both encourages and requires some forms of contacts, which may seem unsuitable to an American. An Italian speaker tends to perceive as standoffish and unfriendly a social interaction that does not include a “warm” and also somehow physical interaction.

On the other hand, the syntax of written business Italian uses forms and expressions that are extremely convoluted and obscure. For instance, whereas a speaker of business Italian should at once respect and “break” the laws of formality in order to convey a friendly and “reliable” attitude, a correct user of written business Italian refers to all those syntactical devices that hide the actual subject of a given expression. For instance, passive forms are much more frequent than active ones. Impersonal expressions, such as “si sottolinea che” (one underscores that), “si auspica che” (one hopes that), which are practically absent in English, are the most common devices in business Italian. Moreover, the “I” form is almost never used. “We” is the common pronoun indicating the subject of a sentence. Instead of a present or a future tense, a conditional (“gradiremmo”; “auspicheremmo”) is preferred because it avoids any specific temporal indication. Finally, whereas speakers of business Italian must be able to convey an “absolute” respect for their interlocutors but also a distinct attention to the other’s presence through eye-contact, bodily position, etc., writers of business Italian make an effort to distance themselves from the addressee of their written communication, to the point of almost disappearing from the text itself. The rationale behind

written business Italian is that an “accomplished” text should convey no specific presence.

American students should be aware of the apparent discrepancy between spoken and written business Italian. In order to “converse” with Italians, American students should be able to look at others and also at themselves. They should acquire the faculty of articulating both verbal (business) and bodily language of Italians, their manners and cultural heritage. What seems laughable at first may have important cultural roots upon closer examination.

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