Taboo and the translator: A survey of translators' notes in Italian translations of Anglo-American fiction, 1945–2005

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Abstract. *Although seldom studied, translators' notes are a rich source of information relevant to the study of cultural identity. This paper seeks to outline a methodological approach to translators' notes appearing in the Italian translations of Anglo-American fiction during the period 1945–2005. The project is situated within the paradigm of Descriptive Translation Studies and draws on Douglas Robinson's innovative ideas regarding the relationship between translation and taboo. The translator's note is seen as mapping the boundaries of intercultural exchange, often highlighting instances in which meaning has not been reproduced within the translation proper. Our corpus of translator's notes reveals a gradual loss of cultural specificity in the target culture and a move towards increased target-culture receptivity and the subsequent development of intercultural homogeneity. This approach is tested in a pilot study that examines the translator's note in the 1946 Italian translation of D. H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover.*

Method in History

> There are good reasons why general history should nowadays be interested in issues of interculturality and transcultural movement. As productivity increasingly ensues from information rather than land, sedentary cultures are becoming difficult to map. Their conceptual sovereignty and historical boundaries are becoming indefensible. (Pym 1998: 18)

The research project outlined in this paper straddles the disciplines of translation history and intercultural studies and aims to map the historical boundaries of Italian cultural identity. Pym has claimed that "translation history can fulfill a service function with respect to the humanistic disciplines concerned with describing individual cultures" (1998: 16). It is hoped that the project resulting from this methodological proposal will both trace the changing coordinates of the boundaries separating target culture from

source culture, and shed light on some of the salient aspects of post-war Italian culture. We will not therefore be looking at translation proper, which, in the bipolar opposition sketched by Castells, occupies a typically both/and position (cited in Cronin 2003: 12). Rather, we propose to focus our study on those instances in which meaning rendition within the translated text is substituted by a translator's note. Cronin has said that "our world only becomes apparent to us when part of it goes missing or stops behaving as it normally did" (Cronin 2003: 12). This statement can equally be applied to the present proposal. By studying the gaps, omissions and absences in the translated text we might begin to shed new light on some of the salient characteristics of target-culture identity.

It is Pym, again, who raises another important point pertinent to the present study, this time in a paper on translation and historiography, when he signals the problem of what can be considered "properly historical" (Pym 1992: 221). His questioning of the historiography of translation points to the need to "construct an explanatory narrative" (Pym 1992: 221). This indeed is what our proposed method aims to achieve: we hope that by collecting and analyzing a corpus of translators' notes appearing in Italian translations of Anglo-American fiction during the period 1945–2005 we might be able to construct a *narrative of avoidance* which, in its movement from denial, through repression and on towards rationalization, mirrors what Douglas Robinson has termed the progress of addiction in his book *Translation and Taboo* (1996). The narrative produced by the translators' notes could be said to recount the story of growing permeability in the target culture. It plots the gradual loss of cultural specificity (expressed in the translator's note via strategies of denial and omission) and a move towards the development of intercultural homogeneity (expressed through rationalizing strategies that seek justification for increased target-culture receptivity).

Hypotheses

The hypothesis is as follows: The narrative produced by the translators' notes plots the historical boundaries of cultural identity, highlights the progressive loss of cultural specificity and diversity, and traces the gradual shift towards intercultural homogeneity.

For this hypothesis to be made fully operational, we need first to ascertain that our corpus of translators' notes (1945–2005) can be arranged into a narrative which traces the shift from low receptivity to high receptivity. We then need to set this narrative alongside Robinson's progression from denial through repression to rationalization to see if the translators' notes do indeed follow the progression of taboo. We would then examine the content of the notes to see whether they do in fact reflect the target culture's changing perception of taboo subjects and what it considers translatable at a given point in time.

Method

Building a corpus

This research project adheres most closely to the Descriptive Translation Studies paradigm, which considers target texts to be facts of target cultures (Toury 1995: 26). The operative development of our hypothesis relies on the construction of a corpus of translators' notes appearing in translations during the period 1945 to 2005. To this end, we will draw up a list of all major translations from Anglo-American fiction published between 1945 and 2005. We will then check for translators' notes in titles appearing in the list. From this list of notes, we will select ten from the period 1945–1965, ten from the period 1965–1985, and ten from the period 1985–2005. This will give us a final examinable corpus of 30 translators' notes.

Typology

We will re-contextualize each translator's note into the target text. A comparative analysis of the target text segment signaled by the note and the corresponding segment in the source text will enable us to identify the problematic issue. This will provide us with a descriptive typology for each note. An example might be: ST dialect raised to standard language in TT.

Source-text analysis

The source-text segment referred to by the translator's note will then be re-contextualized in the source text and its significance determined and evaluated in relation to the narrative aims of the source text as a whole. If we take as our example the instance of dialect-eradication suggested above, this would involve assessing the significance attributed to dialect by the source text. For the purposes of this part of the study, theoretical insights will be drawn from the field of literary theory and especially narratology.

Close reading of translator's note: text analysis

We then propose to subject each note to rigorous critical analysis. The macro-structural elements will be individuated and assessed and the rhetorical strategy of each note defined. For example, individual lexical items will be analyzed and their textual function described.

What the note says vs. what the note does: targe- text analysis

We will measure the *overt* significance of the note by examining what the translator purports to be doing. This will be measured against the *covert* significance of the note, i.e., the textual implication of the note and its effect on the reader. To this end we will re-contextualize the note in the target text and examine the whole episodic segment referenced by the note. The note will be viewed as an integral part of the target text narrative.

Target culture motivation

Once we have described the textual effect of the note, we will seek to explain why the translator was unable to translate the particular source text element. To this end we must direct our attention beyond the text and take into account target-culture translational norms, target-culture literary history and contemporary output, the target-culture publishing industry, politics, society and the general shifts and movements identifiable in the cultural arena. If we continue with the example we have been developing above, the issue of dialect-eradication may be linked to a resistance on the part of the target culture to allow the uncultured and uneducated voice of the *contadino*, or peasant, to contaminate the pages of classic literature.

Identifying the taboo

We assume that what has been avoided in the source text and substituted with a translator's note in the target text will represent a moment of linguistic, sexual, political, religious, social or cultural subversion which the target culture refuses, for whatever reason, to accommodate. Having followed the above steps in our methodology, we should have enough information to identify, for each note examined, the corresponding incidence of non-accommodation or taboo.

Plotting the narrative

Having identified for each of our thirty notes the corresponding cultural taboo indirectly referenced by the translator, we will then position each note in its chronological sequence with respect to its position in the following time spans: 1945–1965; 1965–1985; and 1985–2005. The sequence of notes and the taboo elements they relate to should then enable us to piece together the story of an evolving relationship between target culture and source culture. We suggest that this relationship will be characterized by an increased denial and repression in the target text of source cultural specific-

ity in the early period but that this will shift over time towards increased receptivity, rationalization and eventual absorption of difference.

Pilot Study

Taboo and the Translator: the case of Lady Chatterley's Lover

In order to gain a clearer insight into the practical implementation of the above, we have carried out a pilot study aimed at investigating the extent to which translators' notes do in fact contain important information regarding national cultural identity. For the purposes of this study we have selected Giulio Monteleone's Italian translation of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, published by Mondadori in 1946.

In his defensive essay *A propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1929), D. H. Lawrence pits the prohibitive paranoia of a repressive English society (personified by George Bernard Shaw) against the progressively liberal attitudes of Italian society (personified, somewhat unpredictably, by the Pope). Towards the end of the essay, he addresses the issue of language. "If I use the taboo words, there is a reason. We shall never free the phallic reality from the 'uplift' taint till we give it its own phallic language and use the obscene words. The greatest blasphemy of all against the phallic reality is this 'lifting to a higher plain'" (Lawrence 1993a: 334). This assertion is followed by a revealing anecdote. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was first published in Florence in 1928, at Lawrence's own expense, by a Florentine publisher who spoke no English (Lawrence 1993b: 334). When a newspaper told the publisher that he was being deceived into publishing a potentially scandalous novel, he duly informed himself of its content and exclaimed, "with the short indifference of a Florentine: Oh! Ma! But we do it every day!" (Lawrence 1993a: 334).

These two extracts provide an interesting perspective on Lawrence's English-repressive / Italian-receptive dichotomy. Language is pivotal in the first statement. By asserting that certain realities have their "own" words, Lawrence falls only just short of suggesting that the famously arbitrary signifier-signified relationship might not be quite as arbitrary as Saussure would have us believe. Yet in the second example, which probably accounts for the first instance of Italian reception of the novel, the issue at stake is purely content-based; the publisher's reported indifference towards Lawrence's breaking of taboos conveniently side-steps the issue of the novel's language. It was not until 1946, after the Fascist ban on the translation had been lifted, that Italians had the chance to savour the novel in the Italian language. The novel was translated by Guilio Monteleone and published by the Milan-based Arnaldo Mondadori Editore in 1946.

Given what Lawrence perceived to be the increased sensitivity and general enlightenment of Italian culture, one would expect that the novel's

language, too obscene to be published in the UK or the US, would not have fallen foul of the "uplift taint" and would have been reproduced in all its scandalous glory in the Italian translation. But this was only partly true. Lawrence's notions regarding the receptiveness of Italian society towards the question of taboos were not entirely well-founded and are partly contradicted by the Italian translation of his novel. While many of the obscene lexical items were reproduced as transparently (or scandalously) as possible, the translator's decision to replace Mellors' and, more importantly, Lady Chatterley's use of dialect with a well-placed translator's note in fact eradicates the political and social taboos broken by the source text. The translator's note acts as a sort of textual fig-leaf positioned between target and source culture at precisely the most linguistically, culturally and sexually subversive moment in the narrative.

Taboo and translation

The Victorian theorist James Frazer associated taboo with primitive cultures (cited in Robinson 1996) but more recent thinkers, including Freud (1950), Douglas (1966) and Robinson (1996), have shown how taboo is present in modern cultures as addiction and obsession. "Taboo as obsession or addiction would be the ideosomatic fabric that holds society together, the shared bodily feel for right and wrong that causes us to shudder (and feel powerfully and fearfully attracted to) socially deviant behaviour" (Robinson 1996: 28). In his influential essay *Totem and Taboo* (1950) Freud shows how taboo denotes something inaccessible or unapproachable; it drives covert prohibitions and restrictions and as such implies something untouchable or something that should be kept out of reach: "the principle prohibition, the nucleus of the neurosis, is against touching" (Freud 1950: 27). The inherent danger of taboo lies in its ability to infect, to spread contagion. In the case of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the source-culture taboos were of a sexual and a social nature. While the obscene lexis was considered dirty, Hoggart defends Lawrence's decision to break taboos; in his introduction to the first edition after the ban on the book was lifted he claims that "our language for sex shows us to be knotted and ashamed, too dirty and too shy. Hence the use of the four-letter words. [...] Lawrence's object was to throw some light into a dark corner of our emotional life" (Hoggart 1961: 5).

The idea of touching, signalled by taboo, is deemed subversive, not merely in a sexual sense, but also in a socio-political sense. Meyers notes how one of the appalling aspects of the book was the way in which "[The working class Mellors] caresses Connie, establishes his authority by commanding her to lie down and makes love to her for the first time as sex transcends class through the democracy of touch" (Meyers 1990: 358). Lawrence doubtlessly challenges source-culture taboos, but as we shall see, the concept of taboo and what was considered subversive and thus unap-

proachable to the Italian target culture differed significantly from those of Great Britain or America, where the novel was banned until 1960. The boundary separating the two sites of taboo lies somewhere in Monteleone's translator's note, and it is to this that we now turn our attention.

The case of the well-placed translator's note

Monteleone enters the text with his note towards the end of chapter twelve, just before Mellors and Lady Chatterley utter what are considered to be the most subversively lewd words in a novel which, according to Michael Squires "has endured not only because of its peculiar status as a sexually explicit work but also because, like a camera, it succeeded in photographing a series of moments in the particular history of a society" (Squires 1994: 13). Not only does the upper-class Lady Chatterley relish these obscenities which she pronounces with aplomb, she also attempts to communicate with Mellors in his own dialect. The British establishment received this with horror, as the implications of linguistic debasement of the ruling class threatened the stability of the British class system and thus the very foundations of British society. Whilst the target text seeks an equivalent lexis and register for what was seen in the UK as the offensive naming of body parts and sexual activity, it does not reproduce the dialect in which the characters speak and so the section in which the most potentially subversive elements appear in the target text is prefaced by the following translator's note:

> Le battute effettivamente in dialetto, sono state tradotte in italiano. Non si poteva altrimenti, salvo ricorrere a uno dei nostri dialetti. Ma ne sarebbe nato alcunché di risibile. (Monteleone trans. 1960: 211)
>
> (Gloss: These lines are actually in dialect but have been translated into standard Italian. They could not have been translated otherwise, except by resorting to one of our own dialects. Had that been the case, the result would have been laughable.)

Let us take a moment to analyze the lexis used by the translator. The term *effettivamente* (which can be translated as "actually" or "really") immediately sets the target text at a distance from the "real" and "actual" source text. The implication is that if the source text is the real and actual, then what we have here, in the target text, is somehow unreal, not actual. The distancing techniques continue with the word *ricorrere* (translatable as "resort to", "have recourse to", "go back to", "turn back to"), which contains an implied anaphoric referencing, this time suggestive of temporal distance. The most interesting choice of lexis, however, is the translator's use of the word *risibile*, which in English can be translated as "laughable" or "ludicrous". To reference laughter in this scene is highly significant. One of the functions of laughter is protective: it can divert attention away from and conceal the

subject's embarrassment in front of a potentially face-threatening situation and is once more a distancing mechanism. These references to distance thus preface the most subversive scene in the novel and act as a framing device that serves to highlight the translation's identity as translation, that is, as something at one remove from the "real" novel. The translator's note thus acts like a sort of veil, or a buffer or textual fig-leaf, protecting the sensibilities of the target text reader at precisely the most challenging moment. Had Monteleone been preoccupied solely with explaining problems of a purely translational kind, surely this note would have appeared when Mellors first speaks in dialect and where the target text first veers away from "faithful" reproduction. By referring to himself as translator at this precise moment, Monteleone evokes and invokes the material presence of the translator who, brought now into visibility, acts as a shield in standing between target and source text.

While this interpretation seeks to express the textual effects produced by the insertion of the translator's note, it nevertheless falls short of an explanation as to *why* Monteleone needs to sidestep the issue of dialect. In order to take this argument a step further, we need to examine the issue of dialects and translation.

Translation and dialect

Milton provides a useful insight into the translation of sub-standard language (Milton 2001). In a study on the translation of classic fiction for mass markets, he notes that dialects remained untranslated in classic novels translated from English into Portuguese Brazilian during the period 1944 to 1976, and suggests that the same probably holds true for novels translated into other languages (Milton 2001: 51). In questioning this non-translation of dialect, Milton suggests that one reason for its absence is the fact that language was frequently considered secondary to the actual semantic content of a novel's speech. He quotes M.E. Coindreau, Faulkner's French translator in this regard: "I have often been asked, 'How can you translate dialect?'. This is, in my opinion, a detail of slight importance" (Milton 2001: 52). Milton, however, comes up with a number of other suggestions, two of which might go some way to explaining the eradication of dialect in our particular translation. The first of these takes an aesthetic slant: minority language would be seen to sully the pages of a classic novel. The second, of even greater interest to us, is socio-political in nature: literature, both its production and consumption, was a decidedly middle class, conservative affair which shied away from experimentation.

While sex and social impropriety (which could lead to the destabilization of the class structure) were considered taboos in the source culture, that which was considered unapproachable to the target culture was plotted along a slightly different set of coordinates. Douglas Robinson suggests that the

narrative of taboo progresses from repression, through denial, and on towards rationalization. On the basis of what we have discussed so far we would argue that Monteleone's strategy is a clear example of repression. It thus follows that dialect must in some way be seen as taboo in the target culture. The dialectical voice expressed a rural, practical as opposed to intellectual, culture; it represented the fractured, fragmented and insular identity of a past which Italy was seeking to turn its back on through unification which was finally achieved in 1861. At the time of Monteleone's translation, the Italian nation was still relatively young, as was the concept of a united national identity. The widespread use of dialect was one in a series of factors that underscored the localized character of the Italian people. In 1946, at the time of the translation, Italy had just emerged shattered from the experience of Fascism and the humiliation of defeat in the Second World War. The self-image of the Italian nation was far from positive. Benedetto Croce famously recorded in his diary in 1943 that all political, economic and moral developments that the Italian people had worked for during the past century have been irreparably destroyed (cited in Scoppola 2005), and Salvatore Satta, an astute and well-known jurist, proclaimed in his 1948 book *De Profundis* "the death of a nation" (cited in Scoppola 2005). Italy's self-image was therefore incredibly fragile—so fragile, perhaps, as to be unable to accommodate even the slightest hint of cultural subversion.

Conclusion

Monteleone's decision to reproduce the speech of the characters in standard Italian in many ways reflects a translational norm existing at the time of translation. However, despite this general resistance to dialects in translation, a cultural reading of this case might suggest that the translation of classic English fiction, even if itself mediated through the dialectical voice, could not be effected through anything but the sturdiest, most compact resources available to Italian culture, that is, standard, "high" Italian, the language of the intellectual elite and the ruling classes. Translation through dialect would have meant revealing exactly what the target culture was seeking to repress—it would have amounted to the exposure of the weak link. Faced in the ring by one of the world's literary heavyweights, Monteleone could not defend the honor of the target culture with the voice of the *contadino*, the peasant.

We can now attempt to plot one coordinate in our explanatory narrative. The translator's note on the one hand addresses itself to the target culture and can be interpreted as a distancing mechanism that functions in such a way as to dilute or disarm the source text's subversive nature. On the other hand, the note also addresses the source text/source culture, meeting it, so to speak, head on, but with the protective armor of a standard language grounded in the high culture of the intellectual elite. The note speaks to both

target and source cultures when it ridicules the voice of dialect and suggests it would be considered a laughable invasion to an Italian readership. Thus the note constitutes both attack and defense. It marks the site in which source and target cultures collide. Loaded as it is with cultural and textual significance, the translator's note must be awarded the role of protagonist in our narrative. As such, it constitutes an object worthy of study in the field of Translation Studies.

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