Translating Dialects and Languages of Minorities Challenges and Solutions

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1. Auflage 2011. Taschenbuch. XII, 245 S. Paperback
ISBN 978 3 0343 0178 7
Format (B x L): 15 x 22,5 cm
Gewicht: 370 g

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Translating Dialects and Languages of Minorities

Challenges and Solutions

Federico M. Federici (ed.)
Critical definitions

Beginning by reflecting on the terminology used in the volume, this introduction discusses the challenges of rendering dialects and non-standard varieties of language. Terminology is necessary in a regulated and scholarly discussion; however, it is also regulatory and constraining when it comes to creativity. The search for solving problems of rendering non-standard varieties has to be perceived as a constructive, productive, and creative challenge. The overview of some ‘critical’ definitions of idiolect, sociolect, and dialect here included is intended not as an exhaustive study of the terminology most commonly adopted, but as a means of engaging with the following contributions in the understanding that we may need to review our tools for translation criticism, especially if they become limiting (see the light touch approach of author-translator Hofstadter 2009). The terminology is of course a good point of departure to ensure that we are all discussing the same features and to make reasonable observations. For this purpose, a look at the terminology, particularly taken from sociolinguistics and

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1 Part of this introduction was given as a paper at the MultiDialecTranslation 2010, 4th International Conference on the Translation of Dialects in Multimedia at the Alma Mater Studiorum, University of Bologna, Forlì campus, in May 2010. Several of these observations received feedback and stimulated questions also from the professionals of the British network of Japanese–English translators who kindly invited me to their annual workshop in June 2010. To all my listeners I owe a debt of gratitude as their questions helped me consolidate the points I make in these introductory notes.
sometimes literary criticism, is due. The definitions below in their discourse immediately provide us with an overview of critical assumptions behind the notions of ‘dialect translatability and untranslatability’.

In 1988, speaking at a conference in Bergamo, M. A. K. Halliday discussed differences between register and dialect in these terms: registers are ‘ways of saying different things’ (1990/2002: 169), whereas ‘prototypically, dialects differ in expression; our notion of them is that they are “different ways of saying the same thing”’ (p. 168). For experts of Italian dialectology this assumption shows some fundamental argumentative weaknesses, which are not relevant here (but would be solved by a reading of Grassi et al. 2003: 143–81; Berruto 2007: 181–90). Notwithstanding this relative weakness in the argument (it entirely depends on the linguistic system on which the linguistic discourse is focused; e.g. UK English vs Romance languages or Central Germanic languages), Halliday’s (1990: 169) definition is useful to introduce the problem in relation to translation acts: ‘we can translate different registers into a foreign language. We cannot translate different dialects: we can only mimic dialect variation’. Yet translation of dialectal and regional voices regularly achieves successful renderings of what strictly linguistic perspectives would consider impossible, even untranslatable. Is it, though, just a question of mimicking dialect variation? What do we intend by mimicking?

To appreciate the often subtle distinctions made by the contributors to this collection, it is thus useful to highlight that definitions in many of the chapters come from sociolinguistics and literary criticism, but not only. An English definition of sociolinguistics is useful to contextualize Halliday’s observation a bit further. Crystal’s essential reference volume, Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics (2003), is chosen here as a possible succinct definition (whilst we remain fully aware of the complexity for linguists to agree on the fine details of these definitions). In a reduced version of the full entry, the initial paragraph defines sociolinguistics as the following:

A branch of linguistics which studies all aspects of the relationship between language and society. Sociolinguists study such matters as the linguistic identity of social groups, social attitudes to language, standard and non-standard forms of language, the patterns and needs of national language use, social varieties and levels of language, the
social basis of multilingualism, and so on. An alternative name sometimes given to the subject (which suggests a greater concern with sociological rather than linguistic explanations of the above) is the sociology of language. (Crystal 2003)

The second paragraph of the entry includes a reference to dialect which would stir up a hot debate among the contributors, as it states:

The study of dialects is sometimes seen as a branch of sociolinguistics, and sometimes differentiated from it, under the heading of dialectology, especially when regional dialects are the focus of study.

In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the standard language is a dialect. Berruto (2007: 188) points out that there are substantial differences in the very definition of dialect in terms of continental European languages; this definition is more suitable also in terms of world languages (and particularly relevant in the diglossia of the Arabic language). For this purpose, as editor I have discussed with the contributors the possibility of using the term ‘variety’ to discuss non-standard language. Even this agreement comes at a price: varieties are often defined in relation to or in opposition to a standard language, thus creating a hierarchical relationship even in the most accurate and careful of definitions. When we discuss translation of dialect, what do we consider? Is a regional voice an idiolect that gives recognizable connotations to narratives and their characters? Does giving regionalized voices to characters bring the marginal voices to the foreground and identify political and social issues? Is a minority language a regional voice? Can we define dialects as minority languages? Are idiolects minority languages or languages of a minority? Can it be said that regional varieties correspond to the political and cultural background of a recognizable social group in an identifiable socio-geographical setting?

These questions have no single answer. Possibly they are important to ask while translating; however, it is unlikely that it will ever be possible to answer them in comprehensive theoretical terms. Solutions and reactions to individual cases allow translators to retain the essential multiplicity of choice that encourages creativity.

When locating resources to define the terminology for the discussions proposed in this paper, questions abound and overlap. Multifaceted
challenges characterize translation of non-standard varieties. To this multiplicity corresponds a huge range of methodological approaches, as well as useful rebukes and rejections of some methodologies. Investigating processes, perceptions, and policies behind intellectual and real challenges which affect all translators of regional voices, in particular those who are rendering works of literature, this collection mainly focuses on prose works. As the chapters unfold, it becomes apparent that the main issue is indeed one of visibility of solutions. Rendering regional voices has an effect at all times. Hofstadter (2009) suggests one ‘express’ and relatively painless solution in recognizing that we all have a personal language, our idiolect. The discovery he found enticing was to become ‘aware of just how strange, even paradoxical, it was to use my native language – and, more specifically, my own deeply personal style of crafting, manipulating, and savouring phrases in my native language – to rewrite someone else’s book’ (ibid.: 6).

It would be exceptionally ambitious and incredibly unrealistic to hope that this introduction could even attempt to propose answers to the puzzling questions above, yet the contributions that follow integrate several attempts aimed at answering many of the questions proposed here. It is worth focusing on crucial areas of intriguing complexity that are connected with our definitions of idiolect, sociolect, and dialect. These issues confirm that translating regional voices calls for a re-think of translational competences and priorities when dealing with creative translation (as superbly demonstrated in Perteghella and Loffredo 2006: 1–16).

Critics’ aesthetical values and readers’ expectations on quality can be offended by the output of some productions. Experts are thus asked to join forces and provide analytical frameworks to understand why translations often work as obliquely censored messages. In other words, messages poorly translated convey content that is impossible to interpret, if any content at all. Yet are these criticisms reasonable? In the preface of Translation, History, and Culture (1990: viii), Bassnett and Lefevere provided a crucial reminder that has influenced much of research into translation of creative texts:

Translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text. All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society.
The translation of regionalized narratives go through an additional level of scrutiny in terms of the perceived motives behind the use of vernacular, dialectal, popular, or local features of the source language. Manipulating two ideologies becomes far too easy. Why are some sociolects cleansed even in those countries where far more provocative films are produced in the native tongue? Or else, why do sociolectal, or dialectal, tics, such as the Sicilian minchia in Camilleri’s Montalbano series become a far more taboo profanity, an f-word, in English? Are dialects, sociolects, and idiolects that include slang or profanities dangerous sociolinguistic mixtures?

To look critically at the definitions, at the linguistic terminology that we use to refer to regionalized languages is a way to start. Terminology coming from other fields may in fact provide a restrictive grid of analysis more than a useful tool of categorization.

Definitions

As I have already mentioned one of the highly influential scholars of modern linguistics, M. A. K. Halliday, it is useful to go back to his article analysing two paragraphs of Darwin’s The Origin of the Species. Halliday suggested a system that allows us to discuss registers in all the genres. This system is a powerful tool that enables us to compare completely different texts and regional voices. Then, if our tool kit embeds Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics, our terminology set includes definitions from linguistics, but not only from linguistics. Some definitions of dialect, sociolect, and idiolect have gained momentum and importance in the analysis of literary and multimedia texts; they are not set in stone and they have often emerged from Anglo-centric views.

Without the scope for offering a comprehensive review of significant and influential definitions in the literature, I move to emphasize contrasting features of the terminology that have an influential role when it comes to assessing the ‘problematic’ nature of rendering regionalized voices. The authority of standard varieties looms, yet its sociological implications were