Encounters with dialects, idiolects and sociolects in translation

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The strategies we develop as translators constantly bring about reflections on the way theories apply to the very act of translating. An example that recently got my attention is that of dialects, idiolects and sociolects in translation: different styles – regional, personal and social varieties of a language. Without joining the ongoing debate about what a “dialect” is, for the purpose of this discussion I’ll just use the term to indicate one of many regional variations of a more or less “standard” language. Dialects, idiolects and sociolects, obviously, are perceived as such based on how they differ from what is considered as the standard language – we can only appreciate the unique characteristics of Geordie or Southern American English when we can see where and how they differ from Standard English. Every regional or class-based variety has its unique connotations, and it will immediately prompt the reader to make assumptions and associations. As such varieties are a product of distinct social, political and cultural conditions, translators face a challenging task when they want to carry over that uniqueness in the target language. Idiolects actually represent a different challenge, since a character’s voice will be perceived as peculiar because of its unique, idiosyncratic features. That uniqueness can lie in cultural references, in register, or tone, but in any case encountering a distinctive idiolect can be one of our best chances to explore the creative, or rather re-creative side of translation. By analysing how these different varieties are tied together in the eyes of a translator we are reminded that the unpredictable, chaotic elements of language are indeed the ones stretching its limits and eventually enriching it the most. Here we also see why the very concept of “style”, which holds this panel together, is so hard do define. On the one hand, we might encounter these different styles in the original work, but the next step would be finding our own style as translators in order to overcome these challenges.
In 2008, I translated Will Elliott’s *The Pilo Family Circus* into Italian for Strade Blu - Mondadori. Among the countless bizarre characters in the novel, the most challenging one was called Doopy the clown. He speaks in a strange, incoherent and exhilarating way. Undoubtedly he constitutes a great device for an author to have fun with puns and word plays, which of course are some of the least translatable elements of any language. This character’s speech patterns are based on gross linguistic mistakes, which are also not easily translatable, and often required to be moved around and replaced with completely unrelated ones in the target text. Eugene Nida’s concept of dynamic equivalence comes to mind – the idea of eliciting in the reader of the translated work the closest possible impression to the one the original had on its own audience. But you all know this, and it’s going to be discussed in a panel tomorrow anyway, so let’s just get to some examples and see what actually happens.

Doopy’s sentences needed to be completely reformulated. I had to imagine an Italian-speaking Doopy. What goofy linguistic mistakes would such a warped brain come up with if it were thinking in Italian? It’s a great responsibility, but it’s also the best fun a translator can have. You would think that it would be easy to follow the principle of dynamic equivalence at all times, but it’s obviously more complicated than that. Let’s see, for example, how Doopy distorts idiomatic phrases in clumsy ways, as in:

> “He pooped the question, Gonko.”

> “Popped?”

> “Yeah, that’s what he done. Goshy done went and pooped the question.”

Leaving the mistakes aside for a minute, here I needed to find an element that was suited to a similarly unfortunate distortion. Italian doesn’t have an idiomatic equivalent of ‘popping the question’ we rather ‘ask to marry’ or make a plain ‘marriage proposal’. Still, as it often happens, I didn’t have to think very long, as I soon stumbled upon:
“Gli ha fatto una prostata di matrimonio, Gonko.”

“Le ha fatto una proposta di matrimonio?”

“Si, ecco, quello ha fatto. Goshy ha preso, andato e gli ha fatto una prostata di matrimonio.”

that ‘proposta’ became ‘prostata’ (‘prostate’) which, like it or not, seemed to be quite effective. So, in this case, a strong tendency towards dynamic equivalence was surely the way to go. It’s generally what we do in contemporary literary translation, anyway. But let’s look at another sentence by the same character:

“Who done it, Gonko?” said Doopy. “Who done it? They shouldn’ta oughtn’ta done it, Gonko!”

The main feature, here, is the over-abundance of badly conjugated verbs. And verbs work very differently in Italian, so I still needed to find a different but similarly funny way to twist verb conjugation in the target language, in order to reproduce the singsong rhythm of the original. It is often said that dynamic equivalence allows the translator to convey the meaning expressed in the original without being bound by the linguistic features, but here the linguistic features are the meaning. In this case I had to tend towards the formal end of the equivalence spectrum. My choice was:

“Chi è stato a l’ha fatto, Gonko?” chiese Doopy. “Chi è stato a l’ha fatto? Non avrebbero dovuto dover averlo fatto, Gonko!”

The repetition of similar verbs (or parts thereof) conjugated in several different tenses did the trick. Doopy’s liberal use of grammar, though, reaches its peak in another sentence that he utters in a moment of great commotion:
“They done it again, they gone and done did it, they did doggone done do’d it!”

There is an incredible amount of repetition and alliteration, here, and the most important thing was to keep that syncopated rhythm alive in target language if I wanted this to work. I went for

“L’hanno rifatto di nuovo, han preso e l’han far fatto, l’han proprio fatto far fatto!”

This is a different situation, once again. If the other sentences required a certain adherence to one pole or the other, in this case it was best to stay somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. The verb pattern and the alliterations were easy to preserve. Still, it was inevitable to change the most recurring consonant from *d* to *f*, as a consequence of the translation of *to do* with *fare*. As a result, the syncopation was not as percussive, so to speak, as it was in the original. The impression is a bit softened in the translation, but going too far towards *dynamic equivalence* would have required using another verb, and the meaning would have changed too dramatically.

Finally, Doopy’s funny speech provided a fine example of *found in translation*. At some point the clowns are about to vent their anger on one of the circus’ acrobats, and there’s this exchange between the clown leader and Doopy:

“[…] *What’s the opposite of a facelift?***”

“*Squash smash face,*” *Doopy said.*

It was obviously essential to maintain the consonance of ‘squash’ and ‘smash’. And the gods of language made it so easy it felt like cheating: within a few seconds, I had an Italian sentence that even took the consonance further, thanks to a fortunate combination of Italian words:
“[...] qual è il contrario di un lifting?”

“Uno spiaccica schiaccia faccia,” disse Doopy.

The repetition of hard and soft ‘c’ sounds really makes you think about what could happen to the acrobat's face, even more than the softer ‘sh’ of the original, plus, it extends to the third word as well (faccia – face) which, in English, did not share any phoneme with the first two. Here it felt like the opposite ends of the spectrum actually converged in the middle, to the point of almost coinciding.

So, as we can see, even when translating the same character’s idiolect, we might go in opposite directions, in order to obtain the best result and an overall consistency. Sometimes we might need to find a balance between the two opposite poles, instead, and yet some other times we might not have to choose at all if we want to go one way or the other.

As we’ve just seen, the unique peculiarities of an idiolect often require the translator to move along the theoretical spectrum, and often to be very creative in the process. Dialects and sociolects may sometimes constitute an even more complex challenge to overcome, as a greater number of social and cultural references have to be taken into account. Nonetheless, translating dialects and sociolects similarly shows how the same style – meaning variety – might require different translation styles in different contexts. It is worth noting that the line between dialect and sociolect can sometimes be quite blurred, especially in European countries, where there is greater regional variation and therefore a higher incidence of regional features in the speech of people from a lower social class.

There are many ways to approach this issue. It’s easy when you can just keep the Sicilian accent while dubbing The Godfather. Most of the time, though, it gets much trickier than that, and I have
seen some questionable choices in the past. Most of you will have seen at least a few episodes of *The Simpsons*. Do you remember Willie, the kilt-wearing, red-bearded Scottish groundsman of the school? Well, in the Italian version he speaks in a thick Sardinian accent. This, in my opinion, is a case of *dynamic equivalence* being taken too far. In order for the Italian audience to perceive the character in a way that could be similar to the way it was perceived by the original audience, the translators added an alien element to the context. Luckily, it’s just a cartoon, but it’s fascinating to try and understand the reasons for this choice. The translators probably focused on a few correspondences between Scotland and Sardinia. These are two peripheral regions in their respective countries, inhabited by fiercely independent people, and both regions are famous for their very thick accents. Also, they incidentally share a long tradition of shepherding, and they are often on the receiving end of prejudice and discrimination or at least objectionable jokes. That said, even in the surreal context of that cartoon, one wonders “what sort of Sardinian is called Willie, has red hair, and wears a kilt?”. The impression the character makes on the Italian viewer is probably very close to the one Willie had on the American viewer, but in order to save some details of a minor character, the context takes a bit of a hard blow. As I said, it still works in a cartoon with no pretence of realism, but, obviously, when translating literature or drama it would be pure madness to even think about replacing an English dialect with an Italian one. Still, a translator will tend towards *dynamic equivalence*, and has to be careful not to take it too far. I recently translated *Galveston*, by Nic Pizzolatto, a superb *noir* novel set on the Gulf Coast, between New Orleans and Galveston Island. The author wrote exceptionally life-like dialogue which often draws on Southern American English. As I said before, we can only appreciate the characteristics of a language variety when we can see where and how it strays from what is considered the standard variety. But whereas in the *Simpsons* case there were several perceived correspondences between Scotland and Sardinia, in this case that trick could not be replicated even if one wanted to, as no Italian region has anything in common with the Gulf Coast. In my opinion the best a translator can do in these cases is try to convey the feel, the idea of this often desperate, poorly educated, marginalised underclass, by using
a warped grammar, a very basic vocabulary, and colloquialisms. Effectively, this requires a switch from a dialect to a sociolect. There is a massive loss in nuances, but it is an inevitable one. The main female character in Galveston, for example, Rocky – an eighteen-year-old prostitute from Orange, Texas, ends most of her sentences with “...man.” Which is absolutely normal even in colloquial Standard American English. Adding ‘uomo’ to an Italian sentence, though, would make no sense at all. In some Italian translations, especially in old films, you can hear people using "amico" ("friend"), mainly to fill that second during which the actor was still speaking, I suspect, as it sounds utterly unnatural. And despite being fiercely opposed to excessive domestication of texts, in Italian no one really says "Ehi, amico" to say hi to someone. At most times the best choice was to omit that bit, because the Italian sentence was already perfectly natural without it, and once again the original peculiarities had to be replaced with completely new ones in order to replicate the impression the character has on the reader.

Other instances of irreparably lost nuances were sentences like

“where you going?”

The simple omission of are works wonders in setting the tone. An option would have been to use the progressive form of the verb (gerund) and slap a mistake on it, but “dove stai a andare?” sounds affected, unnatural, and very unlikely to come out of anyone’s mouth. The point is that we can’t really put a mistake in the target language, as the equivalent “dove vai?” is a simple sentence that even the least literate Italian gets right. In some other cases something could be done, like in this case:

“saw him I’s coming up the road”
It has a great effect, but it is hard to replicate it, as omitting the subject pronoun is normal in Italian, as it is of course a null subject language. As far as “as I was” turning into “I’s” is concerned, all I could do was reduce the verb to the bare minimum (the gerund ‘venendo’ instead of the full ‘mentre stavo venendo’) but again, I could not push it too far. Instead, I transferred most of the non-standard quality onto the last bit, so the impeccable English ‘coming up the road’ became a very colloquial ‘venendo in qua’:

“L’ho visto venendo in qua.”

In this case we can see how full dynamic equivalence was at best a utopian goal, given that no Italian regional variety could be even remotely credible as a replacement for Southern American English. Hence the choice to replace the dialect with a sociolect. And, especially because of this choice, formal equivalence was to a certain extent very much in order, as the only way to get close to a dynamic equivalence was actually to maintain the same degree of syntactical and grammatical peculiarities, in order at least to convey the social connotations of the language. Yet again, an excess of formal equivalence would have produced awful and unnatural Italian sentences. And doesn’t so much of our practice consist exactly of this going around in circles until we find a spot where we can strike the right balance.

My perception is that whenever we approach one of the opposite poles too much, a lot of things tend to go wrong. And this brings me to what is, to me, the main point underlying any discussion about style in translation. Which is that, despite the necessity for a bare minimum of theoretical prescriptions and guidelines – foreignisation vs. domestication, formal equivalence vs. dynamic equivalence and so on – and despite the natural intellectual curiosity pushing us to reflect on our work, at the end of the day we need to be pragmatic and learn to navigate that spectrum between the two theoretical poles without being dogmatic. We need some sort of a holistic approach, if you will
let me use that term. Choices are to be made looking at the big picture, the whole work. Maybe changing a word to save a paragraph, a paragraph to save a page. Especially when we consider that – like it or not – most literary translations nowadays are commissioned by publishers with a uniquely commercial agenda, and therefore the tyranny of readability for the average consumer has to be taken into account at all times. This creates new challenges for those scrupulous practitioners who still want to bring the reader into the text and into the culture it comes from, and – even more importantly – have the immodest ambition of further enriching the target language with their work, fulfilling their role as a word smugglers, as this has to be achieved without alienating an average reader who is easily lost. But we really can’t afford to change the whole tone of a work in order to make it a supposedly easier read. It’s a hard balance to strike, and a reminder that we often have to transcend theories. As I said before, we need to look at that big picture and improvise, moving from the rational to the creative domain, where we need to deal with tricky criteria like ear and flow and taste and indeed style, all those imponderable elements which make the literary translator’s task so exciting and enriching.