

**NOTES AND GLEANINGS /
NOTE E CURIOSITÀ**

**GENDER-RELATED AMBIGUITY AND
STEREOTYPING IN ENGLISH-ITALIAN,
ITALIAN-ENGLISH TRANSLATION**

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Abstract

Le diverse strutture morfosintattiche dell'inglese e dell'italiano, sommate alla più lenta evoluzione di quest'ultimo nell'area del linguaggio sessuato rispetto al linguaggio sessuato del primo, rendono problematica, e a volte fuorviante, la traduzione di vocaboli e concetti dall'una all'altra lingua. Una serie di esempi tratti da testi di diverso genere dimostra il dilemma di chi deve tentare di rendere il più fedelmente possibile detti vocaboli e concetti, finendo sovente col deformare il significato del testo originale. Data la tradizionale predominanza del genere maschile in italiano, il testo tradotto è spesso vittima dei pregiudizi e stereotipi di una società patriarcale a danno della presenza femminile, sia nella lingua che, subliminalmente, nella società.

[...] *we do not know how most women in the past regarded themselves or their role since almost all we know about them comes from the writing of males*
[...]¹

The title of the present paper refers to morphosyntactic ambiguity in relation to gender (in)determinacy, and as a corollary to sexual (in)determinacy. In other words, it concerns the issue of how to translate gendered and gender-neutral words, phrases and concepts precisely and unambiguously from Italian into English and viceversa. This is a topic which has curiously been ignored in works concerning theoretical aspects of translation from English into Italian², although to my mind this is one area where we encounter real difficulties if we wish to convey meaning and nuances of meaning with a high degree of accuracy. In my quest I have examined a large sample of published translations, both ways, generally in the higher registers of historiography, sociology, journalism, fiction and poetry.

Structurally, and more pronouncedly in recent years under the impact of the movement advocating gender parity, present-day English has increasingly become a virtually

¹ V. Bullough, *The Subordinate Sex. A History of Attitudes Toward Women*, University of Illinois Press, 1973: 3.

² See e.g. Christopher Taylor, *Aspects of language and translation: Contrastive approaches for Italian/English translators*, Campanotto 1990; Roselia Irti, *Tradurre senza tradire*, Sansoni 1992. In his systematic treatment of translation issues, Taylor refers to gender-related *crucis* only twice: (202-203) when he suggests 'caretakers' rather than 'concierges' to render the marked feminine *portinaie*; and later mistranslates *cameriere* ('maid-servants') as 'waitresses'; (204) when he translates *per il figlio che studia* as 'for (their) sons and daughters' and justifies his choice 'not a as sop to feminism (*sic*) but a recognition that **figlio** (and particularly **figli**) is of a more generic nature than the English **sons**'. (Taylor's bold). However, Taylor does not address the broader theoretical issue of how to translate gendered language.

Irti, in her practical manual for aspiring translators, seems unaware of this issue.

gender-neutral language in which we only find vestigial remains of gender-related inflexion and differentiation. At the beginning of this century, the eminent social anthropologist James George Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough*, was still able to write with apparent impunity 'In Oldenburg, they say that when *a person* lies sweating with fever, *he* should take a piece of money to *himself* in bed'³ (*my italics*). This type of style would be unacceptable, I presume, in most English-speaking societies nowadays, but let us not forget that English legislation included, at least until recently, the all-embracing norm that the pronoun 'he' subsumed, or included, the pronoun 'she'. To be sure, a few oscillations and variations still remain with regard to whether the dual-gendered third person singular pronominal form should be 'he/she' or 's/he', and whether the corresponding possessive adjective should be 'his/her', 'her/his' or 'their', not to mention other more fanciful suggestions. Yet apart from these forms and other relics of gender differentiation such as 'actor' versus 'actress', 'poet' versus 'poetess' and a few more about which usage seems still uncertain, it can be argued that English has by and large solved the problem of making language as gender-neutral as this is morphosyntactically feasible.

The Romance languages, and in particular Italian, have been lagging behind with their Latin-derived system of gendered endings, and the traditional, entrenched dominance of masculine in most cases of gender mixing. With regard to the Latin-Italian *continuum*, there have been two and a half millennia of speech acts and printed texts which have consistently and continuously reinforced the dominance of masculine, and have allocated much less space to feminine, far less than women's numerical

³ J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*: VI: *The Scapegoat*, 1913: 49.

strength within society would justify. I shall use the term 'dual-gendered' to describe those English words which can be used freely to denote either a female or a male, for instance 'traveller', 'doctor', 'singer'. These words are common in the English language and make it possible for the sex of a referent to be concealed, for example when it is irrelevant or for other reasons, in many a context, as English articles and adjectives are of course ungendered. Italian too contains a proportion of seemingly dual-gendered words, for example names of professions or political allegiances ending in *-ista*; many words ending in *-e*, including a whole class of adjectives with common endings; yet the frequent presence of articles and/or other morphosyntactic features makes it considerably more difficult to refer to animates without revealing their gender. Problems arise when we need to translate from one language into the other.

We cannot perhaps use the term mistranslation in all cases, as the original meaning is often not totally distorted. In many instances, as I hope to be able to demonstrate, it seems legitimate to introduce the concept of *distranslation* to express an incomplete and/or inaccurate rendering in relation to gender inclusiveness or gender specificity. In a number of cases, it would be appropriate to define the issue as one of *untranslatability*.

Let us first of all look at what is perhaps the most recurrent pattern of ambiguity. Mixed-gendered animate plurals are normally expressed in English through dual-gendered words: *(the) Romans* refers to Roman men and women, likewise *citizens*, *neighbours*, etc. The following examples, in my view, illustrate the dilemma of an English translator who has to deal with plural mixed-gender animates, expressed in Italian through

'unmarked masculine' (see below), and wavers between English masculine forms and dual-gendered forms⁴.

(xi) la storia delle genti e *degli uomini* che hanno abitato la penisola = (9) history of peoples and *individuals* who have inhabited the peninsula.

(xiii) ciò che vale per le cose vale anche per *gli uomini* = (11) What is true of things is also true of *men*.

(68) riduzioni nel numero *degli uomini* e delle bocche = (65) reductions of the number of *men* and mouths

(68) *gli uomini* del secolo XIV continuarono a vivere... = (65) *the people* of the fourteenth century continued to live...

(70) un sovraccarico di *uomini* su di una terra ... = (66) a land overloaded with *people*

(NB. *my italics*)

In all above examples, context seems to justify an interpretation of *uomini*, which is the plural form of the singular masculine *uomo* (=man), as in fact meaning 'men and women'. Traditionalist Italian grammarians, in order to justify the unsatisfactory state of Italian in relation to gender and preserve the *status quo*, have come up with a third gender, so to speak, labelled 'unmarked masculine' (*maschile non marcato*), which is defined as morphologically masculine but semantically unisex, and has been normally used in reference to mixed groups: for example, *i sudafricani* in the meaning of 'South Africans', i.e. 'South African men and women'; *gli scienziati* to mean 'female and male

⁴ From G. Procacci, *Storia degli italiani*, I, Laterza 1969. One-volume English translation by Anthony Paul under title *History of the Italian People*, Penguin 1978. The Italian quotes are taken from the original Italian text, the English quotes are taken from Paul's translation.

scientists'. A mental process should ensure that the plural unmarked masculine form is perceived as comprising both sexes: but does it? Speakers targeted throughout their lives with messages expressed in the masculine gender will in practice find it very difficult to constantly remind themselves that each plural animate class in the masculine includes a proportion, varying from a small minority to a large majority⁵, of female members.

A frequent and intractable case of mistranslation occurs when English uses a dual-gendered word or concept and this is by necessity, yet arbitrarily put into gender-specific Italian. In a passage in Peter Nichols's *Italia, Italia*, a study of postwar Italian society and politics written in the early 1970s, the author devotes a 20-line paragraph on page 24⁶, to an anecdote set in Calabria, involving a 'traveller' and a local 'child' who 'was sitting by ... a column of what was once the temple of Hera, the goddess of the earth'. (Hera, incidentally, was the queen of heaven and wife of Zeus, and it looks as if Nichols here is confusing her with some

⁵ For a full treatment of this specific issue see Alma Sabatini et al's report on sexism in Italian: Alma Sabatini ed altre, *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana*, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 1987, in particular p. 49, and the authors' recommendations on p. 109. Traditional teaching of Italian grammar has involved a prescription that in all cases of mixed-gender animate groups the masculine gender must prevail irrespective of the female-male ratio within the group (although there have recently been signs of a timid change in approach, see e.g. Renzi e altri, *Grande grammatica italiana di consultazione*, Il Mulino, vol. I, 1988: 322-324).

⁶ Here is the full text of the relevant excerpt:

'For instance, a *traveller* on a spring day a dozen years ago walked along Capo Colonna, outside Crotona in Calabria, where a *child* was sitting by the single classical column remaining from which this cape takes its name, a column of what was once the temple of Hera, *the goddess of the earth (sic)*. *The child* said in an unaffected, unrehearsed tone how a column of solid gold used to stand there centuries ago and sometimes now, when the sun and the sea were right, fishermen saw a glint of gold on the sea-bed....' (*my italics*). (*the rest of the paragraph continues to retell the local legend*). (From Peter Nichols, *Italia, Italia*, Fontana/Collins, 1975: 24-25).

other goddess). The child regales the traveller with tidbits of local history and custom to illustrate the continuance of pagan beliefs in that area long after the advent of Christianity. Nowhere in the paragraph is the sex of the traveller or of the child alluded to, and it is impossible to deduce it from the context as there are no third person pronouns or possessive adjectives. In the absence of any other referents, an unprejudiced reader would be entitled to conclude that both traveller and child could be either female or male. The Italian translator⁷, who incidentally is male, however chooses the masculine gender in both cases and comes up with the unequivocally masculine forms *bambino* and *viaggiatore* respectively. On what grounds, one might ask. An Italian masculine singular form, in this context, will not easily be perceived as dual-gendered, let alone feminine. Both in the case of *bambino*, and *viaggiatore*, a reader's perception is invariably that of a male human. It might be pointed out that the first is imparting knowledge, the other is seeking knowledge. We would be justified in concluding that concern with knowledge is traditionally seen as a male prerogative.

Thus we begin to realize, and this is confirmed again and again in innumerable examples, that when a translator is in doubt in regard to a person's gender, he, and often she, automatically selects masculine as if it is perceived to be the 'safer', or more natural, grammatical gender. Female animates are thereby excluded from very large areas of discourse. We find the use of feminine, especially plural feminine, restricted to specific, socially marked cases.

⁷ *Italia, Italia*, translated by Fabrizio Dentice, Garzanti 1976: 24.

In another passage in *Italia, Italia* (14-16), Nichols discusses the so-called 'killings for honour', in his view sometimes improperly referred-to as *crimes passionnels*, and states that Section 587 of the Italian criminal code laid down 'near-impunity for anyone killing or injuring a spouse, daughter or sister (or the person caught with them) "at the moment in which *he* discovers the illegitimate carnal relationship and in the state of ire caused by the offence to *his* honour or to that of the family"' (*my italics*). It should be pointed out that this particular Section, which was repealed in 1981, was designed to impose milder sentences on those guilty of 'killings for honour' as it prescribed a maximum sentence of seven years in contrast with the 21-year sentence normally imposed on first-degree murderers. (Thus, although the Section was worded in punitive terms, it in fact virtually condoned such killings). Leaving aside Nichols's clumsy English style, a first reading of his version leaves the reader uncertain as to whether the law referred to crimes committed by men, or by either sex. If we analyze Nichols's text, we find that the English words 'anyone' and 'spouse' are dual-gendered, 'daughter' and 'sister' are unequivocally feminine, but there is also a reference to 'he' and 'his' honour, which seems to exclude that clause 587 may have referred to female culprits. Yet the subsequent account of one such crime involves a newly-married couple, Angelo and Maria, who decided to exact revenge on a man who four years earlier had previously seduced and deserted Maria. According to Nichols 'they shot him three times...', then 'the woman (Maria) stabbed him', and later defended her action in her police statement, on the grounds of 'dishonour' suffered. In other words, the notion that a 'crime of honour' ought to be punished leniently would appear to be not solely confined to male offenders, but you would have thought it was if you read the

Italian version of Nichols's text (14) which runs '...quasi-impunità a chi uccide o ferisce la moglie...' (*moglie* can only mean 'wife'), suggesting, it seems, that leniency in court was reserved to male defendants. A further confusing feature is the fact that Section 587 does not refer to murder, or attempted murder, committed by the 'dishonoured' person, yet that was Maria's defence according to Nichols.

Is the original text in the Italian criminal code more helpful? Section 587 contained two dual-gendered words (*chiunque, della persona*), one equivocal (unmarked?) masculine (*del coniuge*) and four unambiguously feminine forms referring to murdered victims (*della figlia, della sorella, la figlia, la sorella*). It seems that a precondition for judicial leniency was that the victim, or victims, had to be female, as Section 587 does not refer to leniency in the case of, say, a parent killing to defend the honour of a son seduced by an older married woman or by an older homosexual. However, all versions of the Section possess one common feature: gender-related ambiguity, compounded by ill-defined terms such as *scopre* and *illegittima*.

The full text of the now repealed Section 587 reads as follows (NB: D-G = dual-gendered; UM = unmarked masculine; GRDF = gendered feminine/GRDM = gendered masculine. *My translation*). I have **bolded** all ambiguous elements or concepts.

Chiunque (D-G) *cagiona*

Whosoever (D-G) causes

la morte del coniuge (UM),

the death of **her?/his?/their?** spouse (D-G),

della figlia (GRDF)
daughter (GRDF)

o della sorella (GRDF),
or sister (GRDF)

nell'atto in cui ne scopre la illegittima relazione carnale
while discovering (her?his?their?) unlawful sexual
relationship?/ congress?

e nello stato d'ira determinato dall'offesa all'onore suo (**D-G**) *o della famiglia*
and in a state of anger brought about by an insult to (her? his?
their?) honour or that of (her?his?their?) family

è punito (**UM? GRDM?**) *con la reclusione da tre a sette anni*
shall be sentenced (**D-G**) to three to seven years imprisonment.

Alla stessa pena soggiace chi (**D-G**)
The same sentence shall be imposed on **anyone who** (**D-G**)

nelle dette circostanze,
in the same circumstances

cagiona la morte della persona (D-G),
causes the death of **the person** (D-G)

che (D-G) *sia in illegittima relazione carnale*
who (D-G) is in an unlawful sexual relationship

col coniuge (**UM**), *con la figlia* (GRDF) *o con la sorella* (GRDF).

with (**her? his? their?**) spouse (**D-G**), daughter (**GRDF**) or sister (**GRDF**).

* * *

Now to a case of unambiguous Italian rendered in gender-inclusive, and therefore ambiguous, English. The following quote is from one of Leopardi's best-known poems, *Il sabato del villaggio*, in which the poet portrays an idyllic village setting on the eve of the holiday. After describing some of the activities involving male tradesmen, such as farm labourers and carpenters, Leopardi alludes to an old woman:

siede con *le vicine*
su la scala a filar la vecchierella

The only possible meaning of *siede con le vicine* is 'sits with her female neighbours', as *le vicine* is a marked feminine form. The latest translation of the poem⁸, published in 1995, as well as previous ones, renders Leopardi's lines as

On her own front steps the old woman
sits spinning *with her neighbours*
(*my italics*)

so, although the reference in the Italian text is unequivocally feminine, the English text is ambiguous as it could refer to female

⁸ *Selected poems of Giacomo Leopardi*, translated by Eamonn Grennan, Dedalus 1995. See also i.a. the translations of G.L. Bickersteth (*The Poems of Leopardi*, Cambridge University Press 1923: 283) and J.H. Whitfield (*Leopardi's Canti*, Scalabrini 1962: 181).

neighbours only, male neighbours only, or a mixture of females and males. The last interpretation would probably pass muster in present-day social conditions, but would have been unlikely in early nineteenth century Italy where sexual segregation was the norm and fraternizing by females with male neighbours would have been a virtual taboo, especially in a small village. It could therefore be argued here that the English translation, as well as being morphosyntactically inaccurate, significantly alters the social construct of the text and unwittingly presents an unhistorical picture of Italian society in the last century.

In addition to the intrinsic morphosyntactic difficulties of English-Italian, Italian-English translation, the way in which the two languages and, even more importantly, the two societies (italophone and anglophone) have developed has on the whole made this whole area even murkier. Virtually gender-neutral language was achieved in English-speaking countries over the past two or three decades, while gender-inclusive language in Italian-speaking society has just begun to be regarded as desirable, and has faced strong objections from the more conservative, mainly male-dominated linguistic establishment⁹. The feminist lobby, while it is aware of the issues involved, has not yet mounted in relation to language, the sort of mass movement which, for example, successfully led to changes in family law in recent Italian history. Female emancipation has also been, on the whole, more readily accepted in anglophone societies than it has in Italy. As a result, translators are having to contend not only with difficulties due to morphosyntactic features being out of sync, but, no less significantly, with

⁹ Typical of this attitude are i.a. Raffaele Simone, 'La lingua italiana è "maschilista"?' in *Lettera dall'Italia*, 3/9, 1988: 57; and Giulio Lepschy, 'Sexism and the Italian language', *The Italianist*, 7, 1987: 158-167.

difficulties originating from the different pace of evolution in relation to women's role.

Typologically, it may be appropriate to establish the following categories (from English into Italian and vice versa: the term 'ambiguous' should be read as 'seemingly ambiguous' or 'originally ambiguous', i.e. if it is decontextualized. In some cases, context will help clarify apparent ambiguities):

from unambiguous to ambiguous: e.g.

(Mack Smith) crowds of hungry women = (Aquarone) *assembramenti di donne affamate*¹⁰

(De Amicis) *essendo entrate alcune signore* = (Hartley) some ladies entered the room¹¹

from unambiguous to ambiguous: e.g.

(Collodi) *l'oste* = (Perella) the innkeeper¹²

(Mack Smith): all citizens...should be thought of as soldiers (447) = (Aquarone) *tutti i cittadini...dovevano essere considerati come militari*¹³

¹⁰ D. Mack Smith, *Italy: A Modern History*, University of Michigan Press 1959: 480: translated by A. Aquarone as *Storia d'Italia dal 1861 al 1969*, Laterza 1977, 3: 733.

¹¹ E. De Amicis, *Cuore*, Edizioni Paoline 1983: 28: translated by D. Hartley as *Cuore: The Heart of a Boy*, Peter Owen/UNESCO 1986: 26.

¹² C. Collodi, *Le avventure di Pinocchio*, University of California Press 1986: 168: parallel edition with translation by N.J. Perella as *The Adventures of Pinocchio*: 169.

¹³ Mack Smith 1959: 447; Aquarone 1977: 682. It is not clear whether cittadini here should be read as marked or unmarked masculine. I presume that the English word 'citizens' in the original text covers both sexes, but can we be *absolutely* certain that this is the case?

unambiguous traditionally untranslated: *Così fan tutte*.
Cameraman

from ambiguous to unambiguous

(Collodi) *disse la Volpe* = said the Fox, and **he** began...¹⁴

(Nichols) a child was sitting = *sedeva un bambino*¹⁵

from ambiguous to ambiguous

(Collodi) *l'appetito nei ragazzi* = a child's appetite¹⁶

(Lee Masters) one child in her arms and **three** that ran along
wailing = *un bambino sulle braccia e tre che le correvano
dietro gemendo*¹⁷

In addition to the lexical or phrasal examples quoted above, it is also possible for a lengthy passage to be sexually ambiguous either in the original or in translation.

The Melbourne daily *The Age*, carried on 19/11/97, (A16), an open letter from an anonymous reader¹⁸ to the local Catholic

¹⁴ C. Collodi 1986: 158; Perella 159. In the original Italian text, *la Volpe* is ambiguously female as is often the case with epicene animals' names in Italian (*la tigre, la giraffa*). The English translator chooses instead the masculine pronoun 'he' to refer to 'the Fox' as a swindler, in preference to the 'feminine' *vixen which of course is traditionally associated with other characteristics. The translator's choice is argued for in a footnote, n. 27 on p. 482.

¹⁵ See P. Nichols's Calabrian anecdote above.

¹⁶ Collodi 112; Perella 113.

¹⁷ Edgar Lee Masters, *Antologia di Spoon River*, parallel edition: translated by Letizia Ciotti Miller from the original *Spoon River Anthology*, Newton Compton, Rome: 1981: 254-255.

¹⁸ As the letter is too lengthy to be reproduced *in toto*, I am here only quoting the relevant paragraph: "The church's cover-ups are the (*sic*) crime against everybody, and you say in the newspapers, 'everybody is a sinner'. *I do not remember being a sinner at eight years of age!*" (*letter writer's italics*).

archbishop, from which it is impossible to deduce the sex of the writer. The purpose of the letter is to denounce what is perceived by the writer as the archbishop's policy of covering up sexual misdemeanours by diocesan clergy. I have attempted to translate the letter into Italian and found it by and large feasible without having to force the language or having to resort to unseemly renderings. There is however a stumbling block, represented by the segment "everybody is a sinner". *I don't remember being a sinner at eight years of age!*. While we can convey the first sentence with the unsatisfactory unmarked masculine *siamo tutti peccatori* which traditionally would have included female sinners as well as male, the second sentence is virtually untranslatable unless the writer's sex is known to us. If we wish to maintain the nominal form 'sinner' in the Italian version, we will have to make a choice between the feminine form *peccatrice* and the masculine form *peccatore*. But this is impossible unless we are informed as to the writer's sex. We therefore have to rely on a paraphrasis, or some other morphosyntactic strategy such as *Non ricordo di avere commesso peccati prima dell'età di otto anni!* which conveys the basic meaning of the original but loses out on nuance, as 'not having committed any sins before eight years of age' is not quite the same as 'not being a sinner at eight years of age', essentially because the first version leaves open the possibility of having begun sinning after the eighth birthday.

In each of two poems by Mario Luzi published in 1990 with an English translation *en face*, the author uses a one-off, but unequivocally feminine form which makes it clear that the poem addresses, or refers to, a human female¹⁹. The title *Nella casa*

¹⁹ *After Many Years. Selected Poems of Mario Luzi, translated from the Italian by*

di N. compagna d'infanzia (48-49, where *compagna* can only refer to a female child) is however rendered by the gender-ambiguous *In the house of a childhood friend* and nowhere else in the whole poem, or in its translation, do we find any further indication of N's sex. The second poem, *Lungo il fiume* (56-57), which is addressed to a woman, contains a single reference to her sex (*Tu come t'aggiri solitaria*) which is lost in the gender-ambiguous translation *You wander all alone*. Many non-italophone readers will undoubtedly be puzzled as to the gender of the two persons alluded to.

To recap then, in the present stage of development of the two languages, translation from English into Italian and viceversa is fraught with ambiguities, confusion and stereotyped solutions. Generally speaking, it is women who suffer from this state of affairs, as the tendency has been for translators to overlook the female dimension in language, and therefore, subliminally, in society, and for readers to be subconsciously influenced in much the same way.

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Catherine O'Brien: Dedalus 1990. I am grateful to Corinna Lonergan of the University of Dublin for drawing my attention to these examples of mistranslation.