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## PREFACE TO VOLUME 3 - THE NECESSARY FOREIGN: TRANSLATING DIALECTS

VIOLA G. MIGLIO

For many of us who are concerned about the loss of linguistic and cultural diversity inherent in the obsolescence of regional, non-standardized linguistic varieties, translation must be seen as an important means of maintaining the interest in these languages and dialects alive. The manipulation, stretching and fitting required by transforming a text in variety A into another in variety B provides a boost to the expressive ability of a language - and translating important literary texts into non-standard, minoritized varieties to make them available to different audiences provides status to those marginalized languages and to the texts originally produced in them. In Cronin's words:

... for minority languages themselves it is crucial to understand the operation of translation process itself as the continued existence of the language, and the self-perception and self-confidence of its speakers are intimately bound up with translation ... (Cronin 2003:146)

In a world where language marginalization and loss have accelerated at breakneck speed,<sup>1</sup> the position of dialects, i.e. diatopic, or regional varieties, but also diastratic, or social varieties of a language are unprotected, culturally valid forms of expression, which find themselves in a precarious position. The superposed standard variety, an umbrella term for the abstract entity that embraces all regional/social varieties, exerts relentless pressure on unwritten, non-standard forms, because it usually carries the prestige of official documents and the school system.

UNESCO considers that linguistic diversity "[a]s a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. (2001, Art. 1, p. 50). It also considers the "defense of cultural diversity ... an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity. It implies a commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular the rights of persons belonging to minorities and those of indigenous peoples (2001, Art. 4, p. 51, also UNESCO 2003).

In view of the bleak facts about language attrition and death, as well as the recognition of the importance of linguistic diversity, we have decided to devote this special volume of the Translation Studies Journal to issues related to the translation of dialects. Our decision was also due to the fact that we feel that this is an important, albeit understudied, area of literary translation studies, and secondly because we want to call attention to the role that translation can play in staving off dialect attrition, and hence the loss of linguistic and cultural diversity. The bulk of the contributions that make up this volume stem from the rich Italian tradition of dialectal literature, from prose to theater and poetry, from Baroque texts to the present.

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<sup>1</sup> See the many cases mentioned in UNESCO's *Atlas of the World Languages in Danger* (2010), or Irujo and Miglio's *Language Rights and Cultural Diversity* (2014).

The articles we have collected in this issue deal with different points of view about the challenges posed by the translation of literary dialects and propose a number of interesting solutions for what is the maintenance (or not) of the ‘necessary foreign’ in the target language text. Our authors address a broad spectrum of issues: the specific requirements of translating for the theater focusing on Italian plays in literary dialects such as De Filippo’s Neapolitan plays (De Martino) or that incorporate dialect and code-switching as an expressive method to capture the linguistic day-to-day dualism of many Italians (this is the case of Baldini’s Romagnol texts analysed in Boselli’s paper); the articles by Balma, Buffoni and DuVal all focus on poetry, and propose ingenious solutions to the translation of dialectal texts. Miglio’s paper raises issues in translating literature from a dialectally rich country such as Mexico, to one that is virtually devoid of dialectal differences, such as Iceland.

At present, it seems obvious that lack of official status for a language or linguistic variety spells out long-term doom (Irujo and Miglio 2014) and makes of that variety a “minor defeated language.”<sup>2</sup> This is of course true for dialectal varieties that by definition lack official status – despite being considered endangered or being considered as *languages* by linguists and by UNESCO.<sup>3</sup>

In this sense, dialects share the same fate of minority languages trapped in a political and administrative unit, where there is no one-to-one correspondence to the ethnic and social realities comprised in it. This is recognized by a number of recent publications (Federici 2011), websites and conferences devoted both to minority language and dialects, and the resources that practitioners and scholars can avail themselves of for translation.

Attrition in dialect use is of course related to societal evolution and the economic forces that have stretched out from single communities or even countries to larger macro-areas, where access to a global *lingua franca* is privileged, to a certain degree pragmatically necessary or convenient. Widely diffused languages, the so-called ‘major languages,’ have therefore dwarfed the importance or even the usefulness for members of traditionally bilingual<sup>4</sup> communities to use and perpetuate the transmission of the minority language to future generation. This is what makes of a *marginalized language* (an expression by the Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, see Lama Rodrigues 2004) a *defeated language* – essentially its speakers decide to stop speaking it. However, language death is not a simple nor a fast process, and it is agreed that one of the factors involved in this more or less conscious choice by the speakers is the

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<sup>2</sup> Nadiani (2006): “I will use the term of ‘minor defeated languages’ for all those codes which are still used, mostly orally, in a situation of fast diminishing diglossia.”

<sup>3</sup> In the European area, UNESCO’s so-called Red Book includes various dialects of Sami, Eastern and Northern Frisian, Leonese, Auvergnat and Limousin, Istriano-Romanian among the ‘seriously endangered languages,’ and North Sami, Western Frisian, Irish and Scottish Gaelic, Welsh, Asturian, Aragonese, Algherese Catalan, Provençal, Gascon, Romansch, Friulian, and the four main Sardinian dialects as ‘endangered languages,’ and Belorussian, Lowland Scots, Low Saxon, Galician, Corsican, Francoprovençal, Piedmontese, Ligurian, Lombard and Emilian as ‘potentially endangered languages.’ ([http://www.helsinki.fi/~tasalmin/europe\\_index.html](http://www.helsinki.fi/~tasalmin/europe_index.html))

<sup>4</sup> By bilingual we also mean bi-dialectal, following contemporary linguistic practice to consider any language variety possessing distinctive phonological system, grammatical patterns, and vocabulary as a different *language*.

prestige of the variety involved (Irujo and Miglio 2014). If the minor language is reviled, or limited to ancillary uses in the home, if it is not used for instruction, its speakers will abandon it, regardless of their affective involvement. Limited registers and situations where to use it will bring the speakers to consider it unsuitable for use in many more contexts, which will be more and more numerous as attrition spreads among speakers. The process will be by and large complete when the last generation of fluent speakers decides that the minoritized language is in fact a hindrance to the social and economic advancement of its children and thus it is no longer handed down to future generations.<sup>5</sup>

This is where translation, specifically literary translation, has a crucial role to play in re-establishing prestige for marginalized languages. But if time is limited, how can people be multilingual, and why should they be multi-dialectal? Why should writers write in dialect or in a marginalised language, when doing so is clearly not marketable?

To this question, Ngugi wa Thiong'o answers with the following words:

Intellectuals, from what we at the International Center for Writing and Translation at the University of California Irvine call marginalised languages – we call them marginalised but not marginal – have to realize that their primary audience is that of the language and cultural community that gave them. It's only they who can produce knowledge in their own languages for that audience defined by their access to that language, and then later, through translation, auto-translation, or by another person, open the works to audiences outside their original language community. A good work of art is always marketable.

By extension, therefore, dialects and their capacity for specialized linguistic expressivity are also always marketable, and despite their limited geographic coverage, they play a major role in establishing identity, and a sense of belonging to a specific community. Translating from and into different dialectal varieties, then, has a crucial importance for the prestige of the communities that speak them, and for the preservation of cultural diversity at large.

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<sup>5</sup> Not being handed down to the future generations is the criterion that makes of a language an 'endangered language' by UNESCO standards: i.e. when "children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home" the language is considered as 'definitely endangered' (<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/atlas-of-languages-in-danger/>, 20/10/12).

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