

Modern Translation Theories in Italy: A "Special Path"?

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Abstract

In Italy, modern theories of translation have recently developed, and occasionally reference has been made to a "special path" regarding the Italian discourse on translation. From an overview of the tendencies since about 1960, it emerges that most studies and reflections in Italy concern literary translation and many scholars reject the idea that a theory of translation should exist. However, research has early on succeeded in overturning the traditional idealistic prejudice of "untranslatability", developing an aesthetic approach which puts the accent on translation as part of the reception processes of literary texts. During the last few decades, the discussion on translation has caught up with tendencies in other macro cultures, being increasingly influenced by linguistics and mostly semiotics. Today, the reflection on translation in Italy is multi-faceted but continues to be characterized by specific focuses and interests, especially on literary translation.

Keywords: Translation Theory, Italy, Untranslatability

1. Introduction: Translation Theories in Different Cultures

Over the past fifty years, translation research has repeatedly made intensive efforts to develop a theory of translation that is as broad as possible. At the same time, research into the history of translation and translation reflection has experienced a marked upswing. For instance, in recent years there has been a noticeable effort to broaden the horizon beyond the European cultural sphere. Consequently, it has become clear that the perception of translation and the translator – despite the cross-cultural character of translation as such – is just as culture-bound as, for example, its cultural and historical environment or the translation strategies themselves.

Various recent studies, some of which have taken on the character of textbooks in university teaching (e.g. Munday et al. 2022, Pym 2023, Prunč 2007, Siever 2010), try to provide an overall view of the translation theories developed in the recent decades. However, unlike for

example in the case of widespread encyclopaedic works, which include a much longer time span (e.g. Baker 1998: 295-582), the approach is not based on cultural areas, but rather on problems. This is probably because the selection of the theories dealt with is normally limited to the Anglo-Saxon and, to some extent, the German regions anyway. Moreover, it is probably the case also because it is assumed that in recent times, at least within the "Western" cultural area, the barriers between the individual national cultures are not particularly relevant.

On the one hand, if the aim is to do justice to the diversity of translation theory that continues to exist today, it also appears necessary to delve deeper and examine cultural areas that have not been widely explored until now. This will help to avoid a kind of 'occidental provincialism' that may arise from 'cultural limits' in research (Salmon, 2003: 40–41). The reflection on translation in Italy, in particular, has rarely been the subject of in-depth discussion (but see Duranti 1998; Bscheipfler & Schwarze 2011). Generally, it is held that modern translation theories in Italy have developed only slowly, and the formulation of explicit systematic models has been delayed in comparison to other cultural areas even from the second half of the 20th century onwards. Conversely, it can be seen that theoretical considerations made in Italy are rarely accepted in other cultural areas. In the main international reviews of translation theory, hardly any reference is made to Italy. Moreover, as has often been noted (e.g. Pöckl & Pögl 2006: 1373; Nasi 2015: 12), Italian authors are practically absent from internationally oriented collections of texts on translation theory, and even the two volumes of this type by Nergaard (1993; 1995), initially the only ones of their kind in Italian, contain only texts by the Florentine humanist Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444), by the philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) and by the well-known semiotician Umberto Eco (1932-2016).

Reflecting about the reasons for the widespread absence of analytical-theoretical texts and for the relatively low level of resonance they receive, the special conditions of the discussion on translation in Italy have generally been blamed for these reasons so far:

- Italian, with its special character as a heritage of Latin, was for a long time considered a "superior" language and thus unquestionably suitable for translation, so that a translational awareness of problems corresponding to that of other cultures could not develop (Zvereva 2013). This would then be the continuation of a "special path" for Italy, which can be traced back to the early 19th century at the latest, when in European Romanticism reflection on translational "fidelity to the original" developed out of the recognition of historical distance, but from which Italy remained largely untouched (Bscheipfler & Schwarze 2011: 1951; see also Catalano & Scotto 2001).
- The concrete reason for the slow development of theoretical frameworks in the 20th century, on the other hand, could lie in the long-lasting influence of Croce's aesthetically founded translation scepticism, which for a long time kept the Italian translation discourse on more philosophical and/or idealistic tracks (Duranti 1998: 481).

The question arises, however, whether the strict separation between research paradigms in the humanities and natural sciences in the Italian scientific tradition, which only allows the latter (i.e. the "scienze") to define regularities, may not have played a role in the restrained theory-building process. In the following, therefore, we analyse the development of the translation theory discussion in Italy since about 1960 in its main features, focusing first on the question of the claim to "scientificity" and then on the role that the concept of "(un)translatability" has played in the discussion. At the same time, the question of the intercultural interlocking of the discourse on translation theory is considered.

2. Attitudes to Theories and Scientificity

It is striking, first of all, that a large part of concrete translation research in Italy, at least until the turn of the millennium, is made up of literary studies or studies on the history of reception of literary text. Often we can find individual case studies that are decidedly opposed to theoretical approaches in favour of a stronger emphasis on the role of the subject and his or her direct involvement in the translation process or a classification of the respective translation in terms of the history of the humanities or literature. Even though the term "traduttologia", borrowed from French "traductologie", has generally prevailed for research into translation and for theoretical reflection on it (see Mattioli 1989; Buffoni 2005; 2007; Montella 2005; see also the journal *traduttologia* edited by Solfanelli), many authors not only reject any normative tendency or influence through systematic approaches, but also explicitly refuse the development of an overarching theory (see, for example, Lavieri 2007: 58-88, "il demone della teoria"; in detail Salmon 2020). It is therefore not surprising that the discussion on the problem of translation has often focused on the question of the translatability of literary texts in particular, or on the "paradox of translation" (see, for example, the titles of Fortini 2004; Guarino 2005), which arises from the opposition between the theoretical impossibility and the real existence of translation, or on a critical examination of the history of translation or of historical translation conditions and reflections.

Parallel to this main tendency in Italian translation discourse, which is strongly rooted in literary studies and philology (many authors on this subject in Albanese & Nasi 2015), in recent decades other currents, fed by different sources, have developed which pursue more systematic scientific approaches and thus also tend to formulate theoretical models. The most important counterbalance to the predominantly literary-historical direction are probably the semiotically oriented approaches, such as those advocated above all by Umberto Eco (2001; 2003) (see also Petrilli 2006; 2009), while the influence of linguistics has also increased (for example, Terracini 1984; Arcaini 1986; De Mauro 1994; Korzen & Marellò 2000; Menin 1996; Prencipe 2006). Only rarely have procedural approaches been pursued to date or approaches oriented more towards aspects of professional translation in particular (on this observation, see Soffritti 2004), which have therefore only occasionally contributed to theory formation. The fact that the study of professional translation in Italy has only slowly got underway and has remained a poor relation of research for a long time also fits into this picture (but see Scarpa 2001 for specialised translation; Perego 2024 for audiovisual translation).

Unfortunately, it is not possible here to discuss in detail the theories developed especially in the field of Slavic Studies under Eastern European influence (Osimo 2004; 2009; Kroker & Osimo 2004), including in particular the interesting, psychologically oriented approaches (Salmon 2007; 2008; Salmon & Mariani 2012), as well as the philologically oriented research concerning history of translation in the Italian-speaking area (see, above all Folena 1991). In the Italian debate on translation, considerable attention is also paid to approaches that place translation in a broader context. For example, there is an extensive discussion of the concept of "traduzione" ('translation') of the well-known philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), which may also refer to the translation of philosophical systems (Bothman 2004; Ives & Lacorte 2010). Recent studies have also focused on the ideas of cultural anthropologist Furio Jesi (1941-1980), for whom translation was a further gnoseological background of his 'mythological machine' (Dogà 2021).

The specific nature of Italian translation discourse can also be seen in its relationship with foreign translation theory literature. There has been a recent increase in interest in international developments, as evidenced by the translation of several monographs since the 1980s. (the initially isolated "classical" work of Mounin in 1965 is followed at a considerable distance by, for example, Newmark 1981; Bassnett 1993; Munday 2012), collections of translated essays (e.g. Agorni 2005), critical reviews of translation reflection in individual cultural fields (e.g. Ulrych 1998) and more historically oriented works on translation theory, which also take into account recent developments (e.g. Osimo 2002: 83-253; Salmon 2003: 17-164; Biagini 2024). A large number of the often "practically" oriented handbooks on translation also offer a theoretical introductory section in which the development of international research in recent decades is reviewed (e.g. Arduini & Stecconi 2007: 13-44; Faini 2004: 11-41; Morini 2007: 15-77). Another noteworthy aspect is the attempt to interlink Italian translation theory terminology internationally (Delisle & Lee-Jahnke & Cormier 2002), which is just as much an indication of the attempt to make the translation discussion more scientific as the attention paid to the development of translation terminology in general (Soffritti 2006; Fusco & Londero 2008: 249-274).

In this process of reception, however, it is noticeable that among the translated works that prevail are those that attempt to derive their theoretical framework from literary translation or from the development of translation reflection (see especially Apel 1993; 1997; Berman 1997; Gentzler 1998; Lefevere 1998; Steiner 1984; 2004; Venuti 1999; 2004; for philosophical works see Ricoer 2022; Benjamin 2023). Thus, a predominantly literary or humanistic orientation emerges, which tends to emphasise the meaning of each text and thus also its translations, while pragmalinguistic or functional(istic) theories are still less widely accepted (internationally renowned authors such as Juliane House or H. J. Vermeer are only rarely mentioned in reviews and bibliographies). Another special feature of the situation in Italy is that, in addition to English-, German- and French-language literature, literature from Slavic countries is often also taken into consideration and, in some cases, provides interesting impulses for the further development of translation theory, also through the translation of monographs with the declared aim of spreading more "scientifically" oriented approaches to translation research in Italy (Soliński 1992; Torop 2000; Popovič 2006; Lûdskanov 2008; on

the process see Osimo 2009).

3. Literary (In)Translatability: From Idealism to Phenomenological Aesthetics

The history of translation reflection in Italy since the second half of the twentieth century, which initially involved mainly literary researchers and translators, has its origins in the discussion of Benedetto Croce's famous verdict of untranslatability, based on theoretical considerations and an idealistic conception of literature. This conception must, however, be relativised because, according to Croce, only the prose of important writers remains fundamentally untranslatable in its stylistic habitus, as does poetry, while an "equivalenza dei segni" ('equivalence of signs') in terms of content for purely communicative purposes is conceivable for certain types of texts, just as "ri-creazione" ('re-creation') is conceivable for certain translators through a congenial translation (see Bscheipfler & Schwarze 2011, 1955-1956; for an overall view of the statements Croces s. Albanese 2011).

It is precisely the question of the value of literary translation and the correct interpretation of Croce's positions that is the starting point for the reflections on translation during the 20th century, which continue to move along decidedly aesthetic lines, but at the same time attempt to overcome the idea of "untranslatability" by means of subtler argumentation. Thus, for example, the literary critic Mario Fubini (1900-1977) complains in a repeatedly published essay that various pre-war authors, including Luigi Pirandello and Giovanni Gentile, show "un irrigidimento e una dogmatizzazione del tanto più aperto pensiero del Croce" ('a stiffening and dogmatisation of Croce's more open thought'), which were expressed in an exaggerated accentuation of the unreducible difference between the translation and the original text, thus leading to the misconception of an absolute absence of relativity of poetry, which was based exclusively on a one-sided interpretation of the early Croce (Fubini 1963: 803 n. 26). Fubini, on the other hand, questions the utopia of translation and, because of the "universalità" ('universality') of all poetry, considers a "relativa traducibilità dell'espressione" ('relative translatability of expression') to be given (op. cit., 790), placing the translation, which for him loses any extraordinary or paradoxical character, in a series with "reminiscenze, imitazioni, citazioni" ('records, imitations, citations') (op. cit., 792). For Fubini, translation means the renewal of a tradition, especially as a sign of "perenne vitalità dell'opera di poesia, o meglio di quella vita espressiva in cui non esistono jati o fratture" ('perennial vitality of the work of poetry, or rather of that expressive life in which there are no gaps or fractures') (op. cit., 803). The translator's task is therefore not to create a work based on the original, but rather one that seeks to reproduce the "spirito" ('spirit') in a different historical context, taking into account both content and form (op. cit., 793).

Even further in the direction of a veritable aesthetics of translation are the influential reflections of the well-known poet and literary translator Franco Fortini (1917-1994), whose writings on translation theory span a period of several decades, the main theses going back to the early 1970s (Fortini 1972; 1972a; 1989; 2004; 2011 - the latter two publications are posthumous editions of some lectures given in 1989). Fortini, who sees translation as one of several possible forms of literary or critical activity, seeks in particular to take up and strengthen the position of the translator him or herself. For a poet, translation is first and

foremost a "metodo economico per assumere un'identità diversa dalla propria" ('economic method to assume an identity different from one's own'), also because every literary use of language leads to the assumption of a new identity of the speaker or writer. A similar process of identification is evident in the reader of a literary work and leads to a tension between one's own personality and the personality that emerges during reading. Translation is the written testimony of this tension and thus of a certain degree of text reading, which could have ended at a higher level with a critical commentary on the same, so that translation becomes part of the reception and criticism of the text. In place of Croce's notion of the "nostalgia dell'originale" ('longing for the original') in translation, Fortini therefore sets the one of "tensione tra la memoria dell'originale e l'apprensione del nuovo 'originale' ossia della traduzione" ('tension between the memory of the original and the apprehension of the new 'original' i.e. the translation') (Fortini 1972, 60). Again, this tension can be gradual and is influenced, among other things, by the previous knowledge of the audience, resulting in different levels of text production, including "l'imitazione, la parodia, il rifacimento" ('imitation, parody, remake'), while the translation itself can evoke different aspects of the original (op. cit. 61). Fortini's later writings, for example, discuss compensation techniques in literary translation (e.g. Fortini 1989), but above all the in-depth treatment of the alternative between the "traduzione didascalica, o di servizio" ('didactic, or service translation'), which rather explains the original text, and the personal-expressive and poetic "traduzione creativa, o poetica" ('creative, or poetic translation') (Fortini 2004: 31), whereby for the latter, later also called "traduzione d'autore" ('author translation') (Fortini 2011: 58), he rejects in principle an evaluation based on a comparison with the original text and therefore does not always consider bilingual text editions to be appropriate (Fortini 2004: 38). Fortini considers these two translation strategies, whose contrast almost corresponds to that between "parafrasi e rifacimento" ('paraphrase and remake') (Fortini 2011: 58), to be incompatible and assigns them to different historical epochs within the 20th century (Fortini 2011: 72-73), while he considers the balancing middle ground of actual literary translation to be no longer viable due to the lack of clearly defined national literatures in the 20th century.

In recent decades, literary translation research in Italy has developed steadily and, despite a continued diffuse hostility to theory, has also sought to define its theoretical position more precisely. Emilio Mattioli (1938-2007), co-founder and long-standing co-editor of the journal "Testo a fronte", can be considered the main representative of this direction, according to the judgement of Bruno Osimo (2002: 226) "il più importante teorico della traduzione italiano" ('the most important Italian theorist of translation'), as well as Franco Buffoni (b. 1948), editor of the same journal and of anthologies (e.g. Buffoni 1989), including a monumental two-volume collection of texts on translation theory (Buffoni 2005). The main aim of the argumentation developed is, after overcoming the thesis of "untranslatability", fundamentally to exclude any normative tendency when considering literary translation. In particular, the question of the definition of translation is deliberately omitted in order to make the methods of phenomenological and reception aesthetics fruitful for its research (Mattioli 2005: 197), whereby translation and original enter into a dialogue. In doing so, a connection is also sought to international translation research with a literary orientation, not only to the polysystems theory applied within the so-called Manipulation School, but above all to

George Steiner's ideas, to the principle of intertextuality initially developed in France and to the concept of translation as a “Sprachbewegung” (‘language movement’) proposed by Friedmar Apel (see Mattioli 1993: 7-23; 2005, 191-196; Buffoni 2007: 7-20).

In particular, the concept of "rhythm" (see Mattioli 2001; Buffoni & Mattioli 2002; also the title of Nasi 2025), which is based on discourse research and was taken over by the French translation theorist Henri Meschonnic, plays a major role and is suitable for all literary texts, while dualistic notions with pairs of opposites such as that between sign and meaning, source and target text or opposing translation strategies are classified as not applicable to literary translation (Buffoni 2005a). The differentiation from other approaches is striking. Umberto Eco, for example, is accused in his more recent writings on translation theory (e.g. Eco 2003) not only of having moved away from his own earlier, originally "more open" positions from the 1960s, but of wanting to stick to the view of the untranslatability of literary texts in general:

Con le idee sulla traduzione sostenute da Eco non si esce dalle dicotomie e dai dogmatismi e si continua a oscillare tra Croce e Jakobson, nella convinzione che la poesia sia intraducibile e che per la letteratura – in generale – sia possibile porre in essere soltanto una stolido, risibile e piuttosto volgare ‘negoziante’.

‘With the ideas on translation supported by Eco, one does not get out of the dichotomies and dogmatism and continues to swing between Croce and Jakobson, in the conviction that poetry is untranslatable and that for literature - in general - it is only possible to put in place a stolid, laughable and rather vulgar 'negotiation'.’ (Buffoni 2007: 17).

4. Conclusions

In summary, it can be said that in the theories examined here, translation in Italy has often been perceived as a one-off event and thus as part of the sphere of competence of the "pure" humanities, which is why many researchers still reject the elaboration of abstract theories today. At the same time, however, it must be emphasised that the "traduttologia" actually broke away quite soon and thoroughly from Croce's translation-sceptical position and thus paved the way for the development of a reception-based description of translation. The predominant interest in literary texts is probably the reason why the influence of linguistically or semiotically oriented approaches to translation reflection has only slowly begun to unfold. A fundamental change in this sense has taken place since the end of the 1990s at the latest, when language and translation research was decoupled from literary studies in the course of the university reform and formed a separate subject for each language, so that the preoccupation with translation in university teaching and research has now taken on a different direction. Another striking feature is the strong link between the discourse on translation theory in Italy and the discussion in international research, with works from the fields of literature or linguistics or semiotics being included depending on the theoretical preference.

As in other cultural areas, translation theories in Italy today therefore present a rather colourful picture with different schools of thought, whereby the more literary-philosophical

and the more linguistic-semiotic orientated directions sometimes confront each other quite irreconcilably, but at the same time there are also attempts to develop them in an interdisciplinary way (see D'Urso 2009). It is therefore not necessarily possible to speak of a purely "special path" in the Italian translation theory discussion, but rather of a specific weighting of the approaches and areas of interest where literary translation continues to predominate.

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