Teaching the Specific Language of Italian Lyric Texts to Future Opera Singers

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Abstract

Future opera singers at conservatories in the Czech Republic study Italian as a foreign language but they also need to understand completely lyric texts related to the scores they interpret; on that account their language education should include translation activities. This paper includes a theoretical part, which analyses linguistic aspects that influence translation related to the specific language of lyric texts, and a practical part based on research conducted with students at the Conservatory of Pilsen, which aims to show all the concrete aspects of such a specific translation. The linguistic analysis is based on the corpus of lyric texts commonly used during the training of future opera singers. The research is based on texts actually interpreted in the current school year. The aim of the research is to provide a comparison of the linguistic knowledge obtained as a benefit of modern teaching methods and the specific knowledge required for the translation of Italian lyric texts. The research questions to be answered are: Do modern teaching methods help the translation process? In what way and to what degree? Finally, the research is extended by a comparison of the declared and performed language knowledge of the participants. The future application of the research presented is the modification of teaching methods used in the language education of future opera singers.

Keywords: Translation, Italian, Language education, Opera singers, Lyric texts

1. Introduction

Nowadays, intra-lingual and cross-lingual activities are often part of the language education, translation is also used as a teaching, diagnostic or corrective tool. Those aspects of language teaching which are best dealt through translation are handled in one type of lesson, and those best dealt by standard teaching method in another [1].

Future opera singers at the Conservatory of Pilsen, Czech Republic, study Italian in a standard language course, but lessons include the translations necessary for the performance of lyric texts.

This paper provides initially an overview of the aspects in which such texts differ from modern language. The benefit of this comparison is a list of criteria for assessment of the source text. The second part is dedicated to research conducted in the current school year, aimed to find out in what way and to what degree modern teaching methods help the translation process.

2. Specific language of lyric texts

To understand how modern language differs from the language of Italian lyric texts and to determine aspects that influence the translation of scores, *Metodo pratico* [2],

selected texts from *Arie antiche* [3] and several scores used for training future opera singers were analysed.

2.1 Quality of scores

The material that future opera singers usually work with is a photocopy of the score. While studying the scores several difficulties are encountered (missing punctuation, missing quotation marks etc.).

2.2 Orthography

In the case of transcripted scores, incorrect transcriptions often occur.

Orthographically, many words vary in connection to the historical period of the source text which can include different versions of one word. Also, the absence of capitalization influences comprehension. The linguistic aspect of the score is highly influenced by its musical part, which often requires stress at the last beat. Only a limited number of Italian words yet can be defined as oxytones, that is why librettists introduced unusual apocopes [4]. Differently elisioned expressions occur.

2.3 Grammar

In the standard language course *Nuovo progetto italiano* the present perfect, typically used in spoken language, is introduced in chapter 4 [5] and the preterite, used mainly in written production and librettos, appears only in chapter 4 of the second volume [6]. In course for students of conservatories and music schools, *Italiano nell'aria*, the situation is reversed [7], [8].

Morphologically, there are differences between commonly taught forms and historical versions of verbs and articulated prepositions.

2.4 Vocabulary

Lyric texts as expressive texts represent poetic lexicon that differs from everyday expressions and is often obsolete. Historical denotation of some expressions can differ if compared to the modern meaning. Obviously, rhetorical figures, idioms and sometimes dialects or foreignisms are present.

2.5 Word order

Atypical word order is often present because the music requires ending of the stanza or verse with a monosyllable or apocope word.

2.6 Context

Not only the verbal aspects should be taken into account, but also the rhythm, harmonies, changes in orchestration and other effects [9]. In the case of opera, the whole libretto should be known, with special regard to historical, geographical or cultural differences.

2.7 Source text assessment

Commonly used criteria for quality translation assessment, introduced by several authors like Werner Koller, Katharina Raiss, Peter Newmark, Chrisitane Nord and Juliane House, which often include also the assessment of the source text [10], give general guidelines, but in the case of lyric texts must be adjusted, taking into account all the above-mentioned aspects.

3. Research on translation

The research was conducted on students' translations of *Ciaccona del Paradiso e dell'Inferno*, created by an anonymous author in the second half of the 17th century. The chaconne was performed by students at the end of the school year.

To describe in what way and to what degree modern teaching methods help the translation process, the difference between the source text and its potential modern version was quantified. The source text included two incorrect transcriptions.

Orthographically, several words changed in the text. There were many lyric apocopes and obsolete elisions. The text included one idiom, one foreignism not found in a Czech-Italian dictionary and three potential false friends. The context was completely unknown but was not particularly unusual. With regard to all the above-mentioned criteria, the text represented approximately 37% of differences if compared to modern language use.

1.1 Quality of the scores	1.1.1 missing punctuation	-
	1.1.2 missing quotation marks	-
	1.1.3 missing words´/syllables´ boundaries	-
1.2 Orthography	1.2.1 incorrect transcription	tute = tutte, ne = né
	1.2.2 obsolete transcription	foco = fuoco, ove = dove, giel = gelo, hore = ore, loco = luogo, havrai = avrai
	1.2.3 different transcriptions	ove / dove, foco / fuoco, havrai / haverai, qui / qua
	1.2.4 missing capital letters	-
	1.2.5 lyric apocopes	bel = bello, orribil = orribile, star = stare, veder = vedere, giel = gielo, ciel = cielo, si radunan = si radunano, fin = fine
	1.2.6 obsolete elisions	fest´e = feste e, l´hore = le hore, ´l ghiaccio = il ghiaccio, l´intemperie = le intemperie, ch´abborisce = che abborisce
1.3 Grammar	1.3.1 obsolete articulated prepositions	-
	1.3.2 obsolete verb form	-
1.4 Vocabulary	1.4.1 lyric lexicon	abborisce
	1.4.2 obsolete lexicon	vi = ci, v´è = c´è
	1.4.3 rhetorical figures	-
	1.4.4 idioms	questo è quanto = ecco tutto
	1.4.5 dialectalism/foreignism	sempiterno
	1.4.6 faux amis	tempo, temperato, senza
1.5 Word order		di Dio svelato il viso = il viso svelato di Dio, fa pausa il canto e fin l´ardire = il canto fa pausa e l´ardire fine
1.6 Context	1.6.1 missing context	X
	1.6.2 historical context	-
	1.6.3 geographical unknown context	-
	1.6.3 cultural unknown context	-

Table 1. The source text assessed from a translational point of view

3.1 Methodology

The research was divided into two stages. In the first stage, the total number of respondents was 30, out of which 10 were in their first year, 10 in the second year, 5 in the third year and 5 in the fourth year. They were aged between 15 and approximately 33. All the participants were Czech native speakers and their CEFR level varied between A1- and A2-. They were asked to underline all the known words of the source text. In accordance with previous analysis, lexical and grammar explanations were given.

In the second stage, conducted two weeks later, the total number of respondents was only 17. They were asked to translate 30 Italian terms in a multiple-choice quiz online

(quizizz.com). The terms were based on the results of the first stage with the aim to verify students' declared knowledge.

O che bel stare è stare in Paradiso Dove si vive sempre in fest'e riso Vedendosi di Dio svelato il viso O che bel stare è stare in Paradiso.	bel = bello fest'e riso = feste e riso vedendosi = vedendo, di Dio svelato il viso = il viso svelato di Dio
Ohimè che orribil star qui nell'inferno Ove si vive in pianto e foco eterno Senza veder mai Dio in sempiterno Ahi, ahi, che orribil star giù nell'inferno.	orribil = orribile, star = stare ove = dove, foco = fuoco veder = vedere, sempiterno = eternità orribil = orribile, star = stare
Là non vi regna giel, vento, calore, Che il tempo è temperato a tutte l'hore Pioggia non v'è, tempesta, **né** baleno, Che il Ciel là sempre si vede sereno.	vi = ci, giel = gielo = gelo Che = Perché, l'hore = le ore non v'è = non c'è Che = Perché, Ciel = Cielo
Il fuoco e 'l ghiaccio là, o che stupore Le brine, le tempeste, e il sommo ardore Stanno in un loco tutte l'intemperie Si radunan laggiù, o che miserie.	'l ghiaccio = il ghiaccio loco = luogo, l'intemperie = le intemperie si radunan = si radunano
Havrai insomma là quanto vorrai E quanto non vorrai non haverai E questo è quanto, o Musa, posso dire Però fa pausa il canto e fin l'ardire.	havrai haverai = avrai, questo è quanto = ecco tutto fin = fine, fa pausa il canto e fin l'ardire = il canto fa pausa e l´ardire fa fine
Quel ch'aborrisce qua, là tutto havrai Quel te diletta e piace mai havrai E pieno d'ogni male tu sarai Dispera tu d'uscirne mai, mai, mai!	quel ch'aborrisce = quello che aborrisce havrai = avrai d'ogni = di ogni d'uscirne = di uscire+ne

Fig. 1: The source text with grammar and lexical explanations

3.2 Results and discussion

Among the most frequently underlined words there were *Paradiso* (paradise), well known to students also from English, *bel=bello* (beautiful), *vive* (lives), *dove* (where) and *tempo* (time/weather), all expressions studied in the standard language course during the first year. Not surprisingly, among the never underlined words were the lyrical expression *aborrisce* (hates) and the foreignism *sempiterno* (eternity). As for potential false friends, *tempo* (weather) was underlined twenty-three times, *temperato* (mild) thirteen times and *senza* (without) eighteen times.

Word	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	4th year	Total
Paradiso	7	10	5	5	27
bel	7	9	5	5	26
vive	10	8	3	5	26
dove	7	10	3	4	24
tempo	8	9	4	2	23
sempre	5	7	4	4	20
che	5	7	4	4	20
o	3	7	3	3	19
canto	3	6	5	4	18
senza	6	6	3	3	18
piace	6	5	4	2	17
tutte	5	6	2	4	17
Dio	3	5	4	5	17
pausa	5	4	5	2	16
quanto	5	4	4	3	16
stare	2	7	4	3	16
inferno	4	6	2	3	15

Table 2. The known words declared by more than half of the participants

The second stage of the research gave further results. The accuracy of correct translations slightly increased with the increased CEFR level of the participants.

Year (participants)	Correct answers	Accuracy
1st year (5)	82	55%
2nd year (7)	138	66%
3rd year (5)	104	69%

Table 3. The total correct answers and accuracy in quiz

When comparing the most frequently underlined words to correctly translated ones, several differences between declared and performed lexical knowledge can be observed.

Word	1st year (5)	2nd year (7)	3rd year (5)	Total (17)
Paradiso	4	7	5	16
bel	4	7	4	15
vive	5	5	4	14
dove	4	5	4	13
tempo	0	2	2	4
sempre	3	5	4	12
che	3	6	3	12
o	4	4	4	12
canto	5	7	5	17
senza	3	4	3	10
piace	0	7	4	11
tutte	4	7	5	16
Dio	4	7	4	15
pausa	4	5	4	13
quanto	5	7	4	16
stare	2	4	3	9
inferno	3	6	4	13

Table 4. The number of correct translations of the most frequently declared known words

The results are particularly interesting when seen separately for each year of study, as there are direct connections to themes studied in standard courses. All the participants of the 1st year translated *piace* (like) as *těší mě* (nice to meet you) confusing *piace* and *piacere,* which is one of the first phrases they learn. Only two of them would associate the verb *stare* (to stay/to be) to the verb *být* (to be), as they had not learned the irregular verbs. But when participants of the 2nd or 3rd year chose the option *stát se* (to happen) or even *stát* (to stand), it must be considered a serious mistake.

Using the quiz as a diagnostic tool, we find that all the participants, future opera singers, translated correctly the word *canto* as *zpěv* (singing). But four participants translated *sempre* (always) as *pořád* (often), as Italian expressions of frequency *sempre* and *spesso* are often confused by students. The quiz also pointed out typical translational difficulties, for example the polysemantic word *che* (which/that/what), which was four times translated incorrectly as *který* (which) and once as *že* (that) instead of *jak* (*how*), or the homophone *o* (oh) which was three times translated incorrectly as *nebo* (or) and twice as *ale* (but).

In many cases, there was low sensitivity to the context, even if more than half of the participants would not consult a dictionary for words like *pausa* (break/pause/rest) because they use the word *pauza* also in Czech, only few of them have chosen the correct connotation *odmlka* (pause/silence).

As expected, *tempo* (time/weather) was translated correctly as *počasí* (weather) only in a few cases; eight times the option *čas* (time), taught primarily in a language course, was chosen and five times the option *rychlost* (speed/tempo), well known to students from musical terminology. The second false friend *temperato* (mild), was translated correctly only four times; nine times the meaning *poklidný* (calm) and five times *vyhřívaný* (heated) were chosen, as in Czech the word *temperovaný* (heated) exists. *Senza* (without), was four times translated as *prostý* (simple) and three times as *senzační* (fantastic), as students confused it with a similar Czech expression.

4. Conclusion

It was previously confirmed that even students with low language competence can produce a good translation of lyric text when provided with appropriate strategies [11] and tools [12]. The presented research showed that correct translation increases with each year of students' study.

To quantify to what degree the language knowledge obtained by modern teaching methods helps the translation process, the source text must be assessed according to criteria that show its differences from modern language. Even if the research was limited by the number of participants, it can be concluded that standard language knowledge helps students with translation of lyric texts, as only a part of the source text presents differences from modern language (in presented research approximately 37%).

The detailed analysis of the results also showed that, on one hand, standard language knowledge helps, but on the other, brings in the translation process many students' mistakes, including confusion of homonyms or false friends. In the case of future opera singers, the knowledge of musical terminology can also influence the translation process and should be taken into account.

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