Localising Cockney: translating dialect into Italian

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Abstract

The wide field of sociolinguistics and dialectology applied to translation and to AVT in particular is one of the most fertile, lively and creative objects of research today. Audiovisual texts offer a varied and exhaustive number of examples of linguistic variation at phonological, syntactical, and lexical levels. In the case of Italian, the attitude of translators towards linguistic varieties is multi-faceted but is still markedly influenced by the strong emphasis placed, in the foreign language and translation classroom, on the study of Standard English and Received Pronunciation. Examples taken from films of various genres and dubbed in different periods help illustrate some of the strategies which have been used in the past to translate the Cockney variant of English into Italian. The paper also tries to offer the most appropriate solutions that help achieve a pleasant exotic effect without falling into any of the two potential extremes of incoherent localisation or banalising neutralisation.

1. Introduction

The problem of the translatability of the linguistic varieties of a geographical, ethnic and social type is particularly felt in the field of audiovisual translation (AVT) where, if linguistic problems are the main concern, issues related to the policies of penetration and dissemination of audiovisual products within a national market are also crucial factors which affect the process of translation.

A limited percentage of the English population – between 3 and 5% – has an accent without a dialect inflection (Trudgill, 2000:2-3). It is the ‘nonregional’ accent defined as ‘Received Pronunciation’ or RP. This accent, peculiar to such a restricted group of speakers, is the main object of study in schools, language institutes and universities, and English courses all over the world refer almost exclusively to it. When we use the more extensive term of ‘dialect’, the spectrum is wider as we refer not only to accent, and thus variations in pronunciation, but also to lexical, morphological, and syntactical variations which, for purposes of study and analysis, are commonly considered against the yardstick of so-called Standard English. Standard English, which could be defined as the most
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successful of English dialects, is the English normally used in the written form and spoken by the majority of the cultured population in England – again, the English normally studied in schools and language institutes –, but it is actually spoken by no more than 12 to 15% of the English population (ibid.).

It is obvious that, besides the geographical variants, every region also offers a social spectrum of variations, with Standard English being the ‘prestigious’ dialect, spoken by people at the top of the social spectrum, and a number of nonstandard variations in the other social strata. Although the word ‘dialect’ refers to a way of speaking a language which is different from the standard, and not to an incorrect way of speaking a language, as it is often erroneously perceived, nonstandard dialects are often associated with the language spoken by the ‘have nots’ of society: those without power, less economically well off and less socially prominent, with little or no education. While legitimate linguistically, these dialects tend to be stigmatised by the ‘haves’ of society.

The wide field of sociolinguistics and dialectology, applied to translation and to AVT in particular, is one of the most fertile, lively and creative objects of research today. The particular interest in applying it to AVT lies in the fact that, thanks to the audio and visual dimensions, no other texts offer such a complete, varied and exhaustive number of examples of all sorts of linguistic variations and, thus, a practically infinite number of phonological, syntactical, and lexical objects of analysis. The films by British directors Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, for instance, are prime examples of the wealth of material available to researchers, since both directors take a stark look at society and at people as they really are and as they really speak.

Nonetheless, despite the wealth of information available in the fields of sociolinguistics and dialectology, the approach to the translation of dialect is generally superficial, dilettantesque or simply heedless of the problem. It is no wonder that if, as has been argued, the focus in the study of the English language is exclusively on Standard English and RP, the translator will not be sufficiently trained to pay much attention to any variations from the norm. It is thus of crucial importance to expose students, from a very early stage, to literary and audiovisual programmes which reflect the varied linguistic and social specificities of other cultures.

2. New trends in dubbing

The situation in Italy concerning the attitude of translators towards linguistic varieties is a complex one. Holmes (1988:49) makes the following distinction between the diachronic and the synchronic axes in the course of the 20th century:
a marked tendency towards modernization and naturalization of the linguistic context, paired with a similar but less clear tendency in the same direction in regard to the literary intertext, but an opposing tendency towards historicizing and exoticizing in the socio-cultural situation.

Trying to apply Holmes’s reflection to feature films, the tendency that seems to be the most explicit and generalized in Italy nowadays goes in the direction of a modernisation of the linguistic context, accompanied by an exoticizing of the socio-cultural content, which is achieved by keeping unaltered some lexical items and by using stylistic devices which succeed in maintaining the linguistic flavour of the original. This tendency is more evident if we compare films from the 1980s onwards to the films produced in the decades before the 1970s, though the change has been gradual and never abrupt, and it allows for a number of exceptions.

Two recent examples, based on Spanish films, are in this sense particularly interesting. In the film Mar Adentro, a multi-awarded 2004 feature film by Alejandro Amenábar, dealing with a euthanasia case, the effort in translating and adapting the film into Italian was to keep in the dubbed version the original flavour of the original work. This is achieved by maintaining the cadence of the Spanish language at various moments in the dialogue, a characteristic which is evident especially in the dubbing of the main character who, as a result, has in Italian a voice and a way of speaking that are very similar to the original. Però, perché?, the protagonist’s nephew protests in one scene in the film; però, no, we hear in other instances. This is not, strictly speaking, Italian: an Italian would say Ma perché?, as però is too emphatically adversative to be used in such an instance. The message that the adaptation of this film intends to convey is that it is a Spanish film and proud to be so.²

Another example comes from the film by Pedro Almodóvar, La mala educación (2004). The adapters into Italian have chosen to let one of the main characters keep his Spanish identity and speak Italian with a strong Spanish accent. The idea of having the Spanish actor Javier Cámara dub his own role in Italian was Pedro Almodóvar’s himself, as dubbing director Francesco Vairano stated in an interview (in Bonardelli, 2004/05). This unusual policy serves to emphasise the exoticism of the product, reminding the viewers of the Spanish nature of the original. This relatively new trend in the Italian adaptation of audiovisual programmes is certainly very different from past approaches in which adapters would replace the then almost unknown ‘peanut butter’ of the original with the word formaggio [cheese] in Some Like It Hot (Billy Wilder, 1959), or mention the generic università [universities] instead of specifically Harvard, to meet the tastes of a public
presumably ignorant and scarcely receptive towards the new (Bovinelli and Gallini, 1994:93).

The tendency to allow the exoticism of another language and culture to surface in the translated text is not accompanied by a similar effort when dealing with dialects. Considering that dialects are a clearly exotic element that translators could be tempted to preserve, their absence from the dubbed versions could be regarded as a countertendency. Indeed, dubbed cinema seems to have opted for the standardisation of dialectal variants and has generally abandoned the ‘parodistic’ tendency to translate foreign dialects with Italian dialects, a choice which, according to Di Giovanni et al. (1994), has now become unpopular and is often stigmatised for being politically incorrect and absolutely arbitrary.

As Galassi (1994) remarks, the use of dialect in Italy has a comic connotation. Generally it is not intended to convey a socio-cultural message, maybe because of its humoristic origins in the Commedia dell’Arte. Its use is thus generally perceived as unsuitable for dramatic films, with the exception of the (often artificial) Sicilian mafia which is deemed suitable to all genres, from The Godfather (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) to The Sopranos (David Chase et al., 1999-2007). Apart from this exception, dialects are often neutralised in translation or resolved syntactically by utilising ‘wrong’ expressions and lexically by resorting to a highly informal way of speaking, geographically unlocalised and socially unmarked.

It is worth remembering that the effacement of dialects has deep historical roots in Italy, ever since 1933 when a piece of legislation was passed forcing the dubbing of films to take place on Italian territory. From then on, the government would exert greater linguistic control over the ‘purity of the Italian language’ and insist on the disappearance of dialects, regionalisms and accents. American films, the majority of the films imported, were to be dubbed in an ‘abstract’ Italian, thus contributing to the effort of cultural homogenisation and regional uprooting which was one of the aims of fascism. From this point of view, as mentioned by Gili (1981:37), the foreign film to be dubbed was a more flexible product than an original Italian film.

3. Cockney and Estuary English

In what follows, I would like to concentrate on some of the solutions adopted by Italian translators in the dubbing of the London accent, both in its traditional Cockney form and in its modern development of rapidly expanding Estuary English. The traditional Cockney dialect includes a number of typical phonetic and grammatical features, among which are:
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- ‘th’ fronting, which involves the replacement of the dental fricatives, /θ/ and /ð/ by labiodentals [f] and [v] respectively, as in words like ‘mother’ (muvver) and ‘think’ (fink);
- dropped ‘h’, as in ‘house’ (‘ouse);
- ‘t’-glottalisation: use of the glottal stop as an allophone of /t/ in various positions, especially the use of a glottal stop for intervocalic /t/, as in ‘bottle’ or ‘butter’. Also /p,t,k/ are almost invariably glottalised in the final position;
- many vowel and diphthong alterations, including /eɪɪ/ → [æɪ~aɪ] as in take = tyke; /aʊ/ may be [æə] or a monophthongal [æː~aː] as in round = raand, house = ‘aase;
- vocalisation of dark ‘l’, thus [mɪtʊk] for ‘milk’;
- use of ‘ain’t’ instead of ‘isn’t’, ‘am not’, ‘are not’, ‘has not’, and ‘have not’;
- use of ‘me’ instead of ‘my’.

Cockney English is also characterised by its distinctive rhyming slang. In this traditional feature, you take a pair of associated words, ‘porky and pies’, where the second word rhymes with the word you intend to say, ‘lies’, then use both or sometimes only the first word of the associated pair to indicate the word you originally intended to say. Some rhymes have been in use for years, for example: “apples and pears” = stairs, “plates of meat” = feet. There are others, however, that became established with the changing culture, for example “John Cleese” = cheese.

Since the mid 1990s, a number of studies have reported dialect levelling, by which differences between local accents/dialects are reduced, features which make them distinctive disappear, and new features are developed and adopted by speakers over a wide area. Levelling is thought to centre on large urban areas, such as Tyneside or London in the UK, from which new features disseminate, and within whose reach high degrees of contact and mobility may lead to linguistic homogenisation. Estuary English is the only regional levelling process to receive a name and to become the subject of public debate. It is a popular variety of spoken Standard English with phonetic features placing it between RP and broad London Cockney. First described by Rosewarne (1984), it was characterised as follows:

Estuary English is a variety of modified regional speech. It is a mixture of nonregional and local south-eastern English pronunciation and intonation. If one imagines a continuum with RP and popular London speech at either end, Estuary English speakers are to be found grouped in the middle ground. They are ‘between Cockney and the Queen’, in the words of The Sunday Times (Rosewarne, 1994: 3).
Estuary English actually spans a very wide range of accents, from near-Cockney to near-RP, so it is difficult to call it a ‘variety’. A realistic approach to Estuary English is to see it as referring to a set of levelled (relatively homogenised) regional – as opposed to local – accents or dialects spoken in the south-east of England. These varieties, and their counterparts throughout the British Isles, are a result of greatly heightened mobility since the period just after the Second World War, and a change in ideology that allowed non-RP users to take up a range of occupations, especially in broadcasting, from which they had been formerly barred (Kerswill, 2006:14).

4. My Fair Lady

The dubbing of the 1964 film My Fair Lady is both a typical and extreme way of treating dialect in dubbing translation; an example which, whatever the opinion on the final result, might encourage translators to find more creative strategies beyond that of the levelling of register to deal with dialectal specificities.

The film by George Cukor, based on George Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion, deliberately keeps the theatrical atmosphere of the play on which it is based: the use of stage settings as opposed to filming in realistic locations contributes to the ‘artificiality’ of the film. This is an important detail as ‘unrealistic’ plots and settings tend to encourage a certain latitude in the way dialects are translated. In other words, if dialects are not used to describe the ‘real’ world, translators feel less constrained by problems of coherence.

To make the film more interesting for the purpose of analysis, it is important to remember that its main theme is the use of the English language. This is programmatically set out in the very first song of the musical:

An Englishman’s way of speaking absolutely classifies him. The moment he talks he makes some other Englishman despise him. One common language I’m afraid we’ll never get. Oh, why can’t the English learn to set a good example to people whose English is painful to your ears?

In the Italian version of the film, the main character, Eliza Doolittle, who in the original speaks an already quite forced, ‘laboratory’ Cockney, adopts a mixture of Neapolitan and Barese (from the city of Bari, in the South of Italy). The end result is a non-existent Italian language that attempts to translate a London dialect which, in essence, is very far from natural; as far, one could say, as Audrey Hepburn is from a Covent Garden flower girl. In the following example, the typical Barese vowel shift from /a/ to /ɛ/, as in pega’ instead of the standard Italian paga[re], is happily mingled with other
features unknown to this dialect, like the expression *E’ figlie vostre* [he’s son of yours] below, which is (more or less) Neapolitan but certainly not Barese:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eliza: ‘e’s your son is ’e? Well, if you’d done your duty by ‘im as a muvver should you wouldn’t le’ ‘im spoil a poor girl’s flow’rs and run away without pyin’.</th>
<th>Ah! E’ figlie vostre. Se gli spezzavate le chiappe quand’era piccolo adesso non arruvinava li fiori a ‘na povera figlia scappano via senza pega’.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[mixed accents] Ah, he’s son of yours. If you had broken his ass when he was a child now he wouldn’t ruin a poor girl’s flowers and run away without paying.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2005, the stage version of *My Fair Lady* directed by Massimo Romeo Piparo toured the Italian theatres. On this occasion, the translation chose to give Eliza a Sicilian accent, but the protagonist, the inexperienced Roman actress Gaia De Laurentiis, was unable to reproduce the Sicilian accent perfectly and, hence, spoke a strange language from nowhere land. Against all odds, her performance achieved, unknowingly, that excess of foreignisation that can be so appealing and stimulating. The key to the success probably derives from the fact that the accent is not from London, it is not really Italian, but something ‘other’. It is that being ‘other’ in an unlocalised sense that the public perceives: while the London context is visually portrayed, the linguistic information is estranging. Would it have been better to hear Eliza speak with a perfect Sicilian accent under the Covent Garden portico to have her speak an aseptic, grammatically ‘wrong’ Italian as generally adopted in dubbing? Or is it not better to hear the character speak another language variation, a language which does not really exist and that tells us that a dialect has been translated with a new variation invented *ad hoc*?

However difficult it may be to achieve this result consciously, I would like to argue that this ‘experiment’ goes in the right direction of achieving an exotic effect which gives the measure of a cultural distance while avoiding the arbitrary and risky solution of choosing a real dialect from the range offered by the target language.

Coming back to the film version of *My Fair Lady*, if the choice of the Italian dubbers is in many ways surprising and probably unconscious (did they really ‘design’ that dialect?), it is also true that the result is interesting in itself. The strange language spoken by the Covent Garden flower girl is far both from Naples and from Bari, and it is certainly very far from the geographical context of the original. It is an extreme choice which, while emphasising the unrealistic atmosphere of the whole work, also adds something to it: an extra-geographical dimension. This new dimension does not belong to the target culture or the original, which bases the whole plot on precise geographic and linguistic coordinates: areas and streets of London are
precisely mentioned in the film (and in the play), some of the main characters speak Cockney, the male protagonist, Doctor Higgins, recognises anyone’s exact place of birth only by hearing their accents etc.

Dubbing certainly manages to unsettle the balance between images and dialogue but it does so in a stimulating way, although one may argue that the choice of Southern dialects to describe the ‘have nots’ of society is politically incorrect as ‘the poor’ are often portrayed as coming from the South of Italy rather than from the North. If one really wished to localise it, the natural choice would probably be to translate Cockney by the Roman accent. Romansesco is commonly defined as being ‘gross’ and ‘loud’ as is Cockney: it is the dialect spoken by the inhabitants of the capital city and its popularity in Italy is only rivalled by Neapolitan, a popularity measured in terms of its use in comedy films and TV sketches (the same as Cockney’s popularity is only rivalled by some Northern accents like Liverpudlian). This is not scientifically consistent but, as we have seen, localising can be effective even if it can hardly be defined as a coherent strategy.

5. Secrets and Lies

The problem is very different when we have to translate dialects in films with a dramatic, political or social content. In films by realistic directors such as Mike Leigh, dialect is used not only to provide a geographical context, but also to define the various characters from a socio-cultural point of view. The original version of Mike Leigh’s masterpiece, Secrets and Lies (Segreti e bugie, 1996), lets the nuances of the language take the burden of conveying the subtle differences of social status among the characters: the protagonist, Cynthia, speaks in a working class London accent, of which the most prominent characteristic is the glottal stop; slightly different is the accent spoken by her brother, who has climbed the social ladder by a few rungs and is married to a Scottish woman who evidently has higher social aspirations. We can also hear, among others, the more formal middle-class English – but with distinctive London and Black British traits – spoken by Cynthia’s natural daughter, a black girl who was adopted as a baby by a well-to-do family. All of this and much more is lost in the Italian adaptation which opted for a standard Italian characterised by a few colloquial expressions in the dialogue exchanges between the protagonist, Cynthia, and her daughter Roxanne: for example, the effective choice of the working class gioia [joy] to translate some of Cynthia’s repeated ‘sweetheart’ and ‘darling’. But in spite of the effort made in trying to keep at least some of the flavour of their exchanges, the loss of information in the dialogues of these two most ‘colourful’ characters is quite evident, as we can see from the following transcript, which of course cannot convey the marked London accent:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Italian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia: Ain’t you seein’ him tonight then?</td>
<td>Cynthia: Che fai, non lo vedi stasera?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxanne: I’m havin’ an early night.</td>
<td>Roxanne: Voglio andare a letto presto.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia: Keep me company.</td>
<td>Cynthia: Tiienimi compagnia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxanne: I’ve got a hangover.</td>
<td>Roxanne: Mi sono presa una sbronza.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia: You should stop in more often. You are lookin’ after yourself with him, ain’t you sweetheart?</td>
<td>Cynthia: Dovresti startene di più a casa. State facendo attenzione, vero tesoro?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxanne: What d’you mean?</td>
<td>Roxanne: Che vuoi dire?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia: You know, taking care. I don’t wanna ask you nothing personal, darling, but are you taking the pill?</td>
<td>Cynthia: Sai, le precauzioni. Non mi voglio impicciare degli affari tuoi ma, prendi la pillola?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia: Why don’t you bring him round?</td>
<td>Cynthia: Perché non lo fai venire a casa?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxanne: Leave it out.</td>
<td>Roxanne: Sono cavoli miei.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia: I’d like to meet him. I wouldn’t know him if he stood up in me soup.</td>
<td>Cynthia: Mi piacerebbe conoscerlo. Non lo riconoscerai neanche se me lo ritrovassi nella zuppa.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxanne: Don’t hold your breath.</td>
<td>Roxanne: Risparmia il fiato.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia: You don’t wanna leave it up to him, darling, men are all the same.</td>
<td>Cynthia: Non aspettare che sia lui a preoccuparsi, gli uomini sono tutti uguali.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxanne: Mind your own business.</td>
<td>Roxanne: Non lo vorrei neanche se me lo ritrovassi nella zuppa.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia: I’d like to meet him. I wouldn’t know him if I found him in my soup.</td>
<td>Cynthia: Don’t expect him to worry about that, men are all the same.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These lines, delivered in standard Italian, show the tendency to neutralise the local and social flavour of the film by choosing to eliminate two idiosyncratic ‘darling’ from Cynthia’s sentences; by changing the register of the original when translating the expression ‘taking care’ with the more formal *precauzioni* [precautions]; by translating literally, and thus conveying what is an unusual image in Italian, the idiomatic phrase ‘I wouldn’t know him if he
stood in me soup’; and by ignoring all the grammatical deviations from standard English (two negatives, use of ‘ain’t’, and the like).

As Taylor (2006:38) correctly points out when discussing the translation of the films by a similarly realistic British director, Ken Loach, the defining features of an original film dialogue marked by dialects and sociolects as well as by other local features are always diluted to the point of neutralisation when translated into Italian.

6. Lock & Stock and Two Smoking Barrels

The 1998 film Lock & Stock and Two Smoking Barrels by Guy Ritchie about petty criminals and humorous swindles, captures the audience from its very first scene drawing them into a context which, while showing no places and only people, is unmistakably London. The funny opening monologue delivered by the protagonist, the small time criminal Bacon, who is selling stolen goods at a market, perfectly illustrates the work that has gone into the Italian adaptation:

Bacon: Let’s sort the buyers from the spiers, the needy from the greedy, and those who trust me from the ones who don’t. ’Cos if you can’t see value here today, you’re not up here shopping, you’re up here shoplifting. You see these goods? Never seen daylight, moonlight, Israelites. Fanny by the gaslight. Take a bag, come on take a bag. I took a bag home last night - cost me a lot more than ten pounds, I can tell you. Anyone like jewellery? Look at that one there. Hand-made in Italy, hand-stolen in Stepney. It’s as long as my arm, I wish it was as long as something else. Don’t think ’cause these boxes are sealed, they’re empty. The only man that sells empty boxes is the undertaker. By the look of some of you here today, I’d make more money with my measuring tape. Here, one price, ten pound (…) Squeeze in if you can. Left leg, right leg, your body will follow. They call it walking. You want one as well, darling? You do? That’s it, they’re waking up. Treat the wife - treat somebody else’s wife. It’s a lot more fun if you don’t get caught. Hold on. You want one as well? OK darling. Show me a bit of life, then. It’s no good standing out there like one o’clock half struck. Buy ‘em, you’d better buy ‘em. These are not stolen - they just haven’t been paid for. Can’t get ‘em again, they’ve changed the locks. Can’t come back – I’ll have sold out. (…)

“Too late, too late” will be the cry when the man with the bargains just passed you by. If you’ve got no money on you now you’ll be crying tears big as october cabbages.

La prima cosa che bisogna fare è dividere chi compra da chi vuole guardare, quelli che di me si voglion fidare da chi non ci vuole neanche provare. E se queste cose non sapete apprezzare, non siete venuti a comprare. Sono cose nuove, sono cose belle, non

The first thing one has to do is to sort the buyers from the onlookers, the ones who want to trust me from those who don’t even try to. And if you can’t appreciate these things, you’re not here to buy. They’re new things, they’re beautiful
hanno mai visto il sole né le stelle, né le modelle sulle passerelle. Prendete una busta, su, prendete una busta. Una donna ieri a casa ho portato e mi è costata dieci sterle, datelo per scontato.

A chi piacciono i gioielli? Guardate questa qui. È stata fatta a mano in Italia e poi rubata a mano armata. È lunga quanto il braccio, più lunga di qualcos’altro, accidentaccio. Le scatole non sono sigillate perché sono state svuotate. Solo le pompe funebri vendono le scatole vuote. Ma guardandovi in faccia mi fate pensare che a prendervi le misure più ricco potrei diventare. Prezzo unico, dieci sterle belli. (…)


Don’t hesitate. Right leg, left leg, for the rest you won’t have to wait. You know, they call it walking. You want one as well, darling? That’s it, you’re waking up it seems. Treat the wife - treat somebody else’s wife. It’s a lot more fun if you don’t get caught. Hold on. You want one as well? OK darling. Show me a bit of life, then. If you stand there like a pole you’ll catch a cold. Buy them, you’d better buy them. These are not stolen - they just haven’t been paid for.

It will be hard to get them again, they’ve changed the locks. (…) Later on it will all be sold out, sorry for those who’ll be left with nothing. Too late, too late. I’ll be far away and the bargains just passed you by. If you’ve got no money on you now unfortunately I’m sure you’ll be crying bitter tears later.

The most obvious feature of this translation is the use of the rhyme. The dubbing adapters, while basically faithful to the semantic content of the text, have chosen to emphasise this particular stylistic dimension, interpreting it as
the dominant feature of the source text. As mentioned above, it is the opening monologue of this fast-paced film and, as such, it sets the tone of the dialogue which follows. It was particularly important to find a solution which is both striking and humorous. The result is undoubtedly exotic. The wealth of rhymed words (underlined in the text – 38 in Italian compared to a total of only ten rhyming words in the source text) is certainly unusual but it perfectly conveys the flavour of the Cockney’s rhyming slang that is sometimes used in the original. Caught by the charm of the Italian version, viewers do not really mind if a few funny wordplays are lost: ‘bag’ translated with busta [bag, but with no double meaning] loses its second meaning of ‘prostitute’; the Italian audience will never recognise one of the quotes from Anthony Asquith’s British film Fanny by Gaslight (1944), or know the idiomatic meaning of ‘standing like one o’clock half struck’, a Geordie expression meaning ‘looking like an idiot’. Nor will they mourn the loss of the geographic, thus exotic, trait offered by the mention of the East London area of ‘Stepney’. The main achievement of this translation is that the exotic feature of the source text Cockney rhyming slang is most precisely transferred into Italian by exaggerating the number of rhymes. The result is that the audience hears a linguistic variety which is not a new dialect, is not an Italian dialect, but is so far from the standard use of the language that it sounds unlocalised and, to some extent, ‘foreign’.

Incidentally, it is worth noting that the use of rhyming lines to translate non-standard English into Italian seems to be growing: the TV series Skins (Jamie Brittain et al., 2007) depicts the lives of a group of young people from Bristol, characterised by a speech full of dialect, slang and idiomatic expressions. The Italian version makes ample use of rhymes which are not present in the original text. The result is, also in this case, what could be labelled as ‘exotic’.

7. Conclusion

The exclusive emphasis in the foreign language and translation classroom on the study of Standard English and Received Pronunciation does not create the basis for developing a sensitivity towards other linguistic variations. It is no wonder that some translators seem to be unprepared and untrained at solving the task of dialect translation in a way which, if not completely satisfactory, can be at least intellectually stimulating.

There are examples of solutions and strategies in dialect translation which achieve unusual but imaginative and intelligent results that might lead the way to further developments. One of them is the use of rhyming which, used in the instances discussed above, to translate Cockney’s rhyming slang or even other non-rhyming dialects, achieves a pleasant effect of exoticism. It
can be concluded that one of the solutions to translating dialects in a carefully selected number of cases might be that of playing with the potential of the target language – its syntax, its standard lexicon – in such a way as to come up with an unusual prosody that achieves the effect of an ‘unlocalised’ variant of the standard language.

Notes

1. It is not possible to delve here into the complexities of this interesting field of research. It will suffice to point out that RP, unlike Standard English, appears to be changing quite rapidly. This leads to problems in finding criteria for determining what are changes and variations within RP, and what features make a person’s speech non-RP. Trudgill’s (2002:175) own criterion is simply to say that, for inclusion as part of RP, a feature must not be a regional feature.
2. The dubbing director of Mare dentro (Mar adentro, The Sea Inside) was Maura Vespini. However, it is important to note that dubbing, like everything in cinema, is the product of a collective effort. In this sense, Andrea Occhipinti, the distributor of the film, took personal care of the dubbing and made sure that the film’s Hispanicity was linguistically evident in the Italian version. An earlier comment on this film was contained in Ranzato (2006).
3. Among the many examples in this sense, in Italian dubbing translation, we might mention the inconsistent but effectively funny translations of dialects in cartoons like The Simpsons and South Park or in comedies which make wide use of language variations like the Monty Python films. The use of Cockney in a Palestinian setting, as in Monty Python’s Life of Brian for instance, certainly called for an equivalently incongruous localisation in the Italian version.
4. Skins is a teen drama premiered in 2007 on the digital TV channel E4. Its fourth series is now in production.

References

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