

QUALITY IN CONFERENCE INTERPRETING BETWEEN COGNATE LANGUAGES: A PRELIMINARY APPROACH TO THE SPANISH-ITALIAN CASE

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1. Introduction

Interpreting between cognate languages is commonly held to be an easy task and, in particular, the process of learning a foreign language thoroughly is considered to be faster when the latter bears great similarities with one's own mother tongue. Yet, while general understanding is achieved fairly smoothly, comprehension proficiency, which is the real sense of the word "thoroughly" and which is paramount in conference interpreting, is likely to be elusive. Indeed, as Antonio Bonino states in *Il traduttore*:

"Lo studio d'una lingua straniera, propedeutico all'abilitazione traduttiva, consiste nell'apprendimento [...] di [...] differenze (di suoni, di significati, di modulazioni e di strutture) fra quella lingua e la nostra, e il grado di conoscenza che uno possiede di una lingua straniera si misura dalla quantità di "differenze" che egli sa riconoscere e rispettare fra quella e la sua. (...) Le affinità [tra due lingue] sono spesso esteriori (quelle intrinseche e funzionali non si notano), sono sempre parziali e costituiscono la maggior causa di errori" ¹.

Unfortunately, as the level of basic comprehension is rapidly reached, the learning process falls short of awareness of the differences lying below the reassuring surface layer of similarities and misinterpretation is likely to ensue with results that range from the merely awkward to the utterly mistaken. A brief overview of some of the main causes of such mishaps will follow, in a preliminary attempt to shed light on this frequently underestimated problem.

2. Morphology

Obstacles to quality in Spanish-Italian interpreting are posed by paronymic word pairs

with roughly the same meaning but different genders. Indeed, many masculine terms in Spanish, such as **aire**, **aluvión**, **apéndice**, **cometa** ², **cutis**, **desmentido**, **domingo**, **eclipse**, **eco**, **frenesí**, **mapa**, **meteoro**, **origen**, and **valle**, are feminine in Italian, while an equally large number of feminine words in Spanish including **afrenta**, **cárcel**, **carga**, **magneto**, **proclama**, **sangre**, **señal**, **serpiente**, **sospecha**, and **orden**, are masculine in Italian. Whilst a moderate degree of concentration will prevent interpreters from mistaking the article and noun suffix in the target language, greater attention and awareness are required to change the gender of all attendant attributes (e.g. in utterances such as: *"Estudiaremos este eclipse, ya que se trata de el primer en muchos años y el único observable claramente en esta zona"*).

3. Syntax

Spanish syntax does not differ greatly from Italian and, accordingly, generally poses no serious problems in the process of transforming Spanish utterances into Italian. Yet, if the few discrepancies which do exist are overlooked, clumsiness is the least which can be expected. For example, the Spanish use of the relative clause in sentences such as *"La Comunidad Autónoma que preside el socialista Joaquín Leguina"* ³ is by no means as frequent in Italian, where a simple transposition of this structure (*"La Comunità Autonoma che presiede il socialista Joaquín Leguina"*) would sound slightly ambiguous and certainly unnatural. A native Italian speaker, indeed, would render the sense of the Spanish expression with a past participle (*presieduta da* or, rather, *governata da*).

Similarly, the Spanish passive reflexive (the

"se"-construction in sentences such as: "Este libro se publicó en 1981") often finds a plain personal passive as its Italian equivalent ("Questo libro fu pubblicato nel 1981"), even though the former structure also exists in Italian.

The use of the gerund at the beginning of a sentence is another frequent feature of the Spanish language which is likely to be misinterpreted in Italian. Very often, indeed, introducing the same utterance with an unaccompanied gerund in Italian misrepresents the sentence meaning. Let the following be an illustration:

"Siendo tan fácil el problema, pocos lo han resuelto al primer intento."

The concessive value of the Spanish gerund is not immediately apparent and this sentence could be translated into Italian beginning with a simple gerund ("Essendo così facile il problema, pochi lo hanno risolto al primo tentativo"), in which case the audience would perceive a contradiction in terms, while full justice to the speaker's meaning would only be made by introducing a concessive preposition ("Sebbene il problema fosse così facile, pochi lo hanno risolto al primo tentativo").

Prepositions, too, are likely to create problems if more attention is paid to their external appearance than to their actual meaning. For example, the Spanish **toda vez que** in sentences like "Es importante, toda vez que permite comprobar la autenticidad de este documento" has nothing to do with the Italian lexical equivalent tutte le volte che ("whenever") and can only be truly rendered with a causal preposition such as dal momento che, poiché, or visto che. Similarly, the expression **por cuanto** in "Nos interesa por cuanto hay pocos de igual índole" cannot be translated with the paronymic Italian phrase per quanto ("however") because the latter has a concessive meaning that is foreign to the causal sense of the original utterance.

4. Lexicon

Paronyms, that is Spanish-Italian word pairs that look and/or sound similar, give rise to the highest proportion of clumsy or mistaken translations. Indeed, as has been suggested in the introduction, such external similarity often overshadows deep semantic differences of which interpreters are frequently unaware. For merely illustrative purposes, Spanish-Italian paronyms have been grouped into four categories: *connotatively-different*, *classic*, *lesser-known*, and *"double-edged"*.

4.1 Connotatively-different paronyms

Exact cross-language equivalence of two paronyms is very uncommon. Indeed, even those Spanish-Italian word pairs whose primary meaning has remained virtually identical, have in time been enriched with different sets of semantic features often making them unsuitable for the same context in both languages. For example, if the utterance

"Esto vulnera la ley"

were translated as

"Questo vulnera la legge",

nobody in the audience would harbour the slightest doubt as to its exact meaning. Everybody, however, would sense that they had heard something odd, that the wording was awkward because in that context the verb violare ("to infringe", "to break") would be more common. The same holds true for the noun **disturbios** in sentences such as:

"Los disturbios continuaron en diversas zonas populares de la capital",

where the Italian term disordini ("riots"), rather than disturbi ("disturbances"), conveys the meaning correctly. **Pronóstico**, too, is perfectly understandable in Italian if, translating from Spanish, the expressions "pronostici del tempo" (weather forecast) or "il pronostico del medico" (the doctor's diagnosis) were used. Still, Italians would only tend to use this word when talking about forecasting the outcome of a future event, a football match for example, while they would speak of previsioni when talking about the weather and of prognosi when referring to a doctor's indication of the future course of a disease. Words like: **aferrarse**, **ambiente** (in sentences like "Aquí no hay ambiente", "What a dead place!"), **autarquías**, **consecuencia** (in the sense of the Italian coerenza, "consistency", not conseguenza, "consequence"), **contaminación**, **delito**, **disolver**, **excepción**, **existencias**, **finalmente**, **importante**, **justamente**, **lesionar**, **ostentar**, **primordial**, **proceso**, **realizar**, **suave**, and **vecino** are only a small sample of the wealth of terms which, though understandable if translated with their Italian paronyms, would not be used spontaneously by a native speaker in the same context.

4.2. Classic paronyms

Awareness of the treacherous similarities of the Spanish and Italian lexicons generally arises during study of the former. Indeed, even before the learning process begins, the average Italian will have already heard of anecdotes deriving from a misuse of such misleading Spanish words as **burro** ("donkey"), which has nothing to do with the fatty food substance that bears the same name in Italian, or **aceite** ("olive oil") which, despite all appearances, has by no means the same referent as the Italian **aceto** ("vinegar"). With increasing comprehension of the language, Italians usually learn to mistrust the apparent resemblance with their mother tongue of terms such as: **achacar** (attribuire, "to put down to", not acciacciare, "to crush"), **acostarse** (andare a dormire, "to go to bed", not acostarsi, "to get nearer"), **aguantar** (tollerare, sopportare, "to stand", not agguantare, "to seize"), **asesor** (consulente, "consultant", not assessore, "alderman"), **callos**, **cámara**, **carta**, **clase**, **contestar**, **delgado**, **despacho**, **embarazada**, **encontrar**, **éxito**, **fracaso**, **garrafa**, **guardar**, **ilusión**, **investigación**, **lama**, **largo**, **letrado**, **lindo**, **mantel**, **media**, **nariz**, **naturaleza**, **nudo**, **oficina**, **oso**, **pájaro**, **presupuesto**, **proporcionar**, **quinta**, **salir**, **sembrar**, **seta**, **sueldo**, **toalla**.

Once the primary meaning has been acquired, however, the word pair tends to become permanently fixed without considering that the same term may pose more than one pitfall to the unwary Italian interpreter. For example, **clase** in the sentence "Hoy no hay clase" is known to mean lezione ("lesson") and would hardly ever be interpreted as "classroom" (classe, in Italian). Yet, how widespread is the awareness that, in the plural, this word also refers to non-commissioned officers?

4.3. Lesser-known paronyms

As Spanish and Italian have a common Latin origin, the number of quasi-homonyms or homographs is not exhausted by the list of what have been defined "classic" paronyms. There is a whole series of words which can hardly be recognized as treacherous when they are heard in simultaneous interpreting unless their semantic content is well known beforehand. A case in point is given by the lexeme **carestía** in sentences of the following type:

"En estos años de carestía, hay que ahorrar mucho"

A translation with the Italian homonym carestia ("famine") would certainly sound perfectly justifiable here, were it not for the fact that, in this context, the term actually refers to high prices. Other such treacherous words include **aterido** in expressions like: "Estoy aterido", where the sensation mentioned is not terror (atterrito is the Italian for "terrified") but, much more prosaically, freezing cold. **Confeti**, too, although coming directly from Italian, has lost its original reference to sugared almonds and has come to acquire the same meaning as its English paronym ("confetti"). Thus, a translation of utterances like:

"La fiesta terminó en medio de confeti"

with

"La festa si concluse tra lanci di confetti",

although not leading to formal semantic contradiction, is necessarily false.

As has been demonstrated, the main problem with such terms is that they are very often used in expressions perfectly justifiable for their Italian paronyms and seem, accordingly, harmless. For example, the following:

"¡ Caramba, pero usted tiene genio!",

does not praise the addressee's intellectual abilities, but rather refers to his moody nature. The same applies to **monte** in interrogatives such as:

"¿Quién quema el monte?"

where no reference whatsoever is made to any mountain, whereas alarm is being expressed as to the burning of forests.

Further examples include the words: **oposición** in "Le afectó mucho su fracaso en la oposición" (nel concorso, "in the examination", not all'Opposizione, "as a member of the Opposition"); **suceso** in "Elevar un suceso como la ruptura de vínculos entre los condes catalanos y los monarcas franceses a la categoría de nacimiento de una nación" (evento, "event", not successo, "success"); or, finally, **nómina** in "Bremecke quizá está convencido de haber formado parte de la Agencia [CIA], pero nunca ha figurado en nuestras nóminas" (organico, "payroll", not nomine, "appointments").

4.4. "Double-Edged" Paronyms

Hitherto, attention has been drawn to aspects of the Spanish language which, if ignored or neglected, may give rise to misinterpretation. There are, however, instances of intrinsic ambiguity which sometimes confound the deepest knowledge and which, if of a lexical nature, may be compounded by the fact that one of the two senses of the ambiguous word is roughly equivalent to that of its Italian paronym. This is the case of those terms described here as "double-edged" paronyms, including words such as: **abandonado** (abbandonato, "abandoned", but also trasandato, "shabby", and pigro, "lazy"); **accionar** (azionare, "to set in motion", but also gesticolare, "to gesticulate"); **bomba** (bomba, "bomb", but also pompa, "pump"); **competencia** (competenza, "skill", but also concorrenza, "competition"); **curar** (curare, "to treat", but also guarire, "to heal", stagionare, "to mature", and conservare, "to cure [meat]"); **jeroglífico** (geroglifico, "hieroglyphic", but also rebus, "picture-puzzle").

A term like **tipo** (tipo, "type", but much more frequently tasso, "rate") may, for example, be responsible for ambiguity in sentences like:

"Si no se reduce el 2 por 100 de renta ficticia o los Ayuntamientos no modifican, todos en la misma proporción, el tipo impositivo como están autorizados, [...] estaremos en presencia de un artificio fiscal".

The same could be said for **parricidio** (not only parricidio, "parricide", but also the murder of any close relative) in:

"Està acusado de parricidio por haber matado a su mujer"

which, if translated literally, would sound absurd.

The apparently harmless **coincidencia**, too, gave rise to some interpretation problems in an EC meeting held not long ago when the interpreter, who had recently added Spanish to his language combination, translated the following:

"Me parece que existe una coincidencia en la necesidad de adoptar la directiva"

with

"Sembra esserci una coincidenza tra la necessità di adottare la direttiva ...",

thus remaining without the second term of a comparison that only existed in his own mind because the Spanish delegate had merely pointed to the "consensus" reached among member states as to the need of adopting the directive.

The aforementioned misleading examples could be extended to cover a whole series of other very common terms such as: **absorbente**, **asistencia**, **beneficios**, **compromiso**, **curioso**, **defraudar**, **destino**, **dietas**, **director**, **empresario**, **enseñar**, **entrevista**, **esperar**, **estufa**, **excusar**, **inexcusable**, **exigencia**, **expediente**, **facilitar**, **facultativo**, **fallo**, **invertir**, **opción**, **pagano**, **parlamento**, **particular**, **planta**, **plátano**, **preciso**, **preconizar**, **principal**, **quinta**, **quisquillas**, **raro**, **reconocer**, **regalo**, **registrar**, **reparar**, **suponer**, **teniente**, **turismo**, **urbanización**, **vago**, **vencer**, **viático**, **vistas**. Suffice it to say, however, that the gist of the problem lies in identifying the correct referent. Linguistic and paralinguistic cues will certainly be helpful, as will a considerable degree of *décalage* pending the arrival of clarifying information. Should such devices prove to be of no avail, the most likely hypothesis should be opted for and apologies kept in store in the eventuality of the most unlikely solution actually being the one meant by the speaker.

5. Conclusions

In the present work attention has been drawn to the difficulties posed by the interpreting process between cognate languages such as Spanish and Italian. In particular, the fields in which the major pitfalls arise have been indicated. The science of interpretation, still in its infancy as an academic discipline, awaits scholarly research in this direction.

Notes

1. BONINO, Antonio, Il traduttore (Druento - Turin: Alessio Editore, 1988), pp. 152-153.
2. But the feminine **cometa** (aquilone, m., "kite") also exists.
3. All the examples provided in this article are taken from the author's own professional experience. Most of them were heard from Spanish speakers during EC meetings in Brussels.

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