

# Translating sociological discourse. Robert Gooding-Williams's *Look, A Negro!*<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*This article presents a commentary on some aspects dealing with specialized translation of the languages of philosophy and sociology of racism.*

*After being published in journals of philosophy and collective works, the articles analyzed here appeared in Gooding-Williams's 2006 volume *Look, a Negro!*: Philosophical Essays on Race, Culture and Politics. Devoted to some of the themes at hand in the debate about anti-black racism in contemporary America, these essays show the author's commitment to his subject, reporting his colleagues' ideas and presenting his own. They are written in a warm, engaging style, which aims at persuading the reader to take side in the debate about anti-black racism and – possibly – to agree with their author.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Robert Gooding-Williams is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago and an affiliate of the Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture. He is particularly interested in studying Nietzsche and DuBois, critical race theory and African-American political thought.

1 This article is drawn from Martina Garbinato's thesis (University of Padua), entitled "Translating Sociological Discourse: Robert Gooding-Williams's *Look, A Negro!*" (academic year 2007-2008, supervisor: Prof. Maria Teresa Musacchio; assistant supervisor: Prof. Francesca Vianello).

Gooding-Williams's essays are academic articles published in American journals of philosophy and collected in his 2006 volume, *Look, a Negro!: Philosophical Essays on Race, Culture and Politics*. These works aim at discussing different views on contemporary philosophy and sociology of racism in the United States, presenting the author's opinion on the subject, and expressing his sharp criticism towards some theories in use.

According to Newmark's (1988: 40) language functions, these essays can be described as informative texts, because they deal with facts and situations placed outside language, as well as reporting other scholars' ideas and theories. However, an underlying vocative function can be recognized here, because the articles are meant to persuade the reader to accept the author's views. Then, the expressive function has to be taken into account because the author is a leading figure in the contemporary debate about racism in the United States. As a matter of fact, he claims that "[f]rom the beginning to the end, these essays express a critical spirit that is indispensable to my sense of my self and my intellectual vocation" (Gooding-Williams 2006: xi).

## 2. TEXTUAL ASPECTS

It is usually pointed out that precision, economy, and clarity are achieved thanks to textual and rhetorical markers. In particular, they can be identified in the logical organization of the discourse and in the connections providing textual coherence and cohesion (Scarpa 2001: 120-121). According to Evangelisti Allori (1994: 195-196), textual genres belonging to Western tradition seem to follow universal norms in presenting information; on the contrary, speech acts are deeply rooted in the sociocultural context and are therefore realized through different pragmatic and linguistic choices. In particular, she claims that in Italy

there is still, in the Social Sciences at least, an academic requirement to show total mastery of the field [...] rather than specialised descriptions as a result of embracing one particular school of thought and pushing forth its claims. (Evangelisti Allori 1998: 8)

If we consider argumentative texts – mainly belonging to soft sciences – from a textual point of view, we see that they are usually constituted of four different parts: 1) opening remarks; 2) opening; 3) presentation of different views; 4) conclusions (Gotti 1991). Gooding-Williams's essays are clearly structured and present a division into sections, sub-sections, and paragraphs. Each section and sub-section is devoted to describing, agreeing or disagreeing with a theory or a view at hand. The sentences are linked together by logical connectors, because this is a typical feature of the language of philosophy, which have in the main been translated into Italian. However, some short passages have been readjusted in order to create a more fluent and cohesive text for the Italian reader, as it happens in the passage below:

Michael Omi and Howard Winant have argued that “[i]n US [*sic*] society [...] a kind of ‘racial etiquette’ exists [...] Race becomes ‘common sense’, – a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world.” **Here, Omi and Winant remind us that racial classification is pervasive in American society.** (p. 3)

Omi e Winant, **ricordandoci che la classificazione razziale è diffusa nella società americana**, hanno affermato che «nella società americana [...] esiste una sorta di “etichetta razziale” [...] La razza diventa “senso comune”, – un modo di comprendere, spiegare e agire nel mondo».

Here the second sentence draws conclusions from the previous passage. This structure would not have been acceptable in Italian, because a long quotation is not usually followed by a short, conclusive sentence. Therefore, the second sentence has been moved inside the first one, placing it between commas and using a non-finite verb form (i.e. gerund).

[...] a reconstruction of Glaude’s conceptual “mapping” of African American politics. There, **I analyze** the key distinctions animating Glaude’s defense (p. 109)

[...] una ricostruzione della «mappatura» concettuale fatta da Glaude della politica afroamericana. **L’obiettivo qui è di analizzare** le distinzioni chiave che animano la difesa di Glaude.

In the example above the English text presents personal verb forms with the subject *I*, so that the author can stress his commitment to his subject and express his views. However, here the Italian reader expects a more neutral, non-emotive style, which can be achieved changing the personal subject *I* with the impersonal *l’obiettivo*.

Halliday and Hasan (1976: 9-10) claim that cohesion is “a general text-forming relation” and refers to “the range of possibilities that exist for linking something with what has gone before”. In particular, in specialized texts lexical repetition is widely used to create cohesion because it avoids ambiguity (Gotti 1991: 105-110). Though this strategy is completely acceptable in English, Italian specialized communication usually presents paraphrases and synonyms in order to avoid redundancies and create a higher register. For example, while defining concepts, presenting views or showing doubts, Gooding-Williams uses the same lexical term throughout the text. In the Italian translation repetitions have been maintained only if they were necessary to avoid ambiguity:

I understand the concept of **racial ideology** to have as its extension [...] the concept of **racial ideology** applies in fact to all representations of social activity. Though the notion of **racial ideology** I am proposing [...] a relatively broad and encompassing concept of **racial ideology**, I mean to resist the temptation to restrict in advance the proper domain of a critique of **racial ideology**. (p. 2)

Ritengo che il concetto di **ideologia razziale** abbia come estensione [...] il concetto di **ideologia razziale** si applica, in realtà, a tutte le rappresentazioni dell’attività sociale. Sebbene la nozione di **ideologia razziale** che sto proponendo [...] un concetto di **ideo-**

**logia razziale** relativamente ampio e comprensivo, intendo resistere alla tentazione di restringere in anticipo l'esatto dominio di una critica dell'**ideologia razziale**.

Now consider the following example:

A genealogical exposure of **racial representations** discloses the interpretive basis of **those representations**. Its point, in a nutshell, is to identify the acts of interpretation that constitute **racial representations**. (p.4)

Un'esposizione genealogica rivela la base interpretativa delle **rappresentazioni razziali** [...] la sua caratteristica, in breve, è individuare gli atti interpretativi che vanno a costituire le **rappresentazioni razziali**.

Here the noun phrase *those representations* has been eliminated and the two sentences have been linked together by a colon. The cohesive tie, which is lexical in the English text, has been maintained through the use of punctuation. The sentence has not lost its clarity and is now completely acceptable for an Italian reader, because it produces a longer and more complex sentence structure.

### 3. SYNTACTIC ASPECTS

#### 3.1 SENTENCE STRUCTURE

English specialized texts generally present simple, short sentences mainly consisting of a main clause and a coordinate and/or subordinate clause. On the contrary, Italian scientific communication tends to present longer sentences, using a large variety of conjuncts. The sentence structure is characterized by a main clause and a set of coordinate and/or subordinate clauses hanging together through the explication of the logical relationships among them.

However, it is worth noticing that Gooding-Williams often presents long sentences having also a large number of subordinate clauses. This feature is not so common in English specialized texts, but here the use of subordinate clauses – presenting both finite and non-finite verb forms – may be the result of the subject matter. The author is a philosopher writing about problems concerning philosophy and sociology of racism; his aim is to be precise and accurate, explaining his reasoning from its very beginning to its conclusions. The reader is guided throughout the text and may understand – and agree with – the author's views more easily. However, sometimes there is the need to readjust the text for the Italian audience, because sentences are too short or not explicitly connected to one another.

[...] **a typified image** of the Negro as behaving in threatening ways. **This image** has narrative significance, **for it portrays** the Negro as acting precisely as historically received legends and stories about Negroes tend to portray them as acting. (p. 9)

[...] **un'immagine** del Negro come di un individuo che si comporta in modo minaccioso **ed** ha valore narrativo, **perché** ritrae il Negro come un individuo che agisce precisamente come leggende e storie storicamente accettate sui Negri tendono a ritrarlo.

Here the second sentence is seen as an explanation of the previous one but there is no linking conjunct. While this construction is perfectly acceptable in English, in Italian it would be more appropriate to translate it as one single sentence presenting a main clause, a coordinate main clause, and a subordinate causal clause introduced by the conjunction *perché*.

I now turn to **an example of** American Africanism [...] **The example** is that of the male nurse figures appearing in Ernest Hemingway's fiction. **These male nurses**, Morrison notes, are almost always black. (p.5)

[...] passo ora a **un esempio di** africanismo americano: **le figure degli infermieri** presenti nella narrativa di Hemingway **che**, osserva Morrison, sono quasi sempre neri.

Here the English text is constituted of three simple short sentences, while its Italian translation presents only one long sentence. Since the second sentence is an explanation of the previous one, the two sentences have been linked together by a colon. The third sentence refers to the second one by adding relevant pieces of information and it has been translated as a relative clause. Thus structured for the Italian reader, the passage becomes more cohesive, and also achieves a more formal register.

### 3.2 IMPERSONAL FORMS VS. FIRST PERSON FORMS

Specialized texts are usually written using impersonal and passive forms: this is a way to reduce the authors' presence in the text, and to emphasize their studies and results. On the other hand, in soft sciences scholars tend to use more often first person – both singular and plural – subjects in order to stress their position in a particular debate. In this way they are able to present their point of view more effectively (Gotti 1991: 101-103). However, if we consider Italian works, they are more formal and tend to a larger use of passive and impersonal forms to present scholars' views rather than showing their commitment in the topic they are dealing with.

In general, Gooding-Williams uses a large amount of first person singular subjects and pronouns while describing his work, an idea that is particularly important for him or for what a particular expression means for him. His aim is to present his point of view on aspects and concepts deriving from philosophy and sociology, as well as to compare them with other scholars' views, as happens in the following passage:

Thus far, **my elaboration** of a view that Piper only sketches has focused on defending that view from Michaels's critique. Here, however, **I would like to** shift ground. In particular, **I would like to** complicate Piper's conception of black identity [...] Piper, **I wish to say**, defines a necessary but not a sufficient condition of being a black person. (p. 92)

Nell'elaborare un'opinione che Piper abbozza soltanto, **mi sono concentrato** sulla sua difesa dalla critica di Michaels; qui, tuttavia, **vorrei** cambiare atteggiamento. In parti-

colare, **vorrei** problematizzare l'idea di Piper dell'identità nera [...] **Vorrei** dire che Piper definisce una condizione necessaria ma non sufficiente per essere una persona nera.

Here the first person singular subject has been maintained in the Italian target text because of its pragmatic value. As a matter of fact, the author presents his ideas with reference to a colleague's work; therefore, the *I* subject is used to place the essay inside the philosophical and sociological debate in contemporary America.

On the contrary, when the author wants to grab the readers' attention and make them agree with his views, he uses first person plural subjects and pronouns, thus including the writer and the reading public (inclusive *we*). It is worth noticing that a large number of *we* sentences present an epistemic modal verb:

Thus, when **we consider** the role of racial ideology [...] **we must acknowledge** that the courtroom and media representations of black bodies [...] (p. 7)

Così, quando **consideriamo** il ruolo dell'ideologia razziale [...] **dobbiamo ammettere** che le rappresentazioni dei neri date dall'aula di tribunale e dai media [...].

The example above presents a reader-inclusive *we* structure, asking the reader to take side in the debate. The author writes in a warm, emotive way in order to convince his audience and grab its attention. This syntactic structure is generally toned down in Italian specialized texts, using impersonal verb forms. Here, first person verb forms have been maintained, because Gooding-Williams is a leading figure in the contemporary American debate about race. He always presents interesting, original views, which have to be taken into account carefully and faithfully, also from a stylistic point of view.

#### 4. LEXICAL ASPECTS

##### 4.1 TERMINOLOGY

Specialized lexis is characterized by concision, accuracy, and lack of ambiguity; authors tend to avoid synonyms and paraphrases, thus repeating the same term throughout the text. From a lexical point of view we find terms belonging to the common use of the language with or without taking a specialized meaning; terms from other special languages; neologisms and compounds; derived and loan words; acronyms, abbreviations, and symbols (Cortelazzo 1994: 9-12).

Gooding-Williams is a philosopher writing about sociology of racism and therefore he uses standard terms and concepts that are to be found in Italian parallel texts as well: such as, for example, the concepts of *act of interpretation/atto interpretativo* (from the philosophical field). However, one of the main lexical problems was represented by a series of different terms the author uses while referring to African Americans.

These noun phrases are not actually synonyms, but refer to a particular aspect of African American people in the contemporary United States. Since Gooding-

Williams is a leading figure in the American debate about race and here expresses his point of view, the translator chose to be as faithful as possible to the original texts.

Translated as *corpi neri*, the term *black bodies* expresses the idea that in the U.S. society African Americans are usually classified – and considered – only according to the color of their skin, without treating them as real persons and citizens. *Afroamericani* has been used for translating *African Americans*. There is also another series of noun phrases referring to African Americans based on skin color alone. In this case they are described as *blacks*, *black Americans* or *persons of color*, but these terms are now old-fashioned and considered offensive both in the United States and in Italy. Once again, following Gooding-Williams's lexical choices, they have been translated as *neri*, *neri americani* and *persone di colore*. Finally, while referring to the works by DuBois and Fanon, Gooding-Williams describes African Americans as *Negroes*, a term that is clearly derogatory. This term has been translated as *Negri*, because here he is not expressing his point of view, but simply reporting – with their own words – what other scholars said years ago (DuBois published “The Conservation of Races” in 1897 and *The Souls of the Black Folk* in 1903; Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* was translated into English in 1967).

#### 4.2 CULTURE-BOUND TERMS

Gooding-Williams uses terms rooted in the American culture, which are not transparent in the Italian context, and so there is no equivalent, literal translation into Italian. Therefore, while speaking of the *thin blue line* and of *racialism*, a translation has been provided and a footnote added.

The phrase *thin blue line* – in inverted commas in the original text – is an example of metaphor: in American slang policemen are usually called “men in blue” from the color of their police uniform. This passage, though highly cultural-specific, is quite important in the following part of the essay and it has been translated faithfully. The strong English metaphor has to be maintained, because it is an effective means for representing and understanding contemporary American society. Therefore, *thin blue line* has become *sottile linea blu* – in inverted commas – and then a footnote provided, explaining that in the U.S. this expression is related to policemen.

As for the term *racialism*, it is strictly linked to the notion of *racism*. However, while racism is a concept present in any sociological debate about race, racialism is used only in the Anglo-Saxon context. It presents a terminological problem, because there are three different possibilities in order to translate this concept in a comprehensible way for an Italian reader. In the Italian translation from French of Wieviorka's *Lo spazio del razzismo* (1993: 112-113), the terms *razzismo* and *razzialismo* are to be found in order to distinguish between an ideology of racial superiority and racist actions:

Sivanandan distingue fra ciò che chiama «**razzismo**», ideologia esplicita della superiorità razziale, e «**razzialismo**», ineguale trattamento delle diverse razze.

Then, the Italian translation from English of Fredrickson's *Breve storia del razzismo* (2005) maintains the two terms in English and explains them through a quotation – also cited in Gooding-Williams's essay – from Appiah's *Racisms* (in Goldberg 1990: 4-5):

[...] distinzione che Kwame Anthony Appiah fa tra [...] **racism** e **racialism**. Egli definisce **racialism** la convinzione “che vi sono caratteristiche ereditarie, possedute dai membri della nostra specie, che ci consentono di ripartirle su una limitata serie di razze, in modo tale che tutti i membri di queste razze condividano alcuni tratti e alcune tendenze che non condividono con i membri di nessun'altra razza”. (Fredrickson 2005: 159; emphasis in the text)

Finally, according to a BBC article which appeared on the internet on 13 March 2007, the editor of the Oxford English Dictionary Online argues that in contemporary English *racism* and *racialism* seem to have the same meaning, so that they can be regarded as interchangeable:

So do **racialism** and **racism** mean the same thing? Yes, says John Simpson, editor of the Oxford English Dictionary Online. [...] they are now considered one in the same [...] now identical and interchangeable. They refer to discrimination and antagonism based on ethnicity, especially the belief that one race is superior to another.

In the light of these three possible translation choices, the term *racialism* has been translated as *razzismo*, thus following the third possibility, because according to the translator it seems to reflect the latest trends in the English language. However, a footnote has also been provided for explaining to the Italian reader the subtle difference of meaning existing in the Anglo-Saxon context between *racialism* and *racism*.

#### 4.3 COMPLEX NOUN PHRASES

Complex noun phrases generally represent a translation problem from English into Italian. As a matter of fact, Italian language requires a series of prepositions and/or participles in order to clarify the different relationships among the phrase constituents. Moreover, English usually opts for pre-modification, while Italian prefers post-modification or a mix of the two.

[...] African American politics as expressing a **deep-rooted biologically, spiritually, or culturally formed racial ethos that is evident antecedently to politics**. (p. 115)

[...] la politica afroamericana come qualcosa che esprime **un ethos razziale, biologicamente radicato nel profondo e formato spiritualmente o culturalmente, cosa che evidentemente è antecedente alla politica**.

The example above is particularly interesting, because it presents a complex noun phrase composed of three main lexical expressions and an embedded relative clause. Here the translator had to clarify the relationships existing among the constituents, as well as to improve its structure – perhaps slightly ambigu-

ous – for an Italian reader. In the target text a coordinate and an disjunctive conjunctions (*e, o*) have been added, as well as the word *cosa* preceding the embedded relative clause.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This work presents a commentary on the relevant issues encountered in the translation process of the language of philosophy and sociology of racism.

The articles analyzed are an interesting example of special languages: their author is a philosopher dealing with sociology of racism and focusing on the related issues of race, culture, and politics in American society, while the intended readership is mainly composed of experts both from the philosophical and sociological fields.

Translating Gooding-Williams's essays is a challenge, because they require a deep knowledge of philosophical and sociological concepts. The author always supports his ideas with evidence from contemporary society; he tries to engage his reader's attention on grounds of common, shared knowledge; his claims cast a new – often critical – light on the debate about race and anti-black racism in the U.S. Here the main relevant problems in the translation process from English into Italian deal with producing a warm, fluent, and clear style while maintaining a high, formal register.

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