TRANSLATING PERSONAL LETTERS:
Theory and Practice

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Abstract

The following article examines a little-explored field, i.e. the translation of personal letters, which actually have features that make them at times difficult to interpret. Indeed, the main problem discussed, and the one that should be stressed in the teaching of translation, is the need to place the texts of the letters in their co-text and context, and to find all the information required in order to interpret, and thus translate, them correctly. In the second part of the article letters by Gramsci, Pasolini and Saba are taken into consideration, with comments on those aspects of them that may present difficulties for students of translation. Some general remarks on the art of translating conclude the essay.

So far as I am aware, there is very little in the literature on the translation of personal letters, either in theory or in practice. While there are dozens of books that teach students how to write business letters in English or Italian, or how to translate such letters from Italian into English, there is nothing of the kind for personal letters. There are only a few collections of letters, or manuals that claim to show how to write “letters for all occasions.” Yet the translation of personal letters is commonly practiced, and collections of letters by famous people are frequently published. In most cases, these letters are by important figures in literature, history or science, as became clear in a translation course held some years ago. During the lessons, it became clear that this particular kind of translation activity was full of references to history, philosophy or science; one might therefore assume that the letters fall into the classification of literature, or philosophy or historical or scientific documents, but the reality may not be so simple. Hegel was a philosopher, but his letters also contain love poems.

Letters by their very nature transcend all our usual classificatory schemes.

1 An interesting, and amusing, discussion of the nature of personal letters is the essay by Ferguson (1980). See also the manuals given in the references.
This essay grows out of the experience of teaching the translation of personal letters and deals with the pitfalls and peculiarities of translating such letters, problems which are typical of them and deserve consideration. My examples will be drawn from letters actually used in classroom activities; at different times, we dealt with letters by Antonio Gramsci, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Umberto Saba. Each of these cases will be considered below, but first I will attempt to make some theoretical observations about the nature of personal letters and their status as texts.

The Letter as a Literary Form

Is the personal letter a form without a definition? Given the great variety of its manifestations, this would almost seem to be the case. Yet it is instructive to attempt a definition.

A personal letter has:

a sender(s)
a message
a code
a receiver
(and perhaps other potential receivers, whether intended or not)

Obligatory formal elements:

Date (and sometimes place of writing) (sometimes omitted)
Opening (specifying the audience) (very often formulaic – “Dear...”, etc.)
Message
Closing (very often formulaic – “Sincerely”, “Love”, etc.)
Signature (not always the complete name, sometimes even a nickname)

It may also contain:

a post scriptum
notes
the sender’s address (usually given only on the envelope in private letters)
the receiver’s address (only in business letters)

It may be private or public (business, circular, etc.).
It may use more than one code (language).
It may be of any length.
It may be about any subject.
It may or may not have literary value.
In any case it is a historical document.
It may refer to other documents (letters, etc.) (intertextuality).
It may be intended for publication, or not.
It is frequently dated (historicity), sometimes with an indication of place (it is firmly rooted in space and time).
It is a case of deferred communication.
There may or may not be a reply.
It may be in prose (usually) or verse.
It may imitate other forms – story, description, poetry, drama (dialogues), the essay, or criticism.
It may be intended to inform, entertain, or convince (the three basic functions).
It is not by definition an art form (yet one speaks of the ‘art’ of letter-writing).
In fact, by definition it is not art – artlessness is one of its basic traits, even in ‘fake’ letters composed in novels.
Private letters are supposed to be “spontaneous” and “unrevised” – how true is this?
A letter need not have internal coherence, and may make a peculiar use – or no use – of normal cohesion devices used in more formal texts.
It may jump from one subject to another with no more than a dash –
It may take things for granted as shared knowledge (Bernstein’s restricted code?). It is, in fact, the allusive nature of the letter (its assumption of shared knowledge) that makes interpretation and translation difficult if the contextual data are missing or unknown (for example, if one does not have access to the letter being replied to, or to the reply to the current letter, etc.).
It may violate the rules of grammar and spelling, or mix registers in original ways.
It may create its own language.
The length may depend on external factors (the availability of paper, the size of the aerogramme, etc.).
Its literary value depends on:
   style – the choice of words/syntax
   the imitation of literary forms
   the intrinsic interest of its content
   the author’s attempt to create a coherent whole (or segment)
The letter could imitate any form – even a law report or a telephone book.
Typical features of letters

Letters are:

- highly context-dependent
- necessarily intertextual (they almost always refer to previous letters and are usually related to later letters)
- transactional discourse (provisional statements, thinking aloud, expectation of reply or rebuttal)
- not necessarily coherent or unified

A special question regards the existence and use of “fake” letters. These are letters invented by authors and not intended for real use in communicative situations, but usually for publication (very often as model letters to be imitated by people who are uncertain how to write effective letters and feel they need “guidance” in the matter). They may also be inserted by fiction writers in their narratives (it is interesting to note that Richardson’s Pamela grew out of the enterprise of writing ‘model letters’ for young ladies); an extreme case of this is the epistolary novel, where the entire narration is entrusted to the letter form. Whereas it is difficult to imagine a “fake” poem or play or novel, it is possible to have a “fake” letter (or history or autobiography, for that matter – in which case we have a novel).

Personal letters are not usually intended for publication, although some famous people may imagine that their letters will be eventually published (especially after their death, if the letters have survived and can be collected). An exception is that category of letters called letters to the editors or “Dear Abby” letters, in which people talk about their personal lives and express personal opinions, intended however for a vast audience and therefore, presumably, more carefully and formally written than the majority of personal letters.

Although letters may be going out of fashion, to be replaced by electronic messages, it is unlikely that they will disappear any time soon, and in any case the sheer quantity of letters in existence will ensure that they will continue to be read (and translated) for a long time to come. In any case, much of what can be said about the translation of letters can be applied directly to the translation of electronic messages, which are normally very close in style to traditional letters or memos (and totally unlike telegrams, telexes or SMS messages, for example).
The Translation of Personal Letters

As a teacher of translation from Italian into English, I worked with Italian students whose knowledge of English was good but still in many cases faulty and imprecise. Therefore, the translation of letters presented many of the same problems as the translation of other types of texts, and much time and effort was devoted to the correction of mistakes in the use of English morphology and syntax, the problems of style and register, and in general the principles that underlie writing readable texts in English. None of this will be dealt with in this essay.

The teaching of translation also involves two other basic aspects: the interpretation of the original text (the “hermeneutic aspect”) and the identification of general methodological principles (or even “tricks of the trade”). These are of more general interest to the translation teacher than the instruction in writing, or compositional aspect, which is necessary and inevitable in these cases, but overlaps with the teaching of the language to foreign students.

It might be assumed that Italian students would have no problem in understanding texts written in their own language, but this is in fact not the case. The understanding of texts is based on expected behavior. Our expectations are, in turn, based on nature, culture and tradition, and these obviously vary from time to time, from place to place, and from person to person. Much class time is therefore devoted to a discussion and analysis of the original text, which must be thoroughly understood before it can be correctly translated. What follows then will focus on the understanding of letters as texts and the general methodology involved in translating them. This will be valid not only for students but also for professional translators.

The first, and most important, consideration to make is that a letter is almost never a “complete” text, in the sense that it contains all the information needed for its decoding. It almost always refers to previous letters, and may assume that the recipient knows certain information which therefore need not be made explicit, but can be taken for granted (such as the contents of the letter being replied to, or knowledge regarding friends and relatives, etc.). A letter is also precisely located in space and time, and therefore (as a historical document) may refer to general political, historical or literary situations that constitute its general context. Consequently, when giving a letter to students for translation (or when translating such letters in any case), the first requirement is that of contextualization. Students should be given sufficient information about the surrounding co-text (other relevant letters) and general context (historical and literary situation) to be able to interpret otherwise possibly cryptic references in the text of the letter itself.
In this sense, a letter is like a chapter or passage taken from a novel. Even there, the interpretation of the passage may require information not contained in the passage itself, since the author assumes that the reader of a passage taken from the middle of a novel will have access to the information contained in the previous pages of the same novel. The lack of contextualization of literary passages, as they are frequently given to students for translation, renders the exercise frustrating and practically useless, since no one would ever start translating a novel with a passage taken from the middle of it, or even without first having read the entire novel. Books of isolated literary passages for translation are, therefore, methodologically unsound and even pernicious. If literary passages are given to students for translation, the students must also be provided with the complete text. In practice, this is much easier to do in the case of short stories than in the case of novels. (It might be objected that the teacher can always provide the missing information, but this falsifies the real translation situation. A professional translator does not always have an informant, and learning to do one’s own research is part of the training of future translators.)

It may not be practical to require students to do all of the research necessary, so in practice the teacher may provide some background information. But something can be done to encourage students to find the information on their own. Firstly, if the teacher decides to translate several letters by the same author, the book of letters by that author being used can be set as required reading. This has the advantage of providing an extensive (though not necessarily complete) co-text, as well as access to historical and biographical information (usually provided in the introduction and notes). At the very least, the teacher can photocopy those parts of the co-text that seem most relevant and make them required reading. Other relevant books can be ordered for the library and students may be directed to them for answers to their queries. Students can also be encouraged to search for information on the Internet. It is probably a mistake to think that the teacher must answer all the students’ questions about the text or context. It should be remembered that the immediate aim (the translation of a given text) should not make us lose sight of the eventual aim (the training of translators who can work independently to produce viable texts). Students’ research skills (and not just dictionary skills) need to be encouraged in every possible way. Teachers should always remember that it is not their job to impress students with their knowledge or erudition, but to enable students to become independent so that they no longer have any need of a teacher.

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2 For general discussions of the importance of context in the translation enterprise, see Steiner (1975), Hatim and Mason (1990), Ulrych (1992: 67-114), Scarpa (2001).
I will now give a few examples of texts actually used by me in translation classes. The first two are letters by Antonio Gramsci, taken from the volume Antonio Gramsci, *Vita attraverso le lettere*, a cura di Giuseppe Fiori (Torino, Einaudi, 1994); they are followed by two letters by Pier Paolo Pasolini, taken from Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Vita attraverso le lettere*, a cura di Nico Naldini (Torino, Einaudi, 1994); and the last letter is by Umberto Saba, taken from *La spada d’amore* (Milano, Mondadori, 1983).

**The Letters by Gramsci**

The first example is the following letter, number 64 in the collection from which it is taken (p. 91).

Roma, 5 settembre 1924

Carissima mamma,

Sono stato fuori di Roma per circa quindici giorni. Ho trovato la tua lettera e la notizia della nascita di un bambino. È nato il 10 agosto e la sua mamma sta bene perché mi ha scritto già l’11 al mattino e ancora il 18. Pesava 3 chili e 600 grammi, aveva molti capelli bruni, la testa ben formata, la fronte grande, gli occhi molto azzurri – ti copio la descrizione che ne fa la sua mamma che aggiunge, molto poeticamente, che sembra sia stato bagnato nel sole come un frutto ancora sull’albero. Sono già trascorsi 25 giorni dalla nascita e adesso deve essere cresciuto. Si chiama Lev, che in italiano significa Leone, ciò che mi pare alquanto esagerato per un bambino che pesa solo tre chili e mezzo e non ha ancora neppure un dente. Mi è molto gravoso di essere così lontano dalla mia compagna in questo momento: penso anche che dovrò ritardare la sua venuta per qualche tempo: è difficile fare cinque giorni di ferrovia con un bambino di pochi mesi. Essa rimane intanto presso la sua famiglia. Mi manderà, appena sarà possibile, una fotografia del bimbo che ti invierò. Così potrai vedere il tuo nuovo nipotino, che per adesso tormenta solo, a 3000 km di distanza dall’Italia, la sua mamma che scrive cose da pazzi sul suo conto: scrive che le mostra la lingua per farla arrabbiare, ciò che mi pare esagerato. Pare anche a te? Ma forse tutte le madri vedono questi miracoli nel loro primo figlio.

Saluti e baci a tutti

Nino

This letter presupposes, on the part of the reader, a knowlege of Gramsci’s personal and family relations, which are simply referred to here in passing. It is
true that a careful reader might well deduce that the child that has been born is Gramsci’s own (he calls it his mother’s grandson), and that the “mamma” and his “compagna” are the same person. But no information is supplied in the text itself as to where the mother and child are, why they are so far away, or what Gramsci himself is doing in this period. A complete reconstruction of Gramsci’s family relations and political activity therefore seemed called for when dealing with a text such as this.

What follows is letter 50 in the collection used here (pp. 73-74).

(Vienna), 11 maggio 1924

Mia cara Julca,

Domani parto per l’Italia, e dopo qualche tempo ripartirò per venire al V congresso e all’esecutivo allargato. Per varie e increscite ragioni ho dovuto tratternermi qui più di quanto pensassi. Mi ero tanto abituato a pensare che tra breve, alla fine di maggio, ti avrei rivista, che non riesco a consolarmi. Ma pazienza: bisognerà aspettare ancora qualche giorno. Come ci vorremo bene, però, dopo tanti tira e molla, credere, disilludersi. Bisognerà cercare in ogni modo di stare tanto tanto insieme, di stare sempre insieme se è possibile. Lavoreremo insieme, penseremo insieme, ci faremo ogni giorno tante tante carezze, saremo allegri, matti, tristi insieme. Per me è necessario che ci riuniamo: mi pare di essere diventato un punto interrogativo nell’infinito spazio; non so dove mettere i piedi per trovare una concretizzazione. Penso a te continuamente e mi viene la voglia di scrivere delle elegi gemo eno contro l’avverso destino che ci ha separato così giovani, quando appena avevamo cominciato a conoscere la felicità.

Ti scriverò dall’Italia e ti informerò su tutte le possibilità del mio viaggio; una settimana però sarà saltata nella corrispondenza.

Ti abbraccio forte, forte, ti tengo la testa fra le mani per guardarti negli occhi e baciarli e dopo gli occhi ti bacio la bocca, cara Julca, liubjmaja

Gr.

Here, too, the unprepared reader finds himself suddenly immersed in a personal and political situation that he may find it difficult to fathom without help. This is clearly a love letter, even if the reader does not yet know who “Julca” is. Some information on Gramsci’s relation with his wife, the story of their courtship and marriage, would help to clarify many obscure points here. Likewise, background information regarding the activities of the Communist Party and Gramsci’s place in it at this time would be useful. It should be noted that the editor of this volume has already added some information here (the place of
writing). Furthermore, the explanation of the meaning of the Russian term “liublmaja” can be found just three pages earlier, in a note to a previous letter.

It might be argued, however, that the co-textual and contextual knowledge recommended is not actually required, in the sense that a competent translator, who translates the text fairly closely and literally into English, will come up with a final translated text that is identical or nearly so to the text that would be produced by a translator with full knowledge of the context. For example, both translators will leave the Russian word “liublmaja” in the English version, the only difference being that one will know the meaning of the word and the other will not. In other words, one translator will be conveying more information to the target reader than he himself has received from the text. Although from a theoretical point of view this would seem to be an undesirable situation, many acting translators and interpreters argue that it is commonly the case, and that a translator or interpreter frequently produces a text that contains information unretreivable by himself. This happens often with very technical texts in which the translator limits his intervention to inserting the correct technical terms (whose meaning is often not fully or even partially understood) into the right slots in the sentence and adjusting the sentence structure to make a correct utterance. This kind of translation activity is clearly opposed to the hermeneutical idea of translation, in which the first duty of a translator is to analyze and interpret the text, i.e. to “read” the text (as every act of reading is an interpretation). For this second school of thought, the information needed to read a text properly is always only partially available; an extreme position would maintain that in order to translate one letter by Gramsci the translator would first have to have read all of Gramsci’s works, a number of works about Gramsci, and possibly also the works referred to by Gramsci. Such a tall order would effectively prevent any translation activity from being carried out. It is perhaps possible to recognize an intermediate position, in which we hold that the more information a translator has about the text being translated, the better; it is utopian to expect the translator to be an expert about all the subjects on which he carries out translation work, but it is likewise irresponsible on the part of the translator not to find out as much as he can and apply his knowledge as efficiently as possible to the production of viable texts.

But let us pursue this issue a bit further. Kirk remarks: “It is a platitude, after all, that we may know that a given pair of sentences mean the same without knowing what they mean: knowledge of sameness of meaning is not at all the same as knowledge of meaning.” Presumably, the translator knows that two sentences mean the same because he treats them as verbal formulas, without even bothering to investigate their actual meaning because he or she has been

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assured by someone that, in fact, these two sentences do mean the same thing. Suppose the two sentences are: (1) “Le photon n’a pas de masse.” And (2) “Photons have no mass.” The translator knows that these two sentences mean the same, without necessarily knowing even what a photon is, or what it means, for a physicist, to say that it has no mass. But in order to know this the translator must have received assurances that one verbal formula is the equivalent of the other, and this assurance could only come – either directly, or indirectly in the form of written documents such as papers, encyclopedias, dictionaries, etc. – from those who do know what the sentences mean. So at some point there has to be someone who understands the meaning of the sentences. It is not always necessary for this person to be the translator himself (or herself); it may be an expert consulted by the translator; it may be, in general, the language community, but someone must have this knowledge. One might therefore suppose that, if possible, it is better if the translator has such knowledge.

The Letters by Pasolini and Saba

Similar considerations also apply to the translation of the letters by Pasolini and Saba. In the case of Pasolini, there are numerous references in the letters to authors who were his contemporaries, as well as to their works, so a fairly detailed knowledge of Italian literature of the 20th century would be an ideal general background for a translator of such letters. Naturally, there are also many references to Pasolini’s own life and works, so a knowledge of these can be considered essential. On the other hand, there are fewer historical references than in the case of Gramsci, although some historical background is taken for granted (as when he speaks about his brother, who was a partisan in the Resistance movement). It is not necessarily true that the longer letters present more difficulties than the short ones; some of the longer letters may be fairly self-contained, or may at least supply a quantity of useful information for their understanding, whereas some shorter ones depend completely for their understanding on a knowledge of the context.

Take, for example, the following short letter (given on p. 337):

A Novella A. Cantarutti – Spilimbergo

Roma, 30 novembre 1952

Cara Cantarutti,
sono contento che tu abbia accettato. Per le due mila non preoccuparti, non c’è scadenza. Ma manda immediatamente le tue risposte alle

qui incluse domande di una mia inchiesta; il primo numero de “il Belli”
deve uscire entro Natale. Quindi immediatamente...
Tanti cordiali saluti dal tuo

Pier Paolo Pasolini

Here it is not clear what Catarutti has accepted, what the two thousand (lire?)
are for, or what the “inchiesta” is. Fortunately, the editor of the volume explains
both the “inchiesta” and “il Belli”; what Cantarutti has accepted and the two
thousand lire are both clear from a reading of the previous letter on p. 336. But
without such a context this little note remains cryptic, though perhaps not
difficult to translate.

The following letter by Saba is, on the other hand, quite long and may seem
to be self-contained, but actually it presents a number of problems for the
translator.

A Alberto Mondadori

Trieste, 5 Novembre 1951

Mio caro Alberto,

Ti ringrazio molto per la tua lettera; ma tu non sai cosa mi è successo.
Ora – sebbene ti sappia molto occupato – te lo racconto.

Ero contento che il nuovo titolo ti piacesse, ed avevo portato con me
a casa il nuovo dattiloscritto, per darci ancora un’occhiata (avevo paura
che mi fossero sfuggiti errori di macchina). Quel giorno ero quasi lieto;
mia moglie che è ricoverata in una clinica stava un poco meglio; pensavo
di mangiare in fretta, rileggere le poesie e poi andarla a trovare. Ma,
prima di tutto (e come facevo ogni giorno) ho voluto liberare per la
stanza i due protagonisti di Quasi un racconto; il canarino cioè e la
canarina. Chi poteva prevedere che quella sciagurata donna di servizio,
che mia moglie volle assumere malgrado i miei scongiuri di non farlo
(sapevo che mi avrebbe portato male e male attraverso gli uccelli: è
una di quelle donne inibite, fanatiche dell’ordine e della pulizia, le quali –
se sei colto da una sventura ed accendi per nervosità una sigaretta – si
affrettano a metterti davanti un portacenere, pregandoti di fare attenzione)
avrebbe, senza avvisarmi, lasciata aperta una griglia? Era, purtroppo, una
bella giornata, e pensava forse di dare più aria alla stanza. Io non ci feci
attenzione e, dopo un poco, anzi subito, cerca di qua cerca di là, non vede
più il canarino. Chiamo la coinquilina, ma quasi per scherzo: pensavo che
il ciuètto si fosse – come usava fare – nascosto in alto, in qualche angolo:
ma la coinquilina si accorse subito che la griglia era aperta. Infatti
l’uccello era sulla griglia, e subito s’involò. S’involò e non è più
ritornato: o solo due volte per mangiare al davanzale i semi sparsi per i
passeri. Oggi è passata una settimana dalla disgrazia, ed io muovo
d’angoscia (il mio primo movimento fu quello di buttarmi dalla finestra),
non per averlo perduto, ma perché i canarini non possono vivere fuori di gabbia; non sanno cioè come i passerì ed altre specie di alati, procurarsi il cibo. Lo vedo morente di fame e di freddo, sento che mi chiama con quella sua voce argentina, sempre più fiocamente, sempre più disperatamente... una cosa da morire a pensarcì. Ora la donna che me l’ha venduto, ed alla quale ho chiesto se avesse comprato in quei giorni un canarino e poi le raccontai tutta la storia, mi disse che era stato da lei un signore a dirle che suo figlio aveva preso un canarino entrato nella stanza attraverso la finestra aperta. Ma non ne sapeva né il nome, né nulla; sapeva solo che la cattività era avvenuta nei pressi di casa mia. Ho mobilitato tutti i ragazzi della contrada, ho messo due volte un’inserzione sul giornale in grassetto, ma senza nessun risultato. Per disgrazia, degli spazzacamini hanno riferito che, in questi giorni hanno veduti sugli alberi del Boschetto due canarini: come faccio a sapere se quello salvato è il mio o un altro? Io ti scrivo quasi scherzando, ma non puoi immaginare quello che soffro. E poi la coincidenza... Un amico mi disse che era una bella favola: il canarino era fuggito proprio nel momento in cui avevo finito il libro su di lui: l’avrei molto volentieri ucciso. Altri cercano di consolarmi dicendomi che non è il caso di disperarsi per un canarino, che di canarini ne scappano tanti, che qualche volta tornano, che, alla più disperata, se ne compra un altro, ecc. ecc. Tutte parole che mi irritano e niente altro. E non posso nemmeno dire che amavo quel canarino: era troppo strano (pazzo addirittura) e faceva orribilmente soffrire la povera canaria (che era incapace di fecondare): non ti dico le stranezze che commetteva. Ci sarebbe da scrivere un trattato sulla nevrosi degli uccelli. Pensa che, fra l’altro, strappava a tradimento la coda della moglie, covava nella mangiatoia uova inesistenti e disfava il nido di lei, di lei che invece lo amava: ora non fa che piangere e chiamarlo, aumentando così il mio strazio. Tutto questo che ti ho detto è serio, Alberto mio, è molto serio.

Questa lettera non richiede risposta. E se, al caso, mi scrivi, non parlarmi del maledetto canarino; potrebbe essere che in quel momento non ci pensi, e che le tue parole mi riaprono una ferita che non so quando si chiuderà. NON ESAGERO.

Un abbraccio dal tuo

Umberto

Although this letter has almost the form of a straightforward narrative and needs little explication, there are some aspects that probably need clarification. It can, perhaps, safely be assumed that Italian university students know who Umberto Saba is, and have some idea of what he wrote; they may even have read some of his poems. They will also surely recognize the name Mondadori. The identification of the “nuovo titolo” and the “dattiloscritto” mentioned at the beginning of the letter may seem mysterious at first, but is almost immediately

5 Taken from Umberto Saba (1983: 230-233).
made clear by Saba himself. What might make the interpretation of the text even plainer, however, is a reading of the work *Quasi un racconto*. Once again, essential background information must either be taken for granted or researched. Such information is especially important in finding the right tone to use in translating the letter.

It should be clear by now that the cultural and historical context is of the utmost importance in understanding and translating personal letters. But if the writing of letters is an art, as all proclaim, the translating of letters is equally an art. Translation will never become an exact science, for the same reason that no computer can produce a publishable translation, one that does not need editing by a competent human translator: no algorithm for translation is possible. In the absence of such an algorithm, the best that one can hope for is the art of a trained mind. The translation of letters is not as simple as it looks, and requires such art every bit as much as the translation of philosophy and poetry.

References


