John Dodds

UNDERSTANDING AND MISUNDERSTANDING
ITALIAN POLITICAL LANGUAGE

Ladies and Gentlemen,

it is with great pleasure that I take this opportunity offered to me here today to talk to politicians and political scientists about the different kinds of difficulty that their translators and interpreters often have to encounter when dealing with their political language. Indeed, this two-day conference will, I hope, be a most interesting forum of discussion between language experts and political experts for both of whom language is their primary tool. Moreover, this meeting personally gives me the chance to talk about something of which I have been convinced for some time now - namely, the difficulty of understanding the Italian language.

This statement may, of course, seem an exaggerated one, especially for those people here today - both foreigners and Italians alike - who have always believed or who have doubtless frequently been told just how easy the Italian language actually is. It is certainly true, for example, that for many students in foreign universities Italian is considered the "soft option", compared to the "more difficult" languages like French, German or Russian. And while this may indeed be true when it comes to understanding or even speaking colloquial Italian, it is in my view a gross misconception with regard to the more formal spoken and written forms of the language. For surely in but very few other European languages is there such a difference in register and style as there is between the formal and the informal, the written and the spoken forms of Italian. And, what is more, Italian political language often falls within the category of the most formal and most elaborate speech patterns of the language, often causing not inconsiderable comprehension problems for those very people who are most highly trained in the use of language - namely, translators and
interpreters.

For the interpreter, political language may often give rise to comprehension difficulties which may render his job more nerve-racking or frustrating than it normally is. The use of an elaborate style in political texts may make the interpreter feel unable to transmit the source language message to the target language public as well as he possibly can. In such cases, he can only hope to do so as satisfactorily or as adequately as possible.

For the translator, his task is little easier since his job, although not quite as nerve-racking as it is for the interpreter, is considerably more brain-racking (if I may use the expression), for it involves hours and hours of working and re-working the Italian original at the interpretation stage of the translation process, until he is quite sure of the meaning, the political message. The translator does, of course, have one advantage over the interpreter in that he may be able to check with the politician concerned what was actually meant — and particularly in the case of ambiguity or indecipherable obscurity. In the end, therefore, the translator should always be able to do the job well — to the best of his ability and not just satisfactorily, as is often the case for the interpreter. And clearly this difference between an optimum and median rendering of a source language text depends almost totally on the time element — on how much time the translator and the interpreter have respectively for deciphering the message.

As the basis for this analysis, then, the time element is fundamental in the consideration of how interpreters and translators differ in their approach to comprehension problems related to Italian political language. As for the problems themselves, it is my intent with this paper to look at and then to explain what it is exactly in Italian political texts that often makes it so difficult for the receiver to decipher the message. It will be a purely linguistic analysis, leaving aside the precise historical, social, psychological or functional reasons for which politicians write or speak in the way they do. Rather, I shall be considering comprehension problems
related to firstly phonology, secondly to syntax and finally those problems related to lexical choices which may lead to various degrees of incomprehension. The textual basis for this study shall of course be political speeches and reports and, for the most part, shall be taken from the minutes of various sessions at the European Parliament where there operates both a simultaneous interpretation service and a translation service, which clearly facilitates a comparative analysis of the two approaches.

So, firstly, as regards phonological problems related to the comprehension of a text, it goes without saying that, due to the oral delivery of the source language speech, the interpreter's problems are quite different from those of the translator. However, one problem that an interpreter has to face that immediately springs to mind, I must discard fairly curtly — namely, the problem of accent and dialect. Of course, it is true that accent and dialect variants are an awful problem for foreigners who may have had even years of exposure to the Italian language at school or university. Doubtless the Tuscan aspirate variant for /k/ or the Roman sibilant variant for /t/ may well lead to comprehension difficulties but, in the end, this should not be the case for a professional interpreter as such problems must be considered as being purely dependent on linguistic competence.

Where the interpreter may have comprehension problems that are not connected to linguistic competence is over the whole question of how and how fast the speech is delivered. As regards speed, the interpreter is of course trained to cope with the fastest of speeches, for his ability of "décalage" permits him to translate one part of a sentence while listening and understanding another part of the sentence. When the speed of delivery is as great as say 160 words per minute, the décalage becomes no longer a question of word groups or sections of a sentence but can be whole sentences themselves. Clearly the faster the speech, the greater the décalage in terms of number of words, although not in terms of numbers of
seconds. Now obviously one does not need to be a psychologist to work out that 160 words a minute fed into the brain every minute will cause a much heavier communication load (1) than say 130 words per minute. Of course, one may well claim that only very few people naturally speak at that speed. This is true. However, many people can and do read at that speed, which is the disadvantage (at least to the interpreter) of the prepared written speech which the politician simply reads out to his public. And this is also where the importance of how the speech is delivered comes in, for there can be no doubt on the basis of current linguistic theory, not to mention, I am sure, everyone's own experience, that correct use of intonation, stress, etc. makes comprehension of what is being said much easier. So, the main difficulties in this sector that the interpreter has to face can be relatively easily solved by asking for the cooperation of politicians, particularly as regards the speed and delivery of their speeches.

The translator, on the other hand, who does not have problems connected with the oral delivery of a speech, has quite a different set of phonological problems to deal with. Here I am referring to the not infrequent use on the part of politicians of non-casual (2) phonetic equivalence and word-play in the speech for the purpose of style, humor or emphasis. For example, the phonetic equivalence created by one Italian Euro-MP referring to the EEC as

"un sistema composto di un pullulare e di un pulviscolo di identità diverse" (3).

For such phonological problems, the interpreter here must be exempted from any duty to render the equivalence in the target language, simply because of the time factor involved in simultaneous interpretation. The translator, however, should at least be aware of such problems and make a choice as to the main function of the political text, that is to say whether it is more or less simply to inform somebody or whether it has the performative
function of influencing the thinking of the receiver (4). If the function is essentially to inform, then clearly, it is the translator's duty to explain the message clearly and simply. If, on the other hand, the very sound of the words used, as in the above-quoted example, may be important as a persuasive tool used by the politician to influence his public in some way, then clearly the translator may well decide to recreate, by making use of target language equivalences, the word-play of the source language text. Consequently, word-play and sound equivalence in informative texts may quite justifiably be eliminated as with the following clearly non-casual utterance at the European Parliament where l'Onorevole Pedini said

"La questione dell'energia dovrebbe emergere come priorità più prioritaria, se posso adoperare questa espressione" (5).

which was quite simply and clearly rendered in English as

"The energy question should become our highest priority".

However, to maintain the performative function of the phonological equivalence between pullulare and pulviscolo would be quite another matter, for the translator would have to try to maintain the image of swarming ants and fine grains of dust or some equivalent image, as well as to try to maintain the sound equivalence. Certainly the kind of job that could not be carried out in the space of a few seconds - if at all.

Grammatical difficulties leading to varying degrees of incomprehension of a text are, however, much more numerous than the phonological ones I have just mentioned. The main difficulty for the interpreter in understanding an Italian source language text is almost certainly connected to the frequently very complex structure of formal style - the style most frequently adopted for lengthy political speeches. The problems
involved are numerous, so, for the purpose of this paper, I shall consider the problems of sentence length, some of the different cohesion rules (6) for Italian and English and the related problems of grammatical ambiguity. (This section on syntactical problems leading to comprehension difficulties is of much less relevance to the translator, once again due to the time factor). The translator has the time, for example to read a sentence carefully - more than once if necessary - in order to work out the cohesion of the elements both within the sentence itself and also beyond the sentence unit (7). He also has the added advantage of having a written text before him with all the assistance that entails, such as commas, dashes, brackets, and so forth. The interpreter has only marked speech intonation to help him and frequently he does not even have that. Again, this is one of the main problems that the interpreter has to try to cope with if the politician is reading from an elaborately prepared script.

As regards sentence length, the main problem that interpreters have is really a problem of memory - that is to say that they may well have to stretch their powers of "décalage" beyond reasonable limits, as frequently subjects are separated from their predicates, relative pronouns from their antecedents, main clauses from their subordinates by a whole series of unnecessarily exaggerated interpolated phrases or clauses. In such cases, the interpreter may have to let pass as many as 3 or 4 interpolated sentences before he discovers what the cohesion is between the main clause and its subordinate, at which point the main semantic point of the sentence may well have become obscure in his mind - or indeed even forgotten - which obviously would lead to considerable comprehension problems not only of the sentence in question but also of whole sections of the discourse. Sentences of more than 10/12 lines in length abound in the speeches made by Italian Euro-MPs at the European Parliament. Let me quote a fairly typical example taken from a speech on relations between the EEC and Japan:
E' infine - almeno per me - oggetto di una qualche costernazione constatare come vi sia taluno che, dall'interessante esperienza - e, per certi versi, impressionante esperienza - in Giappone, abbia tratto la convinzione che le relazioni politiche ed economiche tra la nostra Comunità e il Giappone, che costituiscono oggi uno dei problemi cruciali delle nostre relazioni esterne e del nostro sviluppo, possano, nello scorso della tornata parlamentare e senza la necessaria preparazione, senza il necessario approfondimento in sede di Ufficio di Presidenza, di delegazione permanente, di commissione politica e di quella per le relazioni economiche esterne, essere discussa in quest'aula, sotto il profilo di una immotivata urgenza" (8).

If you count all the senza and di phrases as just one, this sentence consists of no less than 5 more or less lengthy interpolated phrases and clauses, making it very easy for the interpreter to lose the thread of logic between the main clause and the main subordinate, which actually reads very simply on its own:

"E' infine oggetto di una qualche costernazione constatare come vi sia taluno che abbia tratto la convinzione che le relazioni politiche ed economiche tra la nostra Comunità e il Giappone possano essere discusse in quest'aula sotto il profilo di una immotivata urgenza".

That the subject clause there are some who is separated from its predicate by an interpolated clause about the delegation's experience in Japan, that the subject political and economic relations between the Community and Japan is separated from the modal possano by a relative clause, and that the modal is then separated from its verb by a very long series of interpolated phrases, can only be considered, from the interpreter's view point,
the source of not inconsiderable difficulty.

I think, here, with regard to sentence length, two conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the above-quoted example, not only from the interpreter's point of view but also from that of the translator whose task would be greatly facilitated by a re-elaboration of the Italian sentence structure: 1) this re-elaboration could be a re-working of the long complex sentence structure into a series of 2 or 3 shorter more cohesive sentences with the added advantage to the speaker of having more potential scope for stress and emphasis, since the minor stressed interpolated clauses would become major stressed main clauses; 2) a perhaps more realistic re-elaboration of the Italian sentence structure, in view of the long tradition of lengthy complex sentences in formal Italian discourse, would consist of a re-positioning of the interpolated clauses at either initial or final positions in the sentence structure. In this way, the Euro-MP's sentence would read more comprehensibly at the beginning as

"Dall'interessante esperienza e, per certi versi, impressionante esperienza in Giappone, è infine oggetto di una qualche costernazione constatare che ..."

and at the end, the exaggeratedly long series of interpolated phrases could be placed in final positions, thus giving an uninterrupted modal and verb construction:

"... che le relazioni possano essere discusse in quest'Aula sotto il profilo di una im-motivata urgenza, nello scorci della tornata parlamentare e senza la necessaria preparazione, senza il etc. etc."

A connected problem to that just mentioned is the fairly common use of strings of relative pronouns and of other forms of referential substitution (9) in the Italian sentence structure. There is certainly much
greater use made of pronoun substitution in Italian than there is in English — which, of course, is both quite natural and acceptable as Italian referential substitutes are more grammatically marked than their English counterparts, only few of which are marked for both gender and number (10). This, of course, means that in many cases an excessive use of referential synonyms in English runs a greater risk of grammatical ambiguity as to what the referred antecedent actually is. It is, nevertheless, true, I think, that even in Italian excessive use of referential synonyms may lead to obscurity whenever there is communication overload due to an excessive number of substitutes and referents on the one hand and due, on the other, to occasional outright ambiguity. Just as in English the grammatically correct *my brother's friend's sister's uncle's car* tends not a little to overload the communicative event thus giving rise to comprehension difficulties, so too the excessive use of *che, il quale, questo* and the like tends to make the Italian discourse less clear — particularly if the translator or interpreter is an English native speaker unused to heavy communication loads. In fact, this may indeed on occasions lead to grammatical ambiguity even in Italian, as in this case taken from an interview made for a local television broadcast:

"Il Consiglio Provinciale ha varato il Progetto Speciale per il centro storico ma non ancora il Piano Regolatore completo, il quale prevede misure drastiche contro l'abusivismo" (11).

in which the anaphoric relation (12) between the referential substitute *il quale* and its referent is an ambiguous one in that there are two possible antecedents, namely *il Progetto Speciale* and *il Piano Regolatore*. To say that the relation is clear in that the *il quale* should refer to the immediate antecedent would be perhaps a logical deduction but a quite mistaken one, for in this case the antecedent is in fact the *Progetto Speciale* and not the *Piano Regolatore*. In cases such as this, the good
interpreter may well have simply to leave the ambiguity rather than make a wrong choice resulting in an outright mistake. The good translator, on the other hand, having more time at his disposal, should obtain more information about the two Plans until it is clear which of the two is correct - that is if there are no commas in the written text to help him.

I'd now like to move on to what I believe causes the most frequent comprehension difficulties to translators and interpreters alike, namely difficulties arising from lexical choices made in the source language text. Here, the scope for discussion is of course vast - even more so than syntactical difficulties - so once again I shall restrict myself to what I consider to be the main comprehension problems for the translator and interpreter as have emerged from the analysis of the political speeches made at the European Parliament - specifically those related to the use of metaphor and simile, foreign words, neologisms and synonomy.

As regards the problem of metaphor (13), I thought it pertinent to introduce this topic as possibly the main difficulty that both interpreters and translators encounter in the course of their working lives, for it is undoubtedly true that it is one of the fundamental aspects of living language in that it occurs when a writer or speaker, for the first time in the usage of a language, transfers a word or group of words to some object or event to which the term is not properly applicable (14), doing so for the purpose of some kind of personal analogy. Quite simply, then, it is the creation of new word configurations - new and original linguistic creations - that, as such, are not wholly dependent on linguistic competence. Those commonly used metaphors, known as standard metaphors (15), that is to say frequently used metaphorical figures of speech, such as saluto caloroso (16), bandiera ombra (17), cavallo di battaglia (18), not to mention countless other examples found in Italian political speeches, should cause little or no misunderstanding due to the frequency of these lexical units within the range of the translator's or
interpreter's bilingual competence.

Consequently, the chief comprehension difficulty as regards metaphor must lie in the interpretation of completely original figures of speech for which there is no linguistic precedent in language usage. However, it must be said that I found in the political speeches delivered before the European Parliament — and, I suspect, in most Italian political language — a much more restrained and much clearer use of this stylistic device than would be true of British or American politicians. Certainly nothing of the difficulty of trying to understand what exactly President Reagan (18) is referring to when he uses the term bird's nest to talk about the White House, or the mash-potato circuit with reference to some organization he had been associated with.

Nevertheless, original metaphors are occasionally used and do, consequently, give rise to comprehension problems of a greater or lesser degree of difficulty according to the clarity of the image produced. We have already seen, for example, that there would probably be very little misunderstanding with regard to the afore-mentioned pululare e pulviscolo di identità diverse. There the problem lies in how the interpreter would transform the image into simple, clear denotative language or how the translator would render an equivalent image in the target language, if he deemed it necessary for performative reasons. The same would be very much true of something like

"Firenze è il diadema della corona rinascimentale dell'Italia". (19)

where the problem is not so much of understanding the image, as it is of explaining it or rendering an equivalent in the target language.

However, it is when the analogy is unclear or not apparently clear that both interpreters and translators have comprehension problems. Consider, for example, the metaphor used by an Italian politician with reference to Venice's environmental problems where he quotes Giovanni
Comisso who had said years earlier that *Venezia è un aspro guscio d'ostrica*. Certainly, the analogy between Venice and a rough oyster shell is not transparently clear and certainly would take the translator some time to be sure in his own mind exactly what was meant - in this case, perhaps the pearl-like centre of the city itself surrounded by the rough dirty brown of Marghera, Mestre, etc.

That the interpreter would have the presence of mind to make such an interpretation of the meaning in the flash of time at his disposal, I think is rather unlikely. But here again he has problems for, having not understood the significance, he can hardly be expected to explain it. Consequently, there must be considerable justification for translating the metaphor with an almost literal translation, leaving it to the target language public to decipher the message. I say an almost literal translation for the interpreter might very wisely and, I think, very much to his credit add the word *like* to the image thus making the implicit analogy explicit by transforming the metaphor into a simile. And, frankly, the use of a simile on the part of the political speaker really facilitates the interpreter's comprehension of the image being used, simply because it does make the analogy explicit. For example, one Euro-­MP talking about the refugees in Pakistan used a quite comprehensible simile when he said:

"*I profughi hanno lasciato quella vallata senza più un solo albero, senza un filo d'erba, come se la terra fosse stata percorsa da un rasoio". (21)"

- a much clearer image, surely, than any metaphorical counterpart which might well talk in much unclearer terms of land being crossed or even shaved with a razor. Due to this obvious difference in clarity between an original metaphor and a simile, it is not at all surprising that both translators and interpreters often resort to the technique of rendering a source language metaphor with a target language simile.
I must confess, however, that what is frequently considered a major lexical problem in English seems not to be so true as regards Italian political language. What does seem true is that there is a somewhat lower frequency of original metaphors in Italian political texts than there is in British or American texts – a point of some consolation, I think, for interpreters and translators for whom original metaphor is often a problem.

What, on the other hand, seems to represent a minor comprehension difficulty in British and American texts really can cause considerable difficulty in the understanding of an Italian text. I am here referring to the much more frequent use of foreign words and phrases on the part of Italian speakers. As far as the speeches delivered at the European Parliament are concerned, the Italian politicians there have great preference for the use of Latin, followed by French and then lastly by either German or English. Luckily for the interpreter, however, the Euro-MPs always seem to restrict themselves to the use of these four language and never want to stray into more exotic languages. Nevertheless, the use of even Latin and French creates considerable comprehension difficulty for those interpreters who may never have studied the language in question. I must point out, of course, that when I refer to the use of foreign lexis I do mean completely foreign terms and not the numerous items of foreign vocabulary that the Italian language has assimilated and makes more or less frequent use of – such terms as iter, quorum, status quo, a priori, de rigueur, impasse, blitz, etc. Such lexical units really should cause no comprehension difficulty whatever, as they should be considered an integral part of the source language vocabulary and therefore quite within the linguistic competence of either the interpreter or the translator.

Where problems do arise, however, is when the use of foreign lexis is unpredictable – that is to say when a speaker uses foreign terms which have not been assimilated through usage into the source language lexis. At
times, this unpredictable use of a foreign language may be more or less comprehensible from the context as with one instance when a Euro-MP, who was talking about all the hot air that was going around the House, used the French term _du verbiage_ (22) to describe the speeches there. Here, however, as the context is clear and as the foreign term are essentially redundant information, translator and interpreter alike would be fairly safe in omitting the term completely. This, I am afraid, would not be the case of the sentence from exactly the same speech which reads:

"Ebbene, signori della Commissione, hic Rhodus, hic salta!" (23)

where the _ebbene_ introduces a conclusion that perhaps an interpreter would not understand. I think those who do not know Latin would have possibly had even more trouble with

"Aurei preferito un dulcis in fundo anxiche un cauda venenum." (24)

as the interpreter may not have any idea what it is exactly that the speaker would have liked nor what it is he actually had! That such lexical problems exist and do not depend on the linguistic competence of the interpreter or translator I think is undoubtedly true. Whether, as I suspect, some people would maintain, that some knowledge of these languages should be an intrinsic part of one's _bagaglio culturale_, one's general knowledge, is quite another point altogether and, though it certainly merits discussion, it is within not the scope of this purely linguistic analysis.

A related linguistic problem does very much exist, however, with the use on the part of Italian politicians of neologisms. Clearly whole books have been written on the assimilation or otherwise of a vast body of new technical, scientific, commercial and legal terminology introduced into a language with a view to a greater
lexical harmonization between countries within the Common Market. The very word *harmonization* used in this political context in English I think is a point in hand. However, such items should pose no real problem to either the interpreter or translator as it is simply a question of keeping linguistically up-to-date.

Problems do occur, however, with the "one-off" neologisms, that is to say, a speaker inventing a word on the spur of the moment - a word most probably never to be assimilated into the language at all. These lexical items must of course have a certain degree of transparency - in other words the reader or listener must have some idea of its meaning, otherwise the exercise is quite pointless. Transparency is in fact very much related to the problem of foreign words, as I have found that, in the speeches analysed, all the neologisms were made more or less transparent, by use of Latin or Greek prefixes or suffixes. The words "partitocrazia" and "partitopatia" (25) are two clear illustrations of this kind of linguistic creation, where the speaker's use of fully assimilated Greek suffixes in Italian render the understanding of such lexical items relatively easy. Just how the interpreter and translator would most successfully translate the two terms into English is quite another matter!

My last point here today concerns the terribly underrated problem of synonymy - that is to say, problems related to the understanding of the Italian use of synonyms and near-synonyms. For example, in the sentence:

"Quello che afferma l'onorevole collega non è esatto né giusto." (26)

the problem for me is whether or not *esatto* and *giusto* are being used as pure synonyms - perhaps for the purpose of emphasis - or as near-synonyms (words of different significance which also have overlapping common semantic territory) (27). This is vital information when making one's translation choice in the target language, for in the first case the translation would be something like
"what my honourable colleague has said is not at all correct"

using the English emphasis formula not at all as the target language equivalent for the Italian use of synonymy. In the case of near-synonyms, a distinction would have to be made in the target language version that would read something like

"what my honourable colleague has said is neither correct nor is it fair".

And frequently the interpreter and translator would only find out exactly what was meant later on in the text where a non-casual use of synonyms would almost certainly become explicit, as in the case of

"I piani, progetti e programmi della Comunità prevedono che ...") (28)

where a rash interpreter or translator might mistakenly take the three terms to be pure synonyms - which they are not at all.

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen, I think I must make just one small point quite clear. The intention of this paper has not been even minimally criticism of Italian political language, but, rather, an analysis and explanation of some of its aspects which may lead to varying degrees of incomprehension. The intention rather has been two-fold: firstly, to create, as I said at the beginning, a forum of discussion between political speakers themselves and their interpreters and translators so that each may be mutually more aware of the other's problems and difficulties. My other intention has been to show that translating and interpreting from Italian can simply not be done in one's sleep. The Italian language is no soft option - anzi!
NOTES


(4) K. Bühler, Die Sprachtheorie, Stuttgart, 1934.


(11) RAI 3 - Telegiornale della Regione Friuli-Venezia Giulia.


(13) PP. Newmark, Approaches to Translation, Pergamon Press, 1980, ch. 7


(15) P.P. Newmark, op. cit. 1980, ch. 7.


(17) ibidem, p. 50

(18) P. Cortucci, L'interpretazione simultanea della metafora dall'inglese in italiano, (tesi di laurea) Scuola Superiore di Lingue Moderne per Interpreti e Traduttori, Università di Trieste, 1983.
(20) G. Comisso, Gente di mare, Mondadori, Verona, 1928.
(22) ibidem, 17-6-1981, p. 146
(23) ibidem, 11-3-1981, p. 135
(24) ibidem, 17-6-1981, p. 167
(25) ibidem, 17-6-1981, p. 49
(26) ibidem, 25-3-1981, p. 157
(27) Eugene A. Nida, Componential Analysis of Meaning, Mounton, The Hague, ch. 1