

«All'Antica Commedia degli Errori»: Or Crappy English in Italian Restaurants

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This short contribution is not intended as a scholarly treatise on translation theory and practice, nor as a critical review of the latest published translation of some outstanding literary or non-literary work. Rather, it was conceived simply as a way of listing a few tragically sad and, at the same time, tragically funny observations of a translation teacher (me) on a gastronomic / linguistic journey through the main tourist attractions in Italy over the past few years. And though amusement and indeed some merriment are undeniably the immediate aim of this excursus from the more serious stuff of translation criticism, this "comedy of errors" or "comedy of horrors" is also specifically designed to convey a plea to both employers and translators alike.

To the employers, then, and in this particular case restaurant owners and managers, though the message is equally applicable to all professionals who ever have to use translation services, the plea must be to remember that it makes no economic sense whatever to save on such a pittance as the translator's fee when such short-sighted parsimony results in the loss of what otherwise might have been very lucrative custom. This may well be a truism but, on the basis of what follows, it is clear that countless restaurateurs would seem to prefer to lose several potential customers

per day by offering through their translated menus the most frightful gruel rather than pay for the services of a professional translator who would surely successfully make their meals at least seem a good deal more appetizing.

To the translators, then, if some of the versions that follow be other than simply making fun at the restaurateurs' expense for their meanness in the fee offered for the work done in translating the menus (in which case I must confess to feeling a certain sympathy for them), the plea must be for them to be rather more responsible in their work and not simply to translate the first thing that comes to mind, especially if (a) it is meaningless and (b) even worse, if it is potentially off-putting or even downright disgusting. And if you don't know what the dish is, if you've never even seen or heard of it, at least ask someone, or find a recipe book so that you might visualize it or imagine what it tastes like or, preferably, go and try it for yourself. If you're translating a restaurant menu, the very least the owners can do for you is serve up the dishes you've never had before so that even if the job is badly paid, it is at least a gastronomic experience for you — an experience that very possibly will serve in good stead for any future menu translating work that might come your way. As a consequence, when

dining out on the Ligurian Riviera, you might well be surprised to find that *cappon magro* is not that unappetizing "boiled capon" that you expected, but a rather fine local fish dish consisting of all sorts of culinary delights like shrimps and prawns, oysters and lobster!

To get to the meat of this article, then, if you'll excuse the pun, I should like simply to go through some of the least comprehensible and some of the funniest dishes that have been offered to me in a variety of restaurants all over Italy. There is nothing really that these restaurants have in common, having been hit upon purely by chance, except that they all were in the sort of place that we could classify as going from average to good, in a price range that by today's standards would start from around 30,000 lire per head (£12) but that does not exceed the 50,000 lire (£20) mark. In other words, restaurants that presumably provide above average takings for their proprietors and who, therefore, should not have particular difficulty in paying a professional translator a standard fee which, in all likelihood, would not exceed a couple of hundred thousand lira at most, a measly £75-£80, the price of one good meal for four people. It does not take a financial wizard to work out the economic sense of such a meagre investment!

In order to illustrate the bad translation examples I have chosen as clearly and as systematically as possible, I shall simply follow a menu structure from the "starters" through to the "desserts", looking at the incomprehensible as well as the ridiculous. The restaurants themselves will not be named so as not to create any adverse publicity, though should anyone of you ever come across the sort of translation you see here when on your travels in Italy, or for that matter in any

country, do please inform the proprietor or restaurant manager of the poor quality of the translated menu, possibly suggesting that he use a professional translator to do the job properly.

Now, as you can see at a glance, the two menus that appear on the following two pages are quite artificial, in that the English one is simply a spoof menu based on the funniest or least comprehensible of the howlers encountered on this gastronomic tour of Italy, whereas the second is simply a hotchpotch of Italian and regional dishes, of meat, fish and vegetarian dishes, elaborated exclusively on the basis of the spoof English version.

Let us have a look then at what this imaginary restaurant «*All'Antica Commedia degli Errori*» (perhaps «*Commedia degli Orrori*» would be a more apt denomination) has to offer the famished English-speaking tourist who almost certainly has chosen Italy for his holidays not only for its art, history and monuments or for its sun and sandy beaches but also for its fine food and wine.

Let us begin with the "starters" then, a word certainly more appropriate for the Italian *antipasti* than the French loan word *hors d'œuvres*, in that the chiastic logic of all *hors d'œuvres* are "starters" but not all "starters" are *hors d'œuvres* is undeniable. This, however, is a mere detail compared to what is actually offered up, supposedly with that most honorable and age-old purpose of whetting the customer's appetite. How can such be achieved when he is faced with dishes that at best are enigmatic if not downright unintelligible, as is the case for "little pig mushroom salad" and "fishy fillets under oil" or at worst other dishes which range from the ridiculously unappetizing ("fruit from the sea" or "sea fruits" for the so very common *frutti di mare* or the French *fruits de mer*) to the plainly

disgusting and quite inedible specialities of the chef which may well include hair dipped in sea water ("sea curls") or a whole variety of stale bits of bread ("varied crusts")?

Nor do things improve very much as one decides possibly to give the starters a miss and pass directly on to the first course. Here meaningless translations for the various soup dishes like "grated onions soup" and "ham cream" (unfortunately homophonically rather suggestive of a ladies' cosmetic) as well as misleading translations like "stuffed faggots" for *fagottini ripieni* give way to the sublimely ridiculous rice and pasta dishes on offer like "thin rice" or "rice with kisses" (I can only think that this is interference from the French word *bise*) or a typical and very fine pasta dish called *paglia e fieno* simply rendered as "straw" or *cannelloni della casa* as "pipes of the house" or the delicious *pasticcio* so unappetizingly referred to as a "mess". The mind can only boggle at such translation buffoonery!

But the worst is yet to come. The main course, also sometimes called the "entrance" or "second plates", offers naturally the usual range of wonderfully misleading delicacies like "fish broth" for what is a deliciously thick fish stew, "wet cod" and "grated cod" for two very original ways of preparing the national fish of the British, "Persian fish", an intriguing and exotic metonym for a bit of "perch", "milky pork" an insipid alternative for succulent "suckling pig" (there's that iniquitous English language again, using "pig" instead of

"pork"!) and the terribly ambiguous "roast veal nuts", certainly best avoided as it sounds ominously like the Italian version of what the English consider a notorious and very dubious Spanish dish, *cojones de toro*. But then come the real horrors, for not only is the poor tourist, by now resigned to an unforeseen crash diet in the land of culinary wonders, faced with having to choose between a "Venetian's liver", a "roast lamp" and "Chinese crap" for his lunch, he is also instructed to "meet in the fire" and "spit at the grill".

A quick glance at the dessert menu is of little consolation for here too unintelligible inventions like "pull me ups", "half colds" (also "semi-colds") and "fruit Macedonias" are interspersed with the positively uninviting "cooked cream", "English soup with whipped cream", and last but by no means least "granite with vodka", a carefully anæsthetized dessert prepared by dishonest chefs with a "kick-back" from the local dentists.

One can hardly blame the customer at this point for wishing to string up restaurateur and translator alike and to tie them tightly to their spits and grill them thoroughly for such ludicrous linguistic/gastronomic invention. Nor can we criticize the poor old English-speaking tourist for wanting to make a fast exit from such an omnivorous inferno and to return, happy in the conviction of his own nation's culinary superiority, to the relative safety of his much loved "fish and chips" or, over the Atlantic, the ubiquitous "hamburger and fries". Can we really blame him?

«All'Antica Commedia degli Errori»

Starters

- sea-fruits salad
- sea curls
- fishy fillets under oil
- salty cake
- pig mushroom salad
- varied crusts

1st Course

- ham cream
- tomato cream
- grated onions soup
- straw
- pipes of the house
- stuffed faggots
- meat mess
- aubergine mess
- thin rice
- rice with kisses

Main Course

- fish broth
- grated cod
- wet cod
- Chinese crap
- boiled capon
- meet in the fire
- spit at the grill
- milky pork
- roast veal nut
- Venetian's liver
- boiled mixture

Desserts

- pull me up of the house
- half cold
- fruit macedonia
- cooked cream
- English soup with whipped cream
- granite with vodka

Coffee and digestive

Service and cover 15%

«All'Antica Commedia degli Errori»

Antipasti

- insalata di frutti di mare
- ricci di mare
- filetti di pesce sott'olio
- torta salata
- insalata di funghi porcini
- crostini vari

Primi piatti

- crema di prosciutto
- crema di pomodoro
- zuppa di cipolle gratinata
- paglia e fieno
- cannelloni della casa
- fagottini ripieni
- pasticcio di carne
- pasticcio di melanzane
- risotto di magro
- risi e bisi

Secondi piatti

- brodetto di pesce
- merluzzo gratinato
- baccalà in umido
- granchio alla cinese
- cappon magro
- carni al fogolar
- spiedo alla griglia
- maialino da latte
- noce di vitello arrosto
- fegato alla veneziana
- bollito misto

Dolci

- tiramisù della casa
- semifreddo
- macedonia di frutta
- panna cotta
- zuppa inglese con chantilly
- granita con vodka

Caffè e digestivo

Servizio e coperto 15%