

***The absentee language:
the role of Italian in the work of expatriate writers
in Italy***

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Abstract

This paper sets out to examine a cross-section of books by native English speakers who recount via first-person narration their experience of taking up residence in Italy and moving into a new house, focusing primarily on how their relationship with the Italian language is described. It will be argued that little reference is made to what is arguably the greatest obstacle of all when English speakers and non-Italians in general put down roots in Italy – tackling everyday life and establishing new relationships in a language which they barely know. Central to the analysis will be the reporting of the direct speech of the protagonists of these works, particularly when the language of the original exchange must be Italian. This will lead onto the issues of polylingual discourse through a generally monolingual medium, of stancing between native and non-native speakers, and of how a number of the factors discussed can contribute to excessively seductive representations of Italian life. Lastly it will be suggested that the concept of target orientation, usually applied within the domain of studies on translation, may provide insights into the approaches adopted by the authors of the works examined, perhaps disclosing a general reluctance to engage with the linguistic and psychological difficulties inherent in learning a new language in a foreign land.

Introduction

Eric Newby's 1994 work *A Small Place in Italy*, which like all the books to be analysed in this paper offers an interesting and often humorous description of an English speaker's experience of living in Italy and buying a house there, contains an unexpected aside just three chapters from the end. It turns out that Newby's neighbour is a belligerent farmer, furious about some rights of way, who regularly drives his tractor a whisker away from where the author and his wife are eating or relaxing in their garden. Just one chapter is devoted to this matter shortly before the book reaches its conclusion, though Newby mentions that the problem with the neighbour was a persistent feature of almost all the time period covered by the narration, involving a court case that was resolved only after fifteen years.

For this particular reader that isolated chapter provoked a curious feeling of

dissatisfaction, almost as if, however good the food was, the main course had somehow been missing. Clearly a scenario of this type would cast a long shadow over the courageous and joyous decision of a non-Italian to leave her/his native land and relocate to an old house deep in the Italian countryside. A similar sensation of something missing prevails when I read other works by English speakers providing accounts of their new life in Italy, but this time it is on a linguistic level: in most of these books little reference is made to what is arguably the greatest obstacle of all when English speakers and non-Italians in general put down roots in Italy – tackling everyday life and establishing new relationships in a language which they barely know. While difficulties of various other natures are liberally discussed – for example house renovation, acquisition of residence documents, buying a car, adapting to local driving – the inevitable language hurdles are often treated summarily or indeed not at all.

This paper sets out to examine a cross-section of books by native English speakers who recount via first-person narration their experience of taking up residence in Italy and moving into a new house, focusing principally on the question of how their relationship with the Italian language is or is not portrayed. Central to the analysis will be the reporting of the direct speech of the protagonists of these works, particularly when the language of the original exchange must be Italian. This will lead to considerations upon the issues of (i) polylingual discourse through a generally monolingual medium, (ii) of stancing between native and non-native speakers of a language, and (iii) of how a number of the factors discussed can contribute to excessively seductive representations of Italian life. Lastly it will be suggested that the concept of target orientation, usually applied within the domain of studies on translation, may provide insights into the approaches adopted by the authors of the works examined in this paper. These works are (the dates given are those of the first editions):

- Niall Allsop *Scratching the Toe of Italy: Expecting the Unexpected in Calabria* (2012)
- Ivanka Di Felice *A Zany Slice of Italy* (2014) [set in Abruzzo and Tuscany]
- Veronica Di Grigoli *The Dangerously Truthful Diary of a Sicilian Housewife* (2015)
- Chris Harrison *Head over Heel: Seduced by Southern Italy* (2010) [set mostly in Puglia]
- Annie Hawes *Extra Virgin: Amongst the Olive Groves of Liguria* (2001)
- Simon Mawer *A Place in Italy* (2002) [set in a town near Rome]
- Ian R. McEwan *Pan' e Pomodor: My Passage to Puglia* (2012)
- Eric Newby *A Small Place in Italy* (1994) [set in Liguria]
- Tim Parks *Italian Neighbours: An Englishman in Verona* (1994)
- Clare Pedrick *Chickens Eat Pasta: Escape to Umbria* (2015)
- Mark Rotella *Stolen Figs and Other Adventures in Calabria* (2004)

- Paul Wright *An Italian Home: Settling by Lake Como* (2011)

I shall also make reference to James Hamilton-Paterson's (2004) *Cooking with Fernet Branca* and to my own *Crossing the Cultural Divide: the Gaffes of an Englishman in Italy* (2012), but solely for the purposes of comparison inasmuch as these works lie on a different axis with respect to the others, firstly because they have fictional protagonists, secondly because they have either third-person narration (*Crossing the Cultural Divide*) or more than one first-person narrator (*Cooking with Fernet Branca*), and thirdly because the scenario of moving into a new house is not described.

First of all, let us consider the question of the protagonists' degree of familiarity with Italian, and how this is conveyed in the respective stories.

1. The protagonists' language skills in Italian¹

As one would expect, the Italian language competence of the respective protagonists at the beginning of each book varies considerably, as does their ability to learn.

1.1 Protagonists whose language skills in Italian appear to be good at the start of the book

These characters can be broken down into (i) those who have previous experience of living in Italy, for example Nicola in *An Italian Home* (throughout the paper I shall use shortened titles to refer to the works examined), Tim in *Italian Neighbours*, and presumably Veronica in *The Dangerously Truthful Diary*, though the protagonist's clearly good knowledge of Italian is never properly explained; (ii) those who have studied Italian at university, for example Clare in *Chickens Eat Pasta*, (iii) those whose parents or relatives are Italian and who consequently acquired knowledge of the language as they grew up – Mark in *Stolen Figs*, Ian's wife M in *Pan' e Pomodor*, David in *A Zany Slice of Italy*. Included in this category is the protagonist's wife C in *A Place in Italy*, though she is in fact Maltese.

1.2 Protagonists who initially have little or no Italian but who gradually make progress

Books with protagonists of this nature tend to devote greater attention to language questions, from the complexity of the Italian language (*Head over Heel*, *An Italian Home*, *A Place in Italy*), to gaffes arising from their shortcomings in Italian (*Head over Heel*, *An Italian Home*, *A Place in Italy*), to transcriptions of dialect

¹ As a rule I shall refer to (non-Italian) 'protagonists' rather than 'narrators' because not all the protagonists of these works are narrators, for example David in *A Zany Slice of Italy* and Nicola in *An Italian Home*.

(*Pan' e Pomodor*). Some of the protagonists make good progress in Italian (Chris in *Head over Heel*), while others find the learning process more arduous, for example Niall and his wife Kay in *Scratching the Toe of Italy*, Ivanka in *A Zany Slice of Italy*, Ian in *Pan' e Pomodor*, Paul in *An Italian Home*.

2. How is the protagonists' Italian language expertise / lack of expertise reported in the narrative?

Here too the variation is considerable. The main strategies are as follows.

2.1 Reporting of language errors

Reporting of this nature often entails errors of comprehension or confusion between similar-sounding terms: Chris in *Head over Heel* (p.82) asks for *un pedofilo* (a paedophile) instead of *un pedalò* (a pedalo); in *An Italian Home* (Ch.2) Paul interprets the button *LUCE* (light) in an apartment block as someone's surname, and he and his wife Nicola are mischievously told by locals that the village policeman's name is *Signor Pompino* (Mr Blow Job) and subsequently address him as such (Ch.4); the protagonist of *A Place in Italy* wonders, when a woman introduces herself as Grazia, what he had done to deserve thanks (Ch.1), and later (Ch.2) exclaims that his wife *non è pregnante* (she isn't meaningful) instead of *non è incinta* (she's not pregnant). Many errors of this nature are reported in the opening chapters of *Crossing the Cultural Divide*, for instance when Hugh thinks that *devo rimettere* corresponds to 'I have to replace it' rather than 'I'm going to be sick' (pp. 92-93).

2.2 Allusions to the protagonist's language level

Allusions of this type may be implicit or explicit.

2.2.1 Implicit allusions to language level

In *The Dangerously Truthful Diary* (Ch.2), we find "Dictionary in hand, I phoned him [Valentino, Veronica's future husband] back"; in *A Zany Slice of Italy* (Ch.7), Ivanka writes "I'm exhausted, having had to concentrate so intently on trying to understand not only Italian but the local dialect"; in *Head over Heel* Chris speaks to his Sicilian mother-in-law about the way she has coped with her sick husband: "I told Valeria as best I could that I admired her courage" (p. 89), and in *Crossing the Cultural Divide* it is narrated that Hugh "let loose some more of his Italian" on a woman in a supermarket (pp. 46-47). All of these instances are implicit indications that the respective protagonists' Italian is not yet up to scratch. Later in *Head over Heel* (p.65), when Chris and his Italian girlfriend Daniela have to deal with (in Italian) an obtuse *carabiniere* concerning a stolen credit card, we read "'No later, though,' I joked in English. 'The restaurant closes at eleven.'" The fact that

Chris makes this comment in English again implicitly suggests problems in Italian, above all because (i) the comment is not complex, and (ii) the chances of the obtuse *carabiniere* understanding him in English are remote.

2.2.2 *Explicit allusions to language level*

These comprise more descriptive references to the protagonists' knowledge or lack of knowledge in Italian, sometimes with examples of this supplied.

In *A Zany Slice of Italy* (Ch.7), Ivanka writes of her "very limited broken Italian", Paul in *An Italian Home* (Ch.9) writes: "I still hadn't gained enough confidence to converse unaided", later bemoaning (ibid) his "stubborn resistance to speak Italian". Tim in *Italian Neighbours* (first chapter entitled 'Afa') understands around 80 per cent of what is spoken directly to him, and around 50 per cent of what is merely said in his presence; Chris in *Head over Heel* (p. 26) suspects that his "rudimentary Italian" is playing tricks on him; and in *The Dangerously Truthful Diary* we are informed of Veronica's "terribly rusty Italian" (Ch.1). Other references are more elaborate, for instance in Mawer's *A Place in Italy* (Ch.2):

In those early days my knowledge of Italian was patchy. Understanding jumped from one familiar word to another with little but guesswork to help me with what went on in between. It was like watching a scene by the light of a stroboscope: what happened in the darkness was the essential part, the part that made sense of the fixed and frozen images – but that was the part denied me.

Some allusions to language levels are more humorous. In *Scratching the Toe of Italy* Niall (chapter entitled 'Living in a foreign language') has "sledgehammer Italian" due to his Northern Irish accent; in *Extra Virgin* the narrator writes "I gesticulate and gibber in my daft foreign way, trying to communicate where I've come from, pointing to the other side of the valley" (p. 77); in *Head over Heel* it is pointed out that the doctor's parrot speaks better Italian than Chris (p. 49); in *Crossing the Cultural Divide* we are informed that Hugh's heavily-accented Italian makes him sound like an English upper-class twit (p. 48). Very occasionally we are informed of improvements made by the protagonists, for example in *Head over Heel* (p. 41): "In improving Italian I recounted the tale of the lazy immigration police at Rome airport".

2.3 *Discussions about language learning*

Focused discussions of language learning feature in just two of the works analysed.

Niall in *Scratching the Toe of Italy* (chapter entitled 'Living in a Foreign Language') provides a number of insights that are likely to be revealing for the target reader, for example that dubbed Italian is as a rule easier to understand

than original Italian; that so many English words have been absorbed into Italian; the disadvantage of not being a native speaker of a Romance language such as Romanian when learning Italian; the fact that the elderly locals make no allowances for the protagonist's linguistic shortcomings, talking to him as naturally as they would to a friend from the village. Niall observes ruefully that "We had expected that, living in the country [i.e., in Italy], we would assimilate the language reasonably quickly. We were so, so wrong."

Paul's discussion of language learning in *An Italian Home* takes the form of a series of reminders to the reader concerning the immense problems he has speaking and understanding Italian – indeed it becomes one of the main themes of the work with entire chapters devoted to it – in part because he is (reluctantly) shielded by his wife Nicola, whose Italian is very good. In both these works are included reflections upon the psychological implications of the respective protagonists' shortcomings in Italian, an issue which I shall return to in Section 5 below.

3. Direct speech

The previous section described strategies adopted to convey the protagonists' level of Italian, though it needs to be stressed that, on the whole, indications of language levels are few and far between in these works. One of the reasons for this may be that it is not easy to report Italian-language merits or faults 'live', so to speak, or at least inscribed in direct speech, in that although a substantial slice of the conversations reported in these works must have originally taken place in Italian, they are of course always converted into English. Now since it would clearly not work to repeatedly relay the protagonists' imperfect Italian in imperfect English,² this gives rise to the issue of whether authors should use

² A successful example of this in film is to be found towards the end of Richard Curtis' film *Love Actually* (2003). Jamie, an Englishman played by Colin Firth, falls in love with his Portuguese maid Aurelia while on holiday in France though he never declares his love, returns to London where he does a crash course in Portuguese and then flies out to Portugal to find his sweetheart and propose to her on the spot. He eventually finds the restaurant where she works as a waitress, and before a crowd of surprised clients, as well as half the village that has come along for the ride, asks for Aurelia's hand in very imperfect Portuguese. As he does this his Portuguese is subtitled in similarly imperfect English:

Beautiful Aurelia. I've come here with a view to asking you to marriage me. I know I seems an insane person because I hardly knows you. But sometimes things are so transparency, they don't need evidential proof. And I will inhabit here, or you can inhabit with me in England. Of course I don't expecting you to be as foolish as me, and of course I prediction you say 'no'. But it's Christmas and I just wanted to check.

direct speech at all (in English) in order to report the Italian dialogue of the protagonists. If the protagonists are assigned an abundance of direct speech to convey their interactions with the locals then this might give the false impression that their Italian is perfect, whilst if they are assigned scant or no direct speech this may create the undesirable impression that they converse with the locals very little, however much indirect discourse is adopted. This question will be examined in more detail in the following section.

3.1. The implications of direct speech

An Italian reader of *Crossing the Cultural Divide* once asked me the Italian equivalent of “There she blows” (p.224) in a chapter concerning a disagreement about the communal cesspit at a condominium meeting. As I gamely struggled to provide a decent rendering, the reader, looking more and more mystified, then exclaimed: ‘But why is it so hard to translate? After all, you actually said it in a discussion which must have been in Italian!’

Surprised by this remark, I pointed out firstly that despite the autobiographical thrust of the work it was the protagonist Hugh, and not I, who had made the comment, and secondly that the event described had taken place around fifteen years before the book was written, so the discussion reported was perforce a reconstruction. At this the reader reacted as if I had just committed perjury, exclaiming ‘But it’s in inverted commas!’

Notwithstanding the naivety of this reaction it afforded considerable food for thought, confirming that inverted commas are a powerful presence, though of course direct speech may be signalled by other conventions of layout, such as dashes, indenting with new line etc. (Thompson 1996: 512). The tradition of assuming across the board that quotations are verbatim reports of original utterances resisted relatively unchallenged until recent times (for discussion see Clark and Gerrig 1990: 795), but has now been stigmatised by some as a “reproductive fallacy” (Sternberg 1981: 237). It is important to underline, however, that the verbatim assumption is register- and genre-dependent: it is more cogent when the register is for instance scientific, academic or legal (Thompson 1996: 512), but much weaker, for example, in spontaneous conversation (Tannen 2007: 112). Fiction is an interesting case, because any direct speech in fiction, like the rest of the work, is non-factual anyway, but direct speech is used nonetheless in order to present sequences of oral speech as original utterances, or better in order to make a faithfulness claim which, as pointed out by Semino and Short (2004:12-13) “brings with it associated effects of vividness and dramatization”, being more “foregrounded, vivid and immediate

The success of this strategy lies in the simultaneity of the subtitles with Jamie’s proposal in Portuguese.

as compared with an IS [indirect speech] version”. Similarly, Thompson (1996: 512) cites two main functions of direct quotations in written English: the first is to indicate a higher degree of faithfulness to an original language event, and the second is to present the reported language event more vividly by simulating the original utterance.

This also applies to the genre of autobiography, and therefore to the main works analysed in this paper inasmuch as they have a predominantly autobiographical flavour – the name of the author almost always coincides with the name of the first-person narrator (in Mawer’s *A Place in Italy* the narrator-protagonist remains unnamed). At the same time it seems important to make some sort of distinction between on the one hand the use of direct speech in fiction and on the other the use of direct speech in autobiographical or semi-autobiographical works, because readers of the latter may well work on the verbatim assumption, not only interpreting the events described as having actually occurred but also construing the speech events reported as having actually been produced, thus decodifying direct speech as word-for-word representation.

The drawback of this type of decodification in the works considered here is that in so many instances the speech reported in inverted commas must have originally taken place in Italian, in which case the word-for-word interpretation, i.e., that the author replicates exactly what was uttered, is automatically excluded. The reader who had asked about “There she blows” had taken the passage in question to be the faithful *translation* of an oral exchange, and it is here that some ambiguity arises. To provide an idea of this ambiguity I shall focus firstly on Veronica Di Grigoli’s *The Dangerously Truthful Diary* and then remark on other works.

3.1.1 Direct speech in *The Dangerously Truthful Diary*

At the beginning of this entertaining book we are informed – as mentioned above – that the Italian of the English protagonist Veronica is “terribly rusty” (Ch.1), and that when she visits relatives in Sicily she carries a dictionary around with her in case she gets lexically stuck. This implies that she previously had knowledge of Italian before going to Sicily, though it is not explained how or to what degree she acquired it; rapid mention is made of previous experiences in the north of Italy but nothing more. However, once she gets together with her future husband Valentino, who speaks hardly any English, Veronica’s Italian at once appears to improve exponentially. Two days after they meet – and two days after she had been reaching for her dictionary – she is reported as saying to him (Ch.3) “I love the dim candle lighting and the cool smell of dampness”, and three weeks later she suggests to a local builder (Ch.4): “There’s a lintel and you could take out this piece of wall”. During the same meeting her powers of comprehension are nothing short of prodigious when Valentino says:

I don't want the builders trying to rectify anything related to horizontal surfaces ... I went round the house with that piece of piping you used and everything slopes downwards away from the drainage holes. I asked one of the builders to lend me his spirit level and, just to test him, I asked him to show me how it works. He explained that the bubble 'sinks down to the bottom' so you have to get that angled towards the place you want the water to drain to.

Veronica – who is not a builder or architect by trade – far from looking bewildered or reaching for her dictionary, replies with the question: “Did you teach him how spirit levels work?”. Then in Chapter 8, just a few months on, Veronica gives Valentino a complex explanation about a classical temple: “Next, they had to get the base and columns perfectly perpendicular. They used plumb lines ... They used string to measure distances, and they used shadows to work out angles and lengths on the ground.”

One reading of this is that Veronica's command of Italian seems to progress astonishingly within a very short time. However, as suggested above, there is the risk of taking translated direct speech too literally. It could be argued that the reported conversations are not to be read as translations of precisely what was said, but as reconstructions: that in reality Veronica's Italian has not improved implausibly, and that the inverted commas are no more than a rhetorical device designed to lighten the narration and render it more vivid.

3.1.2 *Direct speech in other works*

The same issue applies to many of the other works studied here, with any number of dialogues which must have originally been conducted in Italian reported in inverted commas. Hugh's verbal exchanges in *Crossing the Cultural Divide* – most of them originally in Italian – are a feast of inverted commas, while Ian in *Pan' e pomodor* has by his own admission a poor command of Italian but at one point asks the local men renovating his house (chapter entitled ‘Spring of surprises’): “What about the thickness of the walls? Does that count as volume? What about the vaults and the ceiling space? Can we deduct some volume there?” Further, Ian understands the technical reply to these questions apparently without effort:

If we put the profile of the land behind the house against the cross-section, then technically part of the existing structure is underground ... if we calculate the volume that is technically underground, then maybe we could deduct it from the overall volume and provide space for the extensions.

Chris in *Head over Heel*, whose deficiencies in Italian are stressed on a number of occasions, is stopped in Puglia by two police officers with whom he has an animated discussion in Italian (we know it is in Italian because the narrative

indicates this, though in any case it is extremely unlikely that police officers in Puglia would speak English so fluently). I include only the protagonist's side of the argument:

Don't tell me you're going to fine me because this is the wrong sort of road to have my headlights on? [...] This fucking country is an absolute fucking mess ... [A crow caws] And the crow agrees with me. [...] I said I won't allow you to fine me for driving with my lights on just because I'm on the wrong sort of road [...] By telling you that the report I saw on the news said the lights must be on at all times on all roads. It didn't say anything about the type of road [...] They weren't on high beam so what can you do about it? Are you going to book me because the stereo was too loud as well? [...] What a backward system. A million laws only nobody tells the police what they are (pp.197-198).

Considering that when we react furiously to something we may struggle to articulate our thoughts even in our native language, the protagonist's linguistic performance in Italian is apparently superlative.

In passing it should be noted that inverted commas can also give the impression that *Italians* know *English* rather too well. In *A Zany Slice of Italy* (Ch.12) the elderly peasant Salvatore, who as far as we know speaks no English, "slowly shuffles behind us, the whole time muttering and shaking his head and his fist. I occasionally make out the words 'bloody hell!'"

It is perhaps the case, then, that – given their frequency – we should not give too literal a reading to inverted commas, that the fact that they are reported in perfect English should not induce us to believe that they are originally uttered in perfect Italian.

Nevertheless, a nagging element of ambivalence remains. Another reader of *Crossing the Cultural Divide* once objected to the improbability of the protagonist making all sorts of Italian-language gaffes during the first part of the book and then miraculously producing perfect Italian during the second part, yet during that second part all the protagonist's Italian conversations are reported in English and no appraisal of his Italian is offered by the narrator. Further, it seems significant that certain other authors of this genre occupy the other end of the spectrum as far as direct speech is concerned, in that they give the impression of wishing to keep it to a minimum, especially that of the protagonist(s). In *A Zany Slice of Italy*, *Scratching the Toe of Italy*, *An Italian Home*, *Chickens Eat Pasta* and *A Small Place in Italy* the verbal contributions of the protagonists in what was originally Italian are rarely reported directly (if present at all they normally take the form of brief interrogatives), but the contributions of (i) the Italian characters and (ii) the protagonists when they really are speaking English, are freely placed within inverted commas. For example the protagonist Eric in *A Small Place in Italy*

is an Englishman with limited Italian, while his wife Wanda is Slovenian but “had spent most of her formative years in Italy” (Ch.10). They communicate in English, and inverted commas are used liberally to convey their conversations. What is conspicuous, however, is that Eric is never quoted directly when the language of his conversations must have been Italian, notwithstanding the fact there would have been ample opportunity to do so since he freely mixes with the local people – at one point a chapter is devoted to his two-day hike across the mountains with a couple of local men, but no direct speech is reported.

A further strategy is simply to avoid adopting direct speech. In *Italian Neighbours* it is used sparingly, even though more or less direct interchanges are very occasionally included without inverted commas. Take for example an exchange between the narrator and the local policeman, who is confused as to why application for residency doesn’t exist in the UK (chapter entitled ‘Residenza’):

How was it possible, he asked, for us not to have residency?
 We didn’t.
 So what do you do? When you move.
 You move, I said.
 And the registration plates on the car?
 You leave them as they are.
 And your identity card?
 There are no identity cards.
 And the doctor?
 You go and register at the nearest doctor’s office.

The use of the past tense in the opening comments of this exchange (How was it possible ... We didn’t) is already a step away from direct speech, but in any case the example is exceptional in that throughout the book the protagonist Tim is hardly ever assigned any sort of direct interchange. In *Extra Virgin*, on the other hand, direct exchanges are certainly present but inverted commas are again conspicuous by their absence. The author makes frequent use of ‘we say’, ‘we suppose’ etc. (the reference is to the narrator and her sister) to signpost their conversational exchanges with the locals:

You’re not going to replant the place with something else, then? he asks.
 Of course not, we say, mystified. [...]
 What about your husbands, he asks, after a longish pause. Do they have a lot of land? Are they farmers? Where are they?
 Nowhere, we say, we aren’t married. [...]
 What do people grow in your country, then? he asks.
 Well, we say, potatoes we suppose. (Ch.5)

This absence of inverted commas is not uncommon when reporting direct speech in literature (Thompson 1996: 512) and one should think twice before reading too much into it, but overall it would seem that in most of the works under the microscope in this paper there is a certain reluctance to adopt direct speech in order to report the originally Italian utterances of the protagonists.

4. Polylingual discourse through a monolingual medium

The main works examined in this paper thus show a tendency to avoid attributing direct speech to the protagonists, particularly when the original language of the conversational exchange is Italian. As suggested above, this could be because authors wish to avoid giving the impression that they themselves, *qua* protagonists, speak Italian effortlessly, or perhaps there is simply a certain reticence to engage with the Italian of the protagonists at all, the logic being perhaps that *in primis* these books are about Italy rather than about the protagonists, whose principal function is that of a conduit or observation platform. Also central, however, is the problem of representing bilingual or polylingual discourse through a medium which is usually monolingual.

Sternberg (1981: 223-226) identifies three main procedures adopted in literary works in order to circumvent this problem: (i) referential restriction, (ii) vehicular matching and (iii) the homogenising convention. Referential restriction “consists in confining the scope of the represented world to the limits of a single, linguistically uniform community whose speech patterns correspond to those of the implied audience” (223), for example the novels of Jane Austen, whereas vehicular matching, “far from avoiding linguistic diversity or conflict, accepts them as a matter of course [...] and sometimes deliberately seeks them out” (*ibid.*), for example in George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*. The homogenising convention “retains the freedom of reference while dismissing the resultant variations in the language presumably spoken by the characters as an irrelevant, if not distracting, representational factor” (224), for example Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which the Roman Antony and the Egyptian Cleopatra converse effortlessly.

The expatriate works discussed in this paper feature some vehicular matching, in that Italian lexis and even dialectal words are included sporadically. As Clark and Gerrig (1990: 784), underline “when authors choose the language for a quotation, they must accommodate to their own and their audience’s abilities [...] they leave words untranslated when it serves a purpose”. However, it is clear that the most relevant of Sternberg’s three categories to expat accounts is the homogenising convention. It is very widespread, and most of the time works well enough, but it comes with a heavy realistic price, because its monolingual vehicle is artificially imposed upon a heterolingual scenario. In both direct and indirect discourse “the omission of an overt notice makes it impossible to determine in

which of the possible languages a certain language is constructed” (Sternberg 1981: 232).

5. Stancing between native and non-native speakers

This omission of overt notice produces a linguistic fog which conceals the potential complexity of language interplay for people who choose to move to a new country and tackle a foreign language. One could of course take the view that the original language of communication is unimportant – the vehicle used by the authors is English and no further questions need to be asked, rather like when in old English-language war films German officers speak to each other in English even where there is nobody else present, or when the American pope in Paolo Sorrentino’s *The Young Pope* (2016) has conversational exchanges exclusively in English with everybody he meets in Rome – cardinals, bishops, nuns, assistants, local people and even Roman primary school students. It can seem artificial but ultimately it may not matter, the vehicle of the film / series is English and that is all we need to know.

Personally, I am not convinced by this argument. A factor which contributes to the confidence and brilliance of the protagonist in *The Young Pope* is the fact that he (played by the actor Jude Law) is speaking his native language while most of the other characters are struggling with their grammar and pronunciation (a detail which of course disappears in the dubbing into Italian and presumably into other languages too), but it is of course a false representation because in reality almost all of the exchanges of the pope in the Vatican would be in Italian, and thus it is the non-Italian pope who should be struggling. The native / non-native question contributes to the stancing of any conversation between people of different languages, and is particularly crucial when you take up residence in a land with a native language different from your own, affecting your relationships with others and ultimately perhaps affecting your personality. For example, unless you are particularly feisty you will tend to speak much less than the locals in your conversations with them, you may concede arguments with which you do not entirely agree simply because you are not in possession of the linguistic weapons with which to put up a fight, and even when you become reasonably proficient you will learn to avoid criticising the people and mores of your adopted country. It’s a lesson in humility. As Wright points out in *An Italian Home* (Ch.2): “Somebody who wishes to live in a foreign country and is a bit overfull of pride, and does not speak the language [...] will soon discover that his ego will take an awful battering [...] permanently living abroad can severely rock his confidence.”

Of the works examined here the only one to focus earnestly on how the native/non-native disparity can affect one’s relationship with Italians is Allsop’s *Scratching the Toe of Calabria*. In the chapter entitled ‘Living in a foreign language’

the protagonist Niall describes how the locals, though well-disposed to him and his wife – a retired English couple with barely any Italian – “were treating us a bit like children, but, hey, linguistically we *were* children”, and his most stimulating observation in this respect concerns the way in which his linguistic performance is influenced by how judgemental people are of his Italian (*ibid*):

It was something to do with whether or not I sensed, rightly or wrongly, that people were being judgemental about to what extent I was butchering their beautiful language; whether or not I observed that cringe, that wrinkling of the nose, that screwing up of the eyes, real or imagined, when I started to speak.

In one or two of the works examined there are even suggestions of the notion that the linguistically-challenged foreigner is handicapped. In *An Italian Home* (Ch.2) several locals in a village on Lake Como are puzzled as to why Paul’s wife Nicola, “an intelligent, elegant woman” proficient in Italian, took it into her head to hitch up with someone who is as linguistically hobbled in Italian as Paul, the subtext of this being that while Nicola is normal, her husband is a simpleton. In *Extra Virgin* the protagonist finds it refreshing to talk to small Italian children because she does not feel as “linguistically and culturally handicapped” (p. 229) as when she converses with adults.

As mentioned above, it is surprising how few references there are to this important psychological dynamic experienced by people who choose to live abroad and to take on a foreign language. On the contrary, the reporting of Italian conversations in English can provoke a substantial shift in the stancing, in the axis of power. Like *The Young Pope*, it is all too easy for the English-speaking protagonist to be assigned the upper hand, to be allocated a position of superiority. We have already seen an instance of this in 3.1.2 above from *Head over Heel*, where Chris defeats his Italian interlocutor’s arguments rather too confidently, but let us now consider a more telling example.

5.1 *Axis of power*

In James Hamilton-Paterson’s *Cooking with Fernet Branca*, the English protagonist and first-person narrator Gerald Samper is a writer who lives alone in the mountains not far from Viareggio. As stressed in the introduction to this paper, its clearly fictional status sits uneasily among almost all the other books examined in this article, but an example it provides is germane to the arguments discussed here. In the course of the book Samper almost always speaks English, either with friends from the UK or with other non-Italians. His contacts with local Italians are few and far between, he is often away from Italy on his travels, he does not have Italian origins, he was brought up in England, and we are not told of any studies he has undertaken in the Italian language. This notwithstanding, his

Italian comes across as flawless. In Chapter 36 Samper has a chance meeting with Benedetti, the estate agent – who as far as we know speaks no English – through whom the protagonist had bought his house the year before. After some pleasantries the protagonist makes a polite rebuke:

Allow me to observe, ingegnere, that in future you could be a lot more scrupulous about what you say when trying to induce someone to buy one of your houses. Especially a foreigner. We may be a minority but I think you will find that as a community we are not entirely without significance.

The protagonist goes on to identify the main source of his irritation, namely a noisy neighbour who has just moved in, at which point the estate agent protests that he cannot be expected to vouch for the behaviour of future neighbours. Samper's rejoinder is as follows:

True ... but you did give me verbal assurances whose validity a gentleman like yourself will readily recognise as scarcely less binding. At this late stage, though, I can't see how reparations can easily be made, can you? Things are as they regrettably are. I merely thought I would inform you that Le Roccie is very far from being the nexus of bucolic harmony you painted it to be last year (*ibid*).

The fact that the narrative vehicle of this conversation is English contributes to the superior, grandiloquent effect of the protagonist's speech, to the humour of the situation and to the fact that he effectively wipes the floor with his Italian interlocutor. The protagonist's lexical range and verbal dexterity in what must have been Italian (though in Sternberg's terms there is no overt notice of which language is being adopted), considering that elsewhere in the book he hardly ever opens his mouth in the language, are as enviable as they are miraculous.

6. Are readers sensitive to language code?

I have suggested that the use of direct speech in these works risks projecting a false dynamic if it is assigned regularly to native English-speaking protagonists in dialogues which were originally in Italian – especially if the language is verbose – since it may give the impression that such characters are fluent in Italian and thus encounter no difficulties when they speak it, whether linguistic or psychological. It has also been pointed out that most authors – perhaps in part for this reason – keep to a minimum the direct speech of native English-speaking protagonists in 'Italian' dialogues, though dialogues that really do take place in English are not bound in this way. Other authors (above all Di Grigoli, Hamilton-Paterson,

Harrison, Stewart), on the other hand, do not seem overly concerned about this question, freely attributing direct speech to protagonists, whatever the situation or the original language, though it is surely significant that two of these works (Hamilton-Paterson, Stewart) have fictional protagonists.

A question that arises at this point is to what degree readers are conscious of all this. My conjecture is that they are barely aware of it, and therefore very unlikely to be disturbed by it, especially as in any case it is often unclear in the narratives which is the original language of the conversational exchange. In *A Zany Slice of Italy*, for instance, it is not always transparent in which language the protagonist's husband David, brought up in Canada of Italian parents, converses with his parents when they all meet in Italy, while in *Pan' e pomodor* it is unclear which language Ian speaks with his father-in-law. This kind of language ambivalence occurs most of all when it is a couple that moves to Italy, one of whom speaks Italian and one of whom is learning: David and Ivanka in *A Zany Slice of Italy*, Nicola and Paul in *An Italian Home*, Ian and M. in *Pan' e pomodor*, the protagonist and C. in *A Place in Italy*. In such cases one imagines that there would be a fair amount of code-switching which is then generalised into English in the narrative.

Indeed perhaps the only moment in which readers pause to reflect on the original language of communication in dialogues – aside from when (rarely) there is a language pointer in the narration – is when there are Italian characters reported abundantly in idiomatic English direct speech but then one of these characters makes a mistake (usually of grammar or pronunciation), for example the landlord in *A Place in Italy* (Ch.2) who says “Then the little house is not enough grand”; Ercolino in *Chickens Eat Pasta* (Ch.2), who describes the protagonist Clare as a “pain in the harse”; Daniela in *Head over Heel* (p.32), who comments “My father want to restore it”. The effect of this is sometimes abrupt – indeed at times one's initial reaction is to suspect a typo – because very often the reader has long forgotten that the Italian character in question really is speaking English.

Aside from this, it seems legitimate to suppose that readers would not concern themselves with questions of code at all, and that they would not deem it incongruous that much of what must have been said in Italian or in dialect is represented by English direct speech. And authors of this genre are probably right not to raise language questions excessively: discussions of language obstacles and too much Italian lexis interspersed in the narrative may jeopardise the smooth running of the story, inasmuch as the conveying of mistakes or difficulties in Italian is laborious for readers not familiar with the language. With this in mind it is surprising – and refreshing – that for example *Pan' e pomodor* (in particular the chapter entitled ‘Vicaio – the dialect’) dedicates so much attention to the local dialect.

Ultimately it is perhaps only foreign language operators (teachers, translators, mediators) such as myself who would be concerned about the original

interchange and interaction of English and Italian in these books. Yet the narrative is affected by such questions, as will be discussed in the following section.

7. Seductive representations of Italy

In *Head over Heel* (p.154) there is a brief interlude in the narrative offering observations concerning the dreamy, seductive representations of Italy in films and travel writing (representations sometimes overstated by synopses published on the web: Parks' *Italian Neighbours*, for example, is simplistically described on Amazon as a 'deliciously seductive account ... for anyone who has ever dreamed about Italy'). Frances Meyes' *Under the Tuscan Sun* is sometimes cited in this respect, and this paper began with a reference to Eric Newby's *A Small Place in Italy*, in which the chapter focusing on a highly disagreeable circumstance concerning rights of way together with a consequent legal battle appears to have been included only out of a sense of authorial duty, and indeed seems somewhat out of place amid the amusing anecdotal tone of the rest of the book.

What is striking about the works analysed in this paper is that although they certainly do engage with less favourable aspects of residing in Italy (Harrison himself observes candidly that "Only those who stick around [in Italy] discover that the 'sweet life' can turn sour" (p.155)), most of them end up projecting all the same the oneiric image of expat life in Italy referred to by Harrison. In my view this paradox stems largely from the fact that the foreign language learning process and implications are seldom discussed. It is very rare that readers are properly apprised of the level of sweat, toil and frustration involved in learning a new language as an adult, and they remain almost completely unaware of the issue of stance – how a poor command of a language can force you to take a back seat, to yield ground and generally to behave differently, or can result in you not being taken as seriously as you would wish. In the 1995 film *A Walk in the Clouds* (Alfonso Arau) the Mexican patriarch admonishes a young American whom he suspects is trying to pull the wool over his eyes: "I may *speak* with an accent, but I don't *think* with an accent", but this inescapable part of the expatriate experience in Italy is scarcely mentioned.

In almost all cases the protagonists are either allotted a plethora of direct speech in their conversations in Italian, perhaps giving the impression of effortless fluency, or they are barely allotted direct speech at all, a strategy which, aside from creating an image of the protagonist as a curiously mute spectator, once again gives no signals as to the language struggle that the protagonist inevitably experiences, conveying the idea that language obstacles are absent. There may be sound editorial reasons for these strategies, but the upshot is that a large slice of the Italian experience of these expatriates is simply omitted, with the result that the representation of their autobiographical experiences is sanitised

and ultimately misleading.

8. The dominance of English

The picture which emerges is that language problems in Italian – and all the angst that so often accompanies them – are generally suppressed in favour of free-flowing narrative. This is in contrast with Italian characters' mistakes in English, which are much easier to report 'live' (*Head over Heel*: "I go to buy one [a water melon], should I?" (p.18), "It drivred my father crazy" (p.24), *Crossing the Cultural Divide*: "Are you feeling yourself well?" (p.41)) and which as a consequence become more conspicuous than the protagonists' errors in Italian. The outcome of this is a paradoxical reversal of roles: it is the protagonist who is the outsider, yet within the framework of the narrative it is frequently the Italian characters who are projected as the foreigners. On top of this, there is something dismissive about the recurrence with which Italian words in the various books – inserted in the narrative more often than not simply to give a playful touch of the exotic, a technique known in studies on tourist texts as 'linguaging' (see Cappelli 2008) – have grammar mistakes or are misspelt (*vigile urbane, la patenta, il scudetto, uno momento, strada provinciale, passeggiata, soprano,me, Ferragosta, porka miseria, poco roba, inconsciente*), whereas in English there are scarcely any typos at all. English, it seems, is ultimately all that matters, while Italian is way down on the list of priorities.

9. Direct discourse and target-language dominance. Is this a translational question?

According to Clark and Gerrig (1990: 798-799), "narrators rarely intend us to be able to reconstruct the originals verbatim. No matter how we view translated quotations, it is sheer philosophical imperialism to rule them out as unacceptable or incorrect reports".

Whether it is legitimate to speak of translated quotations in the current context is a moot point. It could be argued that the issues discussed in this article do not fall within the remit of translation at all, since quotations in English of what was originally Italian dialogue might be more accurately construed as reconstructions rather than translations. Nevertheless, it is hard to dispute the idea that some sort of conversion from Language A to Language B is taking place, and for this reason it may be of benefit to turn to Translation Studies for assistance.

The most obvious insight from TS is that of target-language orientation, whereby the smooth flow of the target language is paramount, prevailing over the mechanisms and dynamics of the source language. In House's terms (1977),

translations of this nature are covert, i.e., a filter has been applied, assigning to them the status of an original source text in the target language. As Hatim (2009: 42) puts it:

Covert translation is a mode of text transfer in which the translator seeks to produce a target text that is as immediately relevant for the target reader as the source text is for the source language addressee. Functional equivalence is the goal, and anything which betrays the origin of the translated text is carefully concealed.

It does not seem unreasonable to apply the notion of target orientation to the books analysed in this paper. Even if we are not dealing with translation *stricto sensu*, and even though there is no specific target culture, there is however a target language – in this case English – inasmuch as English is the narrative’s vehicle of communication and thus the language that the target readership will engage with. The approach in these works is such that, as the narrative progresses, the reader loses sight of the fact that most of these writers arrive in Italy with barely any Italian at all, and their efforts to learn Italian are all but eliminated in the name of a smooth narrative flow. In Venuti’s (1995) terms, there is a domestication of the foreign scenario which hampers engagement with cultural difference because that scenario is “pressed into homely moulds” (Hermans 2009: 98). Notwithstanding sporadic references to moments of incomprehension, the conspicuously target orientation of these works means that Annie in *Extra Virgin* understands the local parlance rather too easily for a beginner, Chris in *Head over Heel* and Hugh in the second part of *Crossing the Cultural Divide* come across as too self-assured in Italian, Veronica in *The Dangerously Truthful Diary* picks up technical jargon with alarming speed, Tim in *Italian Neighbours* has barely any language-related difficulties at all, and Gerry in *Cooking with Fernet Branca* makes mincemeat of his Italian interlocutor in Italian. We are light years away from the ego-battering, confidence-rocking expat experience – see Section 5 above – described by Wright in *An Italian Home*.

10. Conclusions

It goes without saying that in their writings authors are free to include or omit whatever they wish, but since almost all the books examined here are presented as autobiographical, with the author and the first-person narrator sharing the same name, one is entitled to assume that these are works of non-fiction, and that the respective authors’ intention is to provide a true and complete account of their experience of living in Italy. Now while there is no reason to believe that what we read is not true, there may be reason to believe that what we read is not complete. Some authors leave the reader with the impression that learning a

language from scratch is not a significant obstacle when taking up residence in a foreign land, and most authors omit altogether the recurrent issue of how Italians react to foreigners, particularly to foreigners who are mangling their native tongue, and the psychological repercussions that their reactions can provoke. The way and the extent to which inverted commas are adopted is a big factor here, steamrolling over the subtleties of communication between speakers of different languages and creating a linguistic fog, with the reader frequently unaware of which is the original language of the dialogue.

There are perhaps two main reasons for this linguistic fog. The first is that most of the authors considered put pen to paper a long time after they first settled in Italy, with the result that, having gradually become proficient in Italian, they have simply forgotten what it was really like to be a hapless, language-strapped outsider. Not that such issues ever disappear altogether when one lives abroad: a foreigner in Italy will always be a foreigner in Italy (a former colleague of mine from London returned to the UK after twenty years of living in Verona, and when I asked him if he had grown weary of Italy, he replied not at all, he had simply grown weary of being a foreigner), regardless of acquired nationality, but I know from experience that one's memories of early language-related complications gradually fade.

The second reason connects with marketing: despite occasional exceptions, writers want their work to be read, to be enjoyed, and to be successful. However much expatriate writers purport to produce frank, unvarnished and uncut accounts of their life in Italy, the moment they begin to discuss their difficulties in a language with which the target reader is not familiar, and the moment they begin to describe the subtle and sometimes strained feelings that arise between natives and foreigners as a result of those difficulties, is the moment that they will conflict with the expectations and desires of their readers, most of whom have bought into the rhapsody of the Italian dream and crave more of the same.

All this falls within the mighty task of representing polylingual discourse within a monolingual medium. Of the strategies suggested by Sternberg (1981), the homogenising convention – the favoured strategy in the expatriate works examined – is the most target language oriented, but despite its popularity it is a technique which entails the building of an invisible language barrier, detaching the reader from the real dynamics of events unfolding on the other side of the great language divide.

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