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The support provided by SIAE, Italian Society of Authors and Publishers  
to the “Convegno Internazionale Tradurre Voci, Tradurre Voci Locali”  
has assisted with the publication of this volume.

# **TRANSLATING VOICES TRANSLATING REGIONS**

*Edited by*

**Nigel Armstrong  
Federico M. Federici**



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ARACNE editrice S.r.l.

[www.aracneeditrice.it](http://www.aracneeditrice.it)  
[info@aracneeditrice.it](mailto:info@aracneeditrice.it)

via Raffaele Garofalo, 133 A/B  
00173 Roma  
(06) 93781065

ISBN 88-548-0619-6

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I<sup>st</sup> edition: June 2006  
I<sup>st</sup> updated reprint: September 2006

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## Acknowledgements

We owe a debt of gratitude to the generosity of the members of the editorial board, who helped us in the difficult process of selecting among many valuable contributions. Their comments and suggestions have greatly improved the chapters published here, and helped both the editors and the contributors to engage in mutually stimulating dialogue.

We are grateful for the initial support to the *Translating Voices* project given by the School of Modern Languages and Cultures of the University of Leeds. We are very happy to thank Gianfranco Formichetti, Director of the Culture and Leisure Department of Rieti City Council, who played a fundamental role in ensuring the smooth running of the conference. Not only was he the sole institutional representative, but also an active sponsor of the event. A subvention from the SIAE (Società Italiana degli Autori ed Editori, Italian Association of Authors and Publishers) has partially funded the publication of this volume; the interest in the Rieti conference shown by this organisation testifies to the efforts that translators' guilds and authors are making towards the promotion of a better understanding of translation issues. The Association for the Studies of Modern and Contemporary France supported the francophone strand of the conference.

Special thanks are due to Theresa Oliver, who read and commented upon many drafts with tireless energy and enthusiasm.



## Introduction

The edited papers selected for this volume were presented at an international conference entitled ‘Translating Voices, Translating Regions’ held in Rieti, Italy in September 2005. The aims of the conference were to explore the question of practices and theories in the translation of marginal voices, not only in traditional literature, but also in audio-visual translation in general and film dubbing in particular, a process which is particularly strong in the French and Italian traditions of the film industry.

The term ‘marginal voices’ can usefully be considered in terms of the linguistic literature on dialectology. In their standard textbook, Chambers and Trudgill (1998: 3) discuss the difficulties inherent in distinguishing in an objective way between languages and dialects, pointing out that both terms are politically loaded. Indeed, in his other writings Trudgill often uses the latter term in a counter-intuitive way, referring for example to the ‘standard dialect of English’, in everyday language more or less a contradiction in terms. It is not uncommonly the case that two ‘languages’ have a high degree of mutual intelligibility – Norwegian and Swedish are often cited as examples. No one would however wish to describe these languages as ‘dialects’; the question then arises, dialects of what language? A language and its dialects are usually mutual intelligible to a high degree, and the essential relation between them is obviously one of dominance; in the jocular formulation sometimes used in linguistics, ‘a language is a dialect with an army and a navy’. The neutral term ‘variety’ is often preferred in specialist discussions in the literature.

A precise definition of the term ‘standard language’ brings with it problems of its own. Trudgill (2002: 162), perhaps a little controversially, proposes the following sequences which he asserts are all examples of ‘standard English’:

Father was exceedingly fatigued subsequent to his extensive peregrination

Dad was very tired after his lengthy journey

The old man was bloody knackered after his long trip

If we assume that these sentences mean more or less the same thing, then the dimension along which they vary is clearly that of *style*. Trudgill argues that although the third sentence is informal, it is not ‘non-standard’ because it is capable of being uttered, or certainly understood, by any native speaker of UK English. In this argument, a standard

language is not therefore a style of language, but a variety having a national distribution; in a formulation currently often used, it is the non-localised language. Trudgill suggests therefore that the dominant variety should be styled ‘Standard English’ with capitals, on the analogy of ‘Yorkshire English’, etc. In any relevant linguistic analysis, including one which relates to translation, we need therefore to distinguish clearly between the social and stylistic distribution of a stretch of language.

It is instructive to contrast the constructed sentences cited above with the following (genuine) example taken from J. Milroy (1992: 33), which involves a serious misunderstanding on the part of speakers of Standard and Hibernian English:

- A:       How long are yous here?  
 B:       Oh, we’re staying till next week.  
           (silence of about two seconds)  
 C:       We’ve been here since Tuesday.  
 A:       Ah well, yous are here a while then.

Speaker A, a Hiberno-English speaker, has a non-standard temporal system which uses the present tense where Standard English has the present perfect: ‘How long have you been here?’. Speaker B misinterprets A’s first utterance as meaning: ‘How long are you / will you be here (for)?’, and confusion prevails until C repairs the situation. Milroy (p. 34) states that “there is no doubt that [communicative] breakdowns arising from the different [grammatical] structures of divergent dialects are quite common” – note again the ideologically committed use of ‘dialect’ rather than ‘language’. Certainly this example shows the quite striking extent to which ‘English’ can vary across speech communities, and what relatively deep structural levels this variation can pervade, as opposed to the relatively superficial level of vocabulary differing across communities that first comes to mind.

This second example shows therefore a variety of English that can be labelled ‘non-standard’ in the definition just given, since it has a restricted distribution, at least from the dominating viewpoint of UK English. The optic that sees a language variety as non-standard is implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) normative and disprizing; J. and L. Milroy (1991) have the phrase ‘the ideology of the standard’ to refer to the attitude, widespread among the dominating and the dominated, that represents the standard as the only genuine language and all other varieties as imperfect approximations to it. Thus in the Hiberno-English example, speaker A has ‘yous’ with second-person plural reference. This

form is arguably more efficient than the standard pronoun, because it contains the *-s* inflection which productively conveys plural information in English and is therefore capable of resolving ambiguity by distinguishing between ‘you’ and ‘yous’. But the ideology of the standard essentially dictates that a language variety that has failed to impose itself socially must also fail linguistically, on grounds of logic, beauty, clarity, suitability to convey abstraction, etc.

How do these considerations relate to translation? The foregoing distributional argument would assume that translation between two standard languages is less fraught with difficulty, and we can perhaps suggest that this is true in very broad terms indeed. Exceptions are of course not far to seek; wherever a standard language explicitly encodes social meaning in a way that is latent in the language of translation, then difficulties arise. An obvious example, and one often cited, is the so-called ‘T/V’ or dual-pronoun system structurally inherent in French, Italian and many other languages. Clearly a French sequence like: *on se tutoie, d’accord?* can have no literal translation in English. Difficulties arise here even though the social coding referred to is distributed across the entire speech community, and is hence part of ‘Standard French’. More precisely, the difficulty arises because Standard English no longer has the T/V alternation. So, although the alternation still persists in a few out-of-the-way places, an attempt by a translator to render this French sequence by ‘let’s use “thou” to each other, shall we?’, even if understood at all by a reader, will carry totally unsuitable associations – if anything, the social message will be archaic or rural, in other words marginal.

A further example shows a different aspect of social encoding in French. The following example is designed to show that the linguistic and cultural aspects of translation issues can be indissociable. Grammatical variation is a salient feature of French, in the sense of being shared by all speakers, to an extent that seems less noticeable in English. So for instance, in informal French (but Standard French, in Trudgill’s definition) speakers have the option between *quelle* and *quoi* as question words in sequences of the following type.

*tu es de quelle origine? ~ tu es d’origine quoi?*

The informal alternant of the pair shown above, *tu es d’origine quoi?*, is also untranslatable into English in a literal way, because the interrogative system of English has little social variation in it. An attempt to render into English the informal nature of *tu es d’origine quoi?* would probably

have to use resources from a linguistic level other than syntax.

We saw above that the dual-pronoun system structurally inherent in Standard French fails to map on to Standard English, because this system is now marginal in the latter language. Difficulties of this kind, though severe, pale into insignificance when compared with the subject of this book, the translation of regional and marginal language. Perhaps the principal difficulty attending any attempt to map marginal ST to marginal TT is the close, indeed indissociable link between localised language and localised and distinctive social features. If the link is indissociable it is often because highly localised social features are structurally present in the language which encodes them. Regional or non-standard language is therefore highly resistant to what one might call 'relocalisation', because translation necessarily uses linguistic features which by definition have to refer to a more or less (usually more) approximate cultural equivalent. We can express this concept more clearly by stating its opposite: the standard language of a Western liberal democracy, referring to a relatively uniform transnational culture, transcends boundaries, through what is sometimes referred to as 'glocalisation', in a way that a local or regional variety does not, cannot do, and would not wish to. This is the challenge for translation addressed in this book.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the study of translation has equipped itself in theory and method sufficiently to claim the status of a scholarly discipline in its own right. There exist still however substantial fields of research and theoretical reflection that can fruitfully and systematically contribute to the study of translation, not least in the rendering of regional voices. Regionalised languages, marginal voices, dialects and accents have in recent decades and at different levels increasingly informed many manifestations of cultural practice. Popular culture, a theme frequently touched on in this book, uses non-standard or marginal language almost by definition. Questions to do with a code of practice and a closer collaboration between theorists and practitioners have also become pressing in the context of the need for a common front of progress in the theory of the discipline and in its practical outcomes.

Despite having gained a certain degree of autonomy, translation studies or theory remains nevertheless a multi-disciplinary area, drawing most notably on the insights of linguistics, literary theory, and (increasingly) information technology. The organisers of the Rieti conference welcomed proposals that explored three broad thematic areas: dubbing and dialect; regionalised voices in translation; and the

languages of minorities and their translation. The synergies between the multi-disciplinary nature of translation studies and the three invited themes have produced a volume that, despite the diversity that in appearance characterises the collection, has nevertheless a certain degree of coherence.

As the table of contexts shows, the editors have regrouped these three themes, firstly into a broad distinction between two sections, the first dealing with audio-visual translation and the second with the more traditional strand of literary translation. Within this grouping, each section has a three-part structure that, as will be seen, groups together contributions that are thematically related. The first part of section one contains papers that have the common aim of considering language-external or social factors that have influenced choices in the translation of standard languages, while parts two and three have contributions grouped by language. The second section is dedicated to the translation of regionalised voices in written literature. Within this section contribution are grouped as follows: part one considers the works of individual writers as objects of translation from or into marginal language varieties, while part two and three have discussions, respectively of cross-cultural and cross-national obstacles to translation. The categorisation we have attempted is not rigid, and indeed many chapters touch on themes addressed in other sections, inevitably so in view of the fluid boundaries between the various disciplines upon which students of translation draw.

Because of the large number of papers in this volume, we have chosen, so as to economise space, not to summarise each contribution in this Introduction. We trust that the thematic grouping described above, and of course the chapter titles, will guide readers to the contributions they find of most interest.

Nigel Armstrong & Federico M. Federici

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## **Section I**

### **Regionalized Voices in Audiovisual Translation**