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Translating contemporary Hindi literature in Italy.**Academy, publishers, readers.**

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Abstract

This paper combines a general survey of the publishing field – viz. the publication of translations of Indian literary texts into Italian from languages other than English - with a particular example, focussing on Hindi. Indian writers in English command a ready market and are published by the most prestigious Italian publishers, even if translators are often ignorant of the cultural background of the works and the translated works may confirm stereotypes about India. By contrast, several eminent Hindi writers have been translated into Italian, but only by academic translators and publishers with little or no distribution. The main exception shows that the editor intervened with a heavy domestication of the text. This prompts a reflection about the power relation between academic translator and editor of a mainstream publisher, in the framework of Bourdieu's model of literary field.

Introduction

Publishing contemporary literary texts of South Asian origin has become quite common in Italy in the recent past and nowadays most of the translations are from texts in Indian English. Nevertheless, if we take a look at the translation of novels and poems from contemporary India in the 20th

century, we immediately notice that it is almost absent. The only author that has been consistently translated, both through direct and indirect translations, is Ravindranath Tagore. The collective catalogue of Italian libraries belonging to the National Library Service has more than 300 occurrences of Tagore's translations into Italian (including re-editions), of which 80 are direct translations from Bengali by Marino Rigon, a Christian missionary who has lived in Bangladesh for the past 40 years.

In her survey of the Italian publishing market from 1984 - when *Midnight's Children* was published in the Italian translation - to the end of the 20th century, as far as the publishing of writers in English is concerned, Silvia Albertazzi comes to the following conclusion:

Through their translation choices the Italian publishers present to the readers an India which is exquisitely Orientalist - according to Said's meaning: a fascinating world, mysterious and sometimes even perverted, suited to Westerners, an ideal India rather than the real India. The reader is offered only what s/he wants to find, what s/he expects: any narrative diverging from the common reader's expectations is rejected. No Indian graduated young man having to do with light drugs and masturbation in order to exorcise the ghost of a government stable job; no clerks, students and housewives living common lives in common urban condos; but also no middle class people wishing to become as rich as Americans; no politicized intellectuals; no metropolitan situations devoid of - implicit or explicit - exotic, mythological, religious references.

(Albertazzi 2002: 530 [translation mine])

Albertazzi highlights the fact that the Italian publishing market prefers

to present works by NRI authors, possibly because the migrant writers' vision of India, from far away, is much closer to the Western common readers' expectations than the vision of a resident writer. I would also add that scholars and professional translators specializing in English sometimes happen to know little of the cultural context in which Indian works are produced, which again leads to an India of the mind rather than to a real knowledge of India. Just to quote an example of the marketing policy of some Italian publishing houses, as the Italian translator and editor regretted, Sudhir Kakar's psychoanalytical essay *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality* has been translated in Italian as the equivalent of *Sex and Love in India* (Kakar 1990; Kakar 1995).

Starting from these findings, in this paper I have tried to investigate what is the situation as far as Hindi is concerned, and to find out what are the choices made by translators and publishers, whether a publishing policy exists and what kind of conditionings are imposed by the market, with a reference to the target readers of Hindi works translated into Italian.

The conceptual frame

In this paper I work in the conceptual frame of Bourdieu's "field" [Bourdieu 2005]. In fact, this concept is very useful for an analysis of social and intellectual events, and it allows to avoid the traps of positivistic determinism and of individualistic voluntarism. Moreover, it is very useful to keep in mind that any individual is at the same time part of more than one field and s/he is agent in any of the field s/he is part of.

Translators and publishers are agents with different types of "capital": for the translator the capital is symbolic, it is based on knowledge and on the

prestige s/he has according to the recognition of this knowledge. The power s/he can display works as credit: it requires trust and belief (in Italian and French *credito/credere* are semantically connected) by those who are subjected to it. The publisher, on the other way, has economic power.

In Bourdieu's model, the basic opposition pair is "ruler/ruled". In this analysis, the translator/academic/intellectual rules as far as the ability of understanding and explaining texts is concerned, but the publisher rules from the economic point of view. In Italy the University system is highly hierarchic, and those who become part of this field enjoy prestige, but translators of Indian works belong to faculties of Humanities (e.g. Foreign Languages), are hardly connected to economic power.

If we think of the contemporary artistic field, we cannot find the threefold partition of art in bourgeois, social, and art for art's sake. Everywhere flourishes a sort of diluted bourgeois art, particularly if we think of the widespread anxiety for social recognition and economic reward. Nobody aims at "glory" today, but rather at "success". In the marketing policy, success guarantees the value of the product: works that sell are works of value. But in the academic field there is a survival of a sort of pre-capitalistic economy, according to which disinterestedness is at the base of scientific research and art is "pure", it is something that cannot be reduced to the market rules – at least theoretically.

This contradiction is very clear in the relation between translators and publishers, at least in the case we analyse, when translators are all part of the academic field. Academic translators are idealistically projected to the promotion of "art for the art's sake", but they are at the same time eager to get recognition. Up to a few decades ago, the prestige linked to their position used to be enough for them, but nowadays everything is measured on

visibility for the audience, and it is necessary to enter the market in order to get it. This is one of the reasons why they wish to get closer to commercial publishers, wishing to re-conquer the recognition contemporary society is no longer giving them for granted.

The problem is that, in a quite contradictory attitude, they are a very peculiar kind of seller: they want to sell what is non marketable, that is culture without any compromise, disinterested knowledge, the one connected with “real” India. But for the general audience (and for the publishers) India is both symbolically and practically far away, and Indian languages other than English add on the perception of difficulty, obscurity, and aloofness of the content. Publishers have profit as their first (and, often, only) purpose, they don’t need works requiring complicated instructions in order to be deciphered, but products ready for consume. Enlargement of knowledge, culture, art: these are good and valuable things; but publishers know that the audience want something different: they want entertainment, exoticism and easy reading, as far as the mainstream market is concerned. Why should a publisher risk with a difficult product when there are plenty of easily marketable works?

In Bourdieu’s definition, “field” has also the meaning of “battlefield”, the socially constructed action field aimed at maintaining or transforming the existing force relations (Bourdieu 1979: 191). In our case, we can see the publishing field as the arena where the conflicting forces of experts/translators and publishers face each other, trying to influence the opponent’s action. The academic/translator wants to maintain the control on the translation, aiming at a highly refined product reflecting his/her expertise, which can convey this expertise to a wider public, in a long term investment towards “glory”. On the other hand, the publishers claim the

right to editing the translation in order to make it more marketable, in a short term investment towards an economically rewarding “success”, short-lived as it may be.

A case study: Translations from Hindi into Italian

Of the many modern literatures in Indian languages other than English only very few are represented in the Italian editorial field. Hindi is no doubt the most studied modern Indian language in Italy and this is evident also in the study of literature and in the choices for translation. If we consider the translation of “modern” narrative, we notice that the Hindi writer most translated into Italian is Premchand, who is universally recognized as the “father of modern Hindi narrative”. The pioneer translator of Hindi short stories into Italian, the late Lakshman Prasad Mishra (University of Venice), edited the first collection of Premchand’s stories in Italian some forty years ago. He was followed by other scholars: Donatella Dolcini (University of Milan) and Mariola Offredi (University of Venice) have dealt with Premchand’s works, but their translations are not easily available and even in libraries they are difficult to find. In fact, a peculiarity of translations from Indian languages other than English is that they are almost always confined to the academic environment.

In the appendix I present a bibliography of “modern” works (written in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries) directly translated into Italian from Indian languages other than English and Sanskrit and published in the past five decades. Focussing on which authors have been translated from Hindi into Italian, we immediately notice that the situation appears strikingly different from the one described by Albertazzi: quite a few eminent writers

are present and works that are not specifically suited to the exotic taste are offered to the reader. For example, Ajñey, Bacchan, Rājkamal Caudhrī, Dhūmil, Kamleśvar, Muktibodh, Kuṃvār Narāyaṇ, Nirālā, Mohan Rakeś, Rahī Masūm Razā, Phaniśvarnāth “Reṇu”, Raghuvīr Sahāy, Rudr, Kedarnāth Siṃh, Śyāmsar Bahādur Siṃh, Vinod Kumār Śukl, Nirmal Varmā: these renowned authors have been translated mainly by scholars affiliated to the University of Venice (Cossio, Offredi, Mingiardi, Rupil, and others). Nevertheless, there is a noticeable common character for these translations: unfortunately, the publisher they usually refer to has no distribution at all and I had a very difficult time in getting a copy even through interlibrary loan. Pinuccia Caracchi and Stefano Piano (University of Turin) edited an anthology of Hindi short stories, this survey on Hindi narrative of the past century being the result of a long didactic experience. Here, again, the selection of authors is quite prestigious: Bhīṣm Sāhni, Candradhar Śarmā Gulerī, Kamleśvar, Viśvambharnāth Śarmā Kauśik, Jayśaṅkar Prasād, Badrīnāth Sudarśan, Pāṇḍey Becan Śarmā Ugr, Ilācandra Jośī, Candragupta Vidyālaṅkāra, Bhagvatī Prasād Vājpeyī, Jainendra Kumār, Ajñey, Kamleśvar, Rājendra Yādav, Mannū Bhaṇḍarī. In this case, the publisher is a renowned academic publishing house, which does not have a wide commercial distribution. A translation of Bhagvatīcaraṇ Varmā’s short stories by the author of this paper was made thanks to La Babele del Levante, a small publishing house based in Milan, one also publishing the only bilingual journal existing in Italy for South Asian languages: *A Oriente!*. Translations of Mohan Rakeś, Uṣā Priyaṃvadā, Viśvambharnāth Śarmā Kauśik, Bhagvatīcaraṇ Varmā, Jayśaṅkar Prasād, Kumār Jhā, Jñānrañjan, Rājendra Jośī, Yatīndra Miśra, and Sumitrānandan Pant have been published in the South Asian issues of this magazine. This publisher recently launched

Ratnamālā, a collection of bilingual editions of modern narrative from Indian languages: the first volume is Citrā Mudgal's *Dulhin*, with an introduction to the author and a thematic discussion. Publications by La Babele del Levante are available at Librerie Feltrinelli, a big chain of booksellers, but otherwise they are not regularly distributed.

As far as the choice of authors is concerned, it generally depends on the research field of the translator, the didactic orientation of the text - both from a linguistic and a literary point of view -, and often on the personal relation between translator and writer. These translations are thus mainly meant for academic circulation, their target are students and scholars of Hindi and Indian culture, and they share some peculiarities: first of all, very often they have a strong didactic flavour and are, in a way, essays on Indian culture. The text is generally presented together with introductory essays, notes, glossary and there is a large use of diacritical marks. The translation is philologically very accurate. Terms that do not have an exact equivalent in Italian are often left in the original form and explained in footnotes or in a glossary. This is a very efficient way of avoiding the use of Italian words that may be misleading and betray the cultural heritage that comes with the original word. There is a large ignorance in Italy as far as Indian culture is concerned, therefore scholars try to promote a larger knowledge of concepts and values to a wider audience, introducing also corrections to commonly accepted bad habits, such as the tendency to maintain English spelling that are in no way justified and are pronounced wrongly by Italian readers. On the other hand, also the excessive use of Hindi terms in an Italian text sounds as much horrible as the exoticism of some Indian writers who stuff their works with foreign words. Of course, the result of such an approach is a text that may not be immediately understandable by the reader, and the

enjoyment of the narration may be hindered by what can be understood as sheer deployment of redundancy: it is not easy to find a balance between philology and approximation.

So we can state that Hindi literature is almost nowhere to be found in the Italian commercial publishing market. But there is a noticeable exception. Some years ago, for the first time a Hindi novel made it to the shelves of common bookshops: *Kalīkathā vāyā bāipās* by Alka Saraogi [Alkā Sarāvagī], translated by Mariola Offredi, was published by Neri Pozza, a medium-large and prestigious publisher, with the title *Bypass al cuore di Calcutta*. The novel had a very good launch, and the first edition (Saraogi 2002) was sold out in two months, with excellent reviews. This novel is very interesting, as it was a literary case when it was published in India: it was at first refused by Rājīkamal, one of the major publishers in Hindi world and was later accepted by Ādhar Prakāśan, a medium publisher from Haryana who is very sensitive to new works in Hindi (Sarāvagī 2000). Saraogi is a *marvārī* from Kolkatta and writes in a Hindi that rejects both the academic, Sanskrit-influenced register, and the Bollywood-inspired popular culture. *Kalīkathā* is an experimental kind of novel not only as far as form is concerned, but also in the content, because it goes back and forth with a tremendous amount of historical information. Its model may be found in the structure of the *Mahābhārata* epic: moreover, this narrative implies much historical research. Nevertheless, the story is told in a way suggesting that the ideal reader should not belong to the academic establishment, but to common sphere of people, totally unexposed to literature and whose language is everyday spoken Hindi.

Another noticeable fact is that the Italian translation was published before the English version came out. This is very unusual, because Italian

publishers are very reluctant to translate works from less commonly known languages, unless they can check a previous translation in some European language (preferably English): they often prefer indirect translations (e.g. the recent translation of three Malayalam short stories: Basheer 2006). Le Lettere, a medium-large publisher based in Florence, has just recently launched a collection of translations of Indian narrative from the original language (other than English), choosing Nirmal Varmā's *Lāl tin kī chat* [*The red tin roof*] as the starting title, but once again, it is a novel which has already been translated into other western languages and it was chosen only after reading the French translation (by the way, the publication is being postponed over and over). The choice of this author relies on the fact that Nirmal Varmā is the only contemporary Indian author writing in Hindi who has been widely translated abroad, and is generally considered the most representative voice of Hindi literature in the second half of the 20th century.

We could state, therefore, that the publication of *Bypass al cuore di Calcutta* marked the opening of the market to a kind of literature that had till then been confined into a niche. Together with that it also brought about a change in the translation policy: the translations that were confined to an academic circulation have never been subjected to an editing in order to fit the taste of some readers, be they real or ideal. On the contrary, *Kalikathā's* translator declared that the publisher edited heavily the translated text, so that she was not satisfied with the final product, even if she accepted it because it was the only way to have the text published.* Just to give an example, in the original text all events referred to the past appear in present indicative, which is a very important stylistic device in Saraogi's writing and it is also a very peculiar character of much Hindi writing of the second half

of the 20th century (Damsteegt 2004). Editing the whole text so that all events in the past are regularly put in imperfect indicative or past tense is a debatable choice, because it completely alters the subtle temporal balance of the narration, even if the resulting text sounds more “natural” to the Italian reader. Another example of unhappy editing is found on page 161, where the Hindi *mehandī*, henna, becomes unexpectedly “myrtle”. A possible explanation might be that henna does not possess an aura of poetical prestige for the Italian reader, while myrtle has a long poetic tradition, as old as Latin literature. But the plants are different, the use of myrtle for celebrations in the Greek and Latin context is totally different from the use of henna in women’s celebrations - especially on wedding ceremonies - and it takes out the original connotation of *mehandī*, which in India opens a whole world of echoes and reverberations. I am sure that the translator had not operated the metamorphosis of *mehandī* into myrtle.* The editor, who is probably neither well versed in Hindi folk songs nor familiar with wedding ceremonies, has probably consulted the Hindi-Italian dictionary (Sharma 2004: 377), where *mehandī* (spelled *memhdi*) is erroneously identified with *myrthus communis*, rather than with *lawsonia inermis*, as it should be. In any case, the choice of the Italian term “mirto” is a striking example of domestication: myrtle is a Mediterranean plant, it is a familiar poetical reference for the Italian reader at ease with classical references, and it is thus supposedly more refined than the “plebeian” henna .

Conclusions

Here comes the need to reflect on the role of publishers and translators. True, publishers impose strong limit to the translators: they have

to take into account economical targets, costs and risks. On the other hand, Italian translators from Hindi, who are University professors or academic related, expect the ideal text to be at the least followed by a glossary with the correct Hindi word, with gender and diacritics. In real life, though, translators must face requirements from the publishers that limit their possibility of intervention, for example a fixed number of pages. When the final text is targeted to a wide audience, other conditioning factors come into play: novels cannot and should not be transformed into essays on Indian culture. But sometimes publishers are ready to sacrifice precision in the cause of the market, favouring the exoticization of texts that are not originally like that. They rely on editors who are generally very self assured, even when their knowledge of South Asian culture happens to be scarce. Sometimes editors inform the translator of the final changes they make, but often they do not even care of discussing their changes with the one who is supposedly the expert, and simply go ahead.

It seems that we are at a crossroad: for long time scholars translating Hindi literature into Italian have been lamenting a scarce visibility, wishing that Hindi authors (together with their translators and exegetes, of course) would reach the wider reading public. Now more opportunities are at hand, but the leap seems to imply the willingness to accept compromises, at least until the day when publishers will understand that domestication and exoticization are not necessarily the only way to have the readers to appreciate these works. In fact, notwithstanding the paternalistic attitude of academic translators and the popularistic one of the publishers, the common readership seems to be able to appreciate good books when they are available, even if we have to admit that the average Italian is not a compulsive reader and the publishing policy is dominated by the globalized

international market, hegemonized by English. Given the prevalence of translation of English works, the general audience tends to think that the best literature in India is produced in English (which, by the way, is also the opinion of eminent writers like Rushdie, but not necessarily is true).

The publication of the Italian translation of Alka Saraogi's novel might be the sign of a turning point in the Italian publishing policy, but in my opinion it reveals also some tricky issues. The direct translation from Hindi was, in fact, accepted by the publisher partly because the scholar who translated it did not request any economical reward for her work.* This has been explained by Mariola Offredi as a strategy to develop original translations from languages other than English: she aimed to create a trend, showing that some Hindi novels are worth being presented also to a wider audience.* This successful experience should open the path for further translations and allow also young translators who know Indian languages to get job opportunities in the publishing field. The striking note, though, is that even when supplied with a free translation, the publisher took more that two years before agreeing to publish the book. Moreover, perpetuating the idea that culture does not pay may lead to the opposite result: it is also possible that publishers expect other scholars and translators to work for free. Especially if we consider the low status of translators both in the academic and in the publishing field, and their consequent scarce negotiating power, this would hardly reveal itself as an efficient way to promote translation of South Asian literature in languages different than English.

Notes

* Communication at the National Conference at the University of Turin:
Streaming Up Memory In-Between Past And Present: A River of Words, 17 -
18/09/03.

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Appendix

A Bibliography of Translations

The present list includes published works written in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries in Indian languages other than English and Sanskrit, and translated into Italian. Unwanted omissions are regretted.

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Pandit Viśvambharnath Kauśik [sic], Bartolini, Osvaldo (trans.). 2000 “Uno studente esemplare / Ek ādarś vidyārthī .” *A Oriente!* 4: 56-61.

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Mohan Rakesh. Kunze Magrini, Maximilian (trans.). 2004 “Il Padrone Delle Macerie.” *A Oriente!* 10: 38-51.

Manto, Saadat Hasan. Nardella, Umberto (trans). 1998 “Un certo odore.” *Nuove Lettere* 9-10.

Mudgal, Citrā. Consolaro, Alessandra. 2005 *Dulhin/La sposina*. Milano: La

Babele del Levante.

Narayan, Kunvar. Offredi, Mariola (trans). 1989 *Naciketa, traduzione italiana del poema Atmjayi*. Napoli: Plural Edizioni.

Narayan, Kunvar. Offredi, Mariola (trans). 2003 "Verso la natura." *Smerilliana, Semestrare di Civiltà Poetiche* 1: 203-6.

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Ripepi, Tiziana (trans. and ed.). 2004 Śrīnivāsa. “Mangamma dello yogurt.” *A Oriente!* 10: 84-99.

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