

## TRANSLATION AS ADAPTATION FOR LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores, within an ecological perspective on language learning (cf. van Lier 2004), the valuable role that translation as adaptation can play in mediating and making sense of cross-cultural experiences in the multilingual language classroom. The aim is to develop a multilingual pedagogy that includes translation as adaptation as an integral part of the language curriculum in order to foster translingual and transcultural competence, this being the goal of foreign language education in the 21st century (cf. MLA 2007:2). The first part of the paper introduces the theoretical framework that conceptualises translation as being closely related to adaptation. It then analyses salient scenes from Gianni Amelio's bilingual drama *La stella che non c'è/The Missing Star/L'Étoile Imaginaire* (2006) filmed in Italy and China and screened in competition as part of the 2006 Venice Film Festival. Moving on from research to pedagogic practice, the final part of the paper outlines a teaching unit that is based on the film and is aimed at undergraduate L1 Chinese learners of Italian and L1 Italian learners of Chinese. The objective of the pedagogic unit is to raise awareness of the transformative power enshrined in linguistic and cultural exchanges mediated by audio-visual translation as an eminent example of adaptation.

**KEYWORDS:** *symbolic representation, symbolic action, symbolic power, translingual and transcultural competence*

### **An Ecological View of Language and Translation**

Within the ecological perspective on language learning adopted by Claire Kramsch, language is conceived as a means of symbolic representation, symbolic action and symbolic power. As symbolic representation, language denotes, connotes and reflects the way our minds understand reality. As symbolic action, language enables us to do things and unveil human intentions. As symbolic power, language is a relational human activity, whereby we co-construct and negotiate personal and social identities, while becoming aware of our own and of other people's subjectivity, historicity, values, individual and

collective memories, emotions and aspirations (Kramersch, “Symbolic” 1-14). Congruent with this holistic and dialogic view of language, the aim of language learning and teaching is to form multilingual subjects with deep translingual and transcultural competence. This places value not only on the ability to operate between languages, but also, and most importantly, on the capacity to reflect on the world and ourselves through the lens of another language and culture. To achieve this goal, pedagogic translation is fully reappraised. As Kramersch advocates:

as a practice that brings out the cultural differences in the relation between language and thought, translation should be rehabilitated, not only from L1 to L2 or L2 to L1, but across the languages shared by students in the class, or across modalities, textual, visual, musical” (Kramersch, *Multilingual* 211).

However, as Kramersch argues:

one would have to make it clear that we are not talking here of translation as transfer from text to text, but as a rethinking of one context in terms of another, where by ‘context’ is meant a whole ecology of which text is only a part (Kramersch, e-mail message to author, 31 Mar. 2009).

This enlarged notion of translation goes beyond mere transfer that offers sameness and seeks equivalence, and is closely related to adaptation. According to Julie Sanders, in fact, adaptations are “reinterpretations of established texts in new generic contexts or [...] with relocations of [...] a source text’s cultural and/or temporal setting, which may or may not involve a generic shift” (qtd. in Krebs, “Introduction” 3). Moreover, one of the modes in which adaptations are carried out is “the recreation of a context that is more familiar or culturally appropriate from the target reader’s perspective than the one used in the original” (Bastin 5). Thus, from an ecological perspective such as the one embraced by Kramersch, the nature of the borderline that separates translation and adaptation as pedagogic practices is a tenuous one. Translation as adaptation can, indeed, play an important role in the language classroom since it enables learners to investigate the foreign language and culture through their own language and culture and, in so doing, they can “not only come to terms with differences between the two, but also change their own view of the world by exposing their own cultural identity to the contrasting influences that the foreign culture and language might exert” (Raw and Gurr 162).

### **Towards a Translation-Based Pedagogy**

In line with the concept of translation as adaptation expounded above and following Kramersch’s advice to translate from the L1 to the L2 and/or across modalities, I will now present a language pedagogy that uses audio-visual translation in order to foster translingual and transcultural competence, this

being the goal of foreign language education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (MLA Committee 2). I will first examine the teaching material, i.e. salient scenes from Gianni Amelio's bilingual film *La stella che non c'è/The Missing Star* (2006). Next, I will illustrate a pedagogic unit that is based on the film and is aimed particularly, but not exclusively, at L1 Chinese learners of Italian and L1 Italian learners of Chinese working on a joint project guided by an Italian and a Chinese instructor.

### **Film Synopsis**

*La stella che non c'è* is inspired by Ermanno Rea's 2002 novel *La dismissione* (The Divestment) (Milan, RCS Libri, 2002), which recounts the 1991 shutdown and sale, piece by piece, of the ILVA-Italsider steelworks. Built in the Neapolitan district of Bagnoli in 1909, it was one of the most important industrial centres in Southern Italy for 30 years. The story is narrated by Vincenzo Buonocore (good heart), a skilled steelworker who instructed the Chinese buyer on how to run and maintain the iron-smelting furnace. When Amelio received a copy of the book in 2004, he read it in one day and decided to make a truly independent film that starts where the novel ends. *La stella che non c'è* is the story of a journey from Italy to China. The protagonist, Vincenzo Buonavolontà (goodwill), is a maintenance man working at a Genoa steel mill which is going out of business and whose faulty equipment has been sold to a Chinese company. Having repaired the mechanical defect by assembling a new control unit, Vincenzo sets out to find the Chinese buyer with the help of Liu Hua, a student of Italian, who serves as his interpreter.

As the plot unfolds, Vincenzo's travel gradually turns into a journey towards himself. Discovering China will, in fact, give Vincenzo the desire to live it to the full. Is this a solitary self-discovery journey? I believe it is not. Vincenzo's personal growth is achieved together with and thanks to Liu Hua, who is more than an interpreter or a cultural mediator. She gradually turns into a travelling companion who opens up her world and pours out her heart letting her whole person be permeated by the experience of being in a transcultural world, just as Vincenzo does and in harmony with him. The scenes that I am going to analyse represent some of the steps taken by the two travellers along their path to a new beginning. Their journey starts in Shanghai, where Vincenzo finds Liu Hua after he met her briefly in Genoa where she served as interpreter for the Chinese delegation. From Shanghai Vincenzo and Liu Hua take the train to Wuhan, the capital of Hubei in Central China, a large city of eight million people, where the first steel mill in the country was built in the nineteenth century.

### **Scene 6: The Journey Begins**

In “The Journey Begins” scene, Vincenzo reaches out towards Liu Hua by bringing two century eggs and speaking Chinese. “Bedan,” he says, which means “leather egg” or “skin egg” because the century egg is coated with clay and this makes it look as if it had an extra skin layer. It is an ingredient of Chinese cuisine and its origin goes back to the Ming Dynasty 600 years ago. Liu Hua does not look at all impressed by Vincenzo’s display of linguistic and implicit cultural knowledge. On the contrary, she takes the opportunity to give Vincenzo a lesson in Chinese pronunciation and this is later reciprocated by Vincenzo who gives Liu Hua a lesson in Italian intonation and colloquial abbreviations of common names. So, through reciprocal learning the two characters begin to warm to one another putting themselves in the right mood for the journey ahead. When they arrive at the Wuhan steel factory, Liu Hua goes into the office and Vincenzo wanders inside the factory floor feeling almost at home among his fellow steel workers whom he greets with a radiant smile. His presence, however, is detected by the closed circuit television system and he is taken to the police station.

### **Scene 8: At the Police Station**

The scene portrays a police interview involving two participants. Participant 1 is the Chinese police officer, who enjoys the highest status because of his institutional position. He, therefore, controls the beginning, development and outcome of the whole exchange. Participant 2 is Liu Hua, a law-abiding Chinese citizen, who has a delicate gate-keeping role to play as a non-neutral intermediary between the police officer and Vincenzo, the Italian outsider, who is excluded from the exchange. I shall now focus on this non-neutral intermediary role by analysing the interplay between verbal and non-verbal communication.

I will examine, first of all, the physical positioning of the participants and Vincenzo at the beginning of the scene. The police officer and Liu Hua are sitting at the same desk facing each other, while Vincenzo, who comes into view only a few seconds later, is sitting at another desk, with his back turned to both the police officer and Liu Hua. He is attending to his personal belongings that are being searched by a police woman. When the police officer questions Liu Hua about Vincenzo’s identity and asks “who is he?,” Liu Hua answers using a narrative which recounts Vincenzo’s personal history embedded in its transcultural context involving China (in theme position) and Italy (in theme position), “A Chinese factory bought a facility in Italy.” In so doing, she attempts to legitimise Vincenzo’s presence in China. When the police officer presses on with the second question, “And where does it fit in?” Liu Hua

distances herself from Vincenzo, verbally, by using the third person and indirect speech “he says that it’s flawed.” But, just before she utters these words, she makes eye contact with Vincenzo, which betrays her involvement with him.

Next, when the hydraulic power switch is taken apart, which is the very symbol of Vincenzo’s journey, his sole purpose in life, Vincenzo suddenly subverts all the communicative roles dictated by the situational context. He stands up, gets close to the police officer and addresses him directly and through Liu Hua’s mediation, which is elicited by the repetition of the imperative “translate.” He speaks excitedly, giving Liu Hua very little time to relay his words. Meanwhile, the police officer and Liu Hua remain seated, but not for long. When Vincenzo attempts to demonstrate how to operate the power switch, the alarmed police officer stands up, gets hold of the switch and orders Vincenzo to let it go. Vincenzo does not comply and he is forcefully taken away by another policeman. At this point there is a dramatic change. Liu Hua unexpectedly stands up and turns her back to the police officer. She follows Vincenzo with her eyes until he is completely out of sight. She returns to her seat only when the police officer tells her to sit down. The original positioning is finally re-established, order is restored. Liu Hua’s involvement with Vincenzo is now more evident than ever. Later that evening Vincenzo and Liu Hua are released. The following morning they have breakfast in a restaurant nearby, where they reflect on the events of the previous day.

### **Scene 9: “Very Maybe and Very Surely”**

In the restaurant scene, Liu Hua appeases and reassures Vincenzo, who is visibly and understandably shaken by the whole ordeal and feels alienated from the world Liu Hua belongs to. While at the police station Liu Hua had to undertake the difficult task of building up trust between the police authority and Vincenzo, the Italian trespasser, now she has to heal the rift between Vincenzo and the culture she represent and identifies with. She is successful on this occasion just as she was at the police station. She wins Vincenzo’s trust with two moves. She first explains the policeman’s behaviour through a metaphor that highlights an aspect of being Chinese “the Chinese first trip you, and then help you to get back on your feet.” The police officer did, in fact, provide her with information about a steel factory that may have had dealings with Italy. Then, she shows in a personal and tangible way, that she trusts Vincenzo’s good intentions unreservedly. In fact, it is thanks to Liu Hua that the modified hydraulic power switch is now intact and in safe hands. This good news gives cause for celebration and the symbolic value of food is evident. Once trust has been restored and the tension eased, interest, curiosity and appreciation for another culture’s eating habits and tastes are aroused. Most importantly, though, the symbolic meaning of this “feast” is that mutual trust and understanding have

changed Vincenzo's solitary venture into a joint mission with Liu Hua, who has now taken Vincenzo's cause to her heart.

### **Scene 10: Italian, a Minor Language**

The journey of Vincenzo and Liu Hua goes on. Following the police officer's advice, they are now travelling on the Yangtzen River (the Blue River) heading towards Chongqing, the largest city in Southwestern China. The dialogue in the "Italian, a minor language" scene reveals Liu Hua's and Vincenzo's convergent and divergent viewpoints on different aspects of the same cultural reality. First, the weather in China: Vincenzo imagines China as being sunny and Liu Hua tells him that the sunshine is a rarity. Second, progress and growth: both Vincenzo and Liu Hua share a feeling of admiration for the construction of the largest dam in the world on the Yangtzen River. But, when Liu Hua tells Vincenzo about the imminent creation of a 600 meter- long lake, she expresses, through metaphor, her critical perspective on the human cost of progress and growth "sugar cane is never sweet in all its parts." The third topic of conversation is the Italian language, which is considered to be a minor language from a different cultural perspective. This comes as a real surprise to Vincenzo. We get the momentary impression that he may say something in reply, but he remains silent.

### **Scene 17: The Stars on the Chinese Flag**

The visit to the obsolete steel factory in Chongqing bears no fruit. A machine had been bought from Italy, but ten years earlier. As a consequence, Vincenzo is totally disenchanted and demoralised also by what he has witnessed with his own eyes – that is the huge gulf between poverty and wealth in modern China. This is not the China he had imagined and he says to Liu Hua "Vincenzo from Italy returns to Italy." But Liu Hua encourages him to continue to pursue his goal and replies confidently: "Vincenzo first finds his steel mill, then returns to Italy." Thanks to a search carried out on the internet, Liu Hua has found a factory which had purchased an iron-smelting furnace from Italy exactly three months before Vincenzo's departure. It is the Baotou Iron and Steel Group located in the industrial city of Baotou in Inner Mongolia. Enthused by this good news, Vincenzo takes heart and decides to resume his search. They set off by bus for Yinchuan, on the Yellow River, but on the way Vincenzo is taken ill. They stop in Pianyan, a small town near the Yangtzen River and stay at Liu Hua's grandmother's house until Vincenzo recovers. Here Vincenzo discovers that Liu Hua is a single mother whose young son is being looked after by his great grandmother. On the day before they leave for Baotou, Vincenzo and Liu Hua have an intimate conversation.

The dialogue portrayed in “The stars on the Chinese flag” scene goes to the heart of the human values and aspirations cherished by the two characters. For Liu Hua these are represented by the four stars on the Chinese flag that, for her, symbolises patience, honesty, justice and solidarity. Vincenzo is more realistic. Thinking about Italy, all he hopes for are fewer scoundrels, braggarts and profiteers and a bit more respect. We cannot help sensing a feeling of disappointment towards each respective country. Yet, there is renewed hope flared up by the exchange of language, culture, knowledge and beliefs. We can also perceive that the two characters are getting closer to one another at a personal level. Of course, there is still a long way to go before they are ready to share the same emotional space. Nevertheless, it is quite evident that the transcultural experience they are living is making them deeply aware of their subjectivity shining through the eyes of the other. To sum up, the story narrated in the film does not represent only Vincenzo’s mental and spiritual journey, but the journey of Vincenzo and Liu Hua towards themselves and towards each other. The two protagonists are the creators of a new living space where their (re)discovered subjectivity can thrive and be voiced in unison.

Moving on now from research to pedagogic practice, the question I wish to address is this: how can we harness the symbolic power enshrined in multilingual exchanges such as the ones represented in multilingual films in order to pursue the goal of foreign language education, which is to form “educated speakers who have deep translanguingual and transcultural competence”? (MLA Committee 2). In order to address this question, we need to take on board the recommendations made in the MLA Ad Hoc Report on Foreign Languages issued in 2007. This advocates that students be trained “to reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture (2). To this end, “literature, film, and other media are used to challenge students’ imaginations and to help them consider alternative ways of seeing, feeling and understanding things” (3).

Moreover, one of the priorities identified in the report is to develop programs in translation and interpretation because “[t]here is a great unmet demand for educated translators and interpreters, and translation is an ideal context for developing translanguingual and transcultural abilities as an organizing principle of the language curriculum” (3). The agenda set in the MLA Report offers foreign language educators an exciting new challenge. It encourages cooperation among teachers of different languages and of different subjects: literature, film and media studies, translation and interpreting. In the following part of my article I outline a methodology that incorporates audio-visual translation in language teaching in keeping with the ecologically-oriented and multilingual approach embraced by the MLA Report. The envisioned educational context consists of undergraduate degree programs attended by L1 Chinese and L1 Italian students. The learning objective is to unearth the

symbolic dimensions of multilingual exchanges through the analysis of selected scenes from *La stella che non c'è* and the production of reverse subtitles (from the L1 to the L2). The activities are subdivided into three phases:

1. Pre-viewing: introduction to the film and film synopsis;
2. Viewing: with or without the aid of subtitles;
3. Post-viewing: reciprocal (con)textual, intertextual and multimodal analysis of selected scenes;
4. Production of reverse subtitles.

To guide the reciprocal analysis and the translation task I give students a set of instructions as those reported in the worksheet below:

### Scene 8: At the Police Station

- *During the police interview, Liu Hua fulfils the dual role of language and social mediator. Examine the interrelationship between verbal and body language and reflect on the symbolic dimensions of these two modes of communication.*
- *Produce the reverse subtitles of the film dialogues, including Liu's interpretation of Vincenzo's lines.*

Other possible multimodal transpositions are audio description for the visually impaired or the production of subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing. The benefits of this type of reciprocal and collaborative learning are various. First of all, it brings to light different perspectives on the same cultural reality such as the symbolic meaning of food that plays an important role from the beginning right to the end of the film narrative (see, for example scene 9) or the human cost of progress and growth (see scene 10). Another benefit is that it unveils nuances of meaning accessible to speakers of Chinese or speakers of Italian, thus fostering interlingual and intercultural exchanges. Italian speakers can detect Vincenzo's peculiar Southern Italian accent or Liu Hua's peculiar pronunciation of Italian dental consonants. Chinese speakers can explain the meaning of examples of intertextuality, the lyrics of Chinese songs or culture-specific allusions.

Finally, as a cool down, I propose a sing-along session. The song that I consider suitable particularly for a group of EFL learners is "Maybe There's a World" by singer-songwriter Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens). The reason for this choice is that the lyrics express an important symbolic meaning conveyed by the journey made by Vincenzo and Liu Hua, i.e. the quest for an open, inclusive world where people rise above cultural barriers and connect with the Other. Maybe, *The Missing Star* actually refers to a world that is still to come. The lyrics transcribed below are those sung at the 2007 Epiphany Concert held in

Naples (“Live in Naples.”) Epiphany is the Christian feast celebrating the day that Baby Jesus was visited by the three Magi, Zoroastrian priests, who travelled from Persia to Bethlehem following the Pole Star:

**Maybe There's a World**

I have dreamt of a place and time, where nobody gets annoyed,  
But I must admit I'm not there yet but Something's keeping me going

Maybe there's a world that I'm still to find  
Maybe there's a world that I'm still to find  
Open up o world and let me in,  
Then there'll be a new life to begin

I have dreamt of an open world,  
Borderless and wide  
Where the people move from place to place  
And nobody's taking sides

Maybe there's a world that I'm still to find  
Maybe there's a world that I'm still to find  
Open up a world and let me in,  
Then there'll be a new life to begin

I've been waiting for that moment  
To arrive  
All at once the palace of peace  
Will fill My eyes - how nice!

Maybe there's a world that I'm still to find  
Maybe there's a world that I'm still to find  
Open up a world and let me in,  
Then there'll be A new life to begin

I've been waiting for that moment  
To arrive  
All at once the wrongs of the world,  
Will be put right - how nice!

To conclude, my belief is that a multilingual and ecologically oriented pedagogy fosters the ability to operate between languages, allows learners to enter the traffic of meaning and preserves global semiodiversity and glossodiversity.

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