



The Future of Teaching Translation to Opera Singers: Strategies to Follow or Not to Follow

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Abstract

The needs of opera singers studying Italian or German as a foreign language differ completely from those of other kinds of students studying these languages for other purposes and must indeed include translation. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the research which has already been conducted – based on the teaching model applied in contemporary music education institutions in the Czech Republic – with the aim of finding out the best teaching strategies to follow and avoiding the strategies not to follow. The research includes analysis of linguistic and extralinguistic aspects that influence the teaching process, analysis of didactic materials and tools used in teaching translation, as well as analysis of concrete translations of scores and musical texts; including samples of Italian texts. In accordance with the hypothesis, modern teaching materials and communicative methods are found to be often unsuitable for such specific educational needs, and, as pointed out in the research, only a limited number of other types of materials are available. Specific strategies and also further research into musical text translation are needed. These results are significant especially for teachers of Italian and German as a foreign language working with opera singers.

Keywords: Translation, Opera singers, Teaching process, Scores, Musical Texts

1. Italian language at conservatory

This paper presents a research carried out at the Conservatory of Pilsen, in the Czech Republic, where opera singers study Italian language. Analogously, its conclusions can be used for the German language. The aim of the research was to find out whether a low language competence can be sufficient to make a good translation of an unknown lyric text. The hypothesis was that, with specific strategies used in the teaching process, this is possible. Thus, the research questions to be answered were: 1. Can students with a low language competence produce a good translation of a lyric text? 2. Which strategies can a teacher adopt in teaching translation to opera singers?

1.1 Extralinguistic aspects

At the Conservatory of Pilsen, future opera singers are mixed in classes with students of other specializations. Italian is taught for 4 years, normally with 2 lessons a week; but students in part-time programmes only have 8 contact lessons within six months. All students have the CEFR level of A0 when entering the programme and A2 when leaving. The classes are monolingual.

1.2 Linguistic aspects

The process of translation is influenced fundamentally by scores and musical text that typically contain a wide range of specific orthographical features, complex grammatical structures, and obsolete forms; the lexicon is often literary or archaic; and, frequently, the word order can be problematic. Some texts have already been translated, but singers should be encouraged to translate for themselves, rather than depend on existing translations. The knowledge of what each word means actually makes the text easier to sing with an appropriate emotion [1].

1.3 Didactic tools

There is no specific didactic material intended for opera singers suitable for mixed classes at the Conservatory of Pilsen. The currently used material is a monolingual multimedia course of Italian language [2], and translation activities are additional. Currently, no complete course in Italian specifically for conservatories [3] is used. There are only two complementary publications [4], [5] available on the Czech market. As previous research demonstrated [6], 90% of students at the Conservatory of Pilsen use online applications, easily accessible from PCs and phones, when translating.

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2. Research on translation

The research presented is based on an anonymous questionnaire completed by students. The participants were aged between 15 and approximately 45. The total number of respondents was 33, out of which 6 were in their first year, 8 in the second year, 4 in the third year and 15 in the fourth year (including 9 part-time students).

2.1 Methodology

The participants were exposed, for one week, to a set of 30 words placed online in the Quizlet application. In the next step, they were given grammatical explanations and were asked to complete different tasks related to a particular lyric text (Fig. 1.), including its translation. The quality of the translation was measured as a percentage based both on the quantity of translated text and on the meaning and interpretation expressed in the target language.

Giulio Caccini

Tu ch'hai le penne, Amore,
e sai spiegarle a volo,
deh muovi ratto un volo
fin là dov'è 'l mio core.
E se non sai la via
coi miei sospir t'invia.
Va pur: che'l troverai
tra'l velo e'l bianco seno,
o tra'l dolce sereno
de'luminosi rai,
o tra bei nodi d'oro
del mio dolce tesoro.

Fig. 1. Lyric text to be translated

2.2 Results

The text to be translated was completely unknown to 28 of the participants; none of them had previously sung it, 30 participants defined the theme of the text to be love, 25 participants based their theme definition on the word *Amore* (Amor, Cupid), 14 on *core* (heart), 21 on *dolce* (sweet) in the lines *mio dolce tesoro* (my sweet treasure) or *dolce sereno* (gently serene), 7 on *rai* (rays) and 6 on *seno* (breast).

The participants can be divided into 4 groups on the basis of how they evaluate their exposure to the 30 words in Quizlet. Participants in group D have not even seen the vocabulary (11), participants in group C have only seen the words once (10), participants in group B have studied the words (9) and participants in group A have memorized the words (3). The success of translation was closely related to the number of memorized words as shown in the statistics below (Table 1.).

n.	percentage	group
1 x	95	A
3 x	90	A-B
2 x	85	B
2 x	80	B-C
1 x	70	B
1 x	50	B
1 x	40	B
1 x	30	B
1 x	20	B
1 x	15	C
2 x	10	C
4 x	5	C-D
13 x	0	C-D

Table 1. Statistics on success of translation related to exposure to vocabulary



Students of different levels were the authors of the best six translations (Fig. 2.).

95 % - Ty, jenž máš křídla, Amore (A) – fourth-year part-time student

90 % - Ty máš křídla, bůžku lásky (B) – second-year student

90 % - Ty, co máš peří, Amore (B) – first-year student

90 % - Máš křídla, lásko (A) – fourth-year part-time student

85 % - Ty, který máš křídla, Amore (B) – first-year student

85 % - Ty, který máš křídla, Amorku (B) – second-year student

Fig. 2. The first line of the best six translations in the target language in relation to the group and to the participants' year

The participants were asked to state briefly what the text was about and to describe how they would sing it, despite the absence of the musical transcription which indicates the tempo as *lento e malinconico* (slow and melancholic). The table below (Table 2.) shows the meanings and the proposals of interpretation related to the groups.

group	meaning	interpretation
D	8 x no estimation 3 x love	melodically romantically sadly
C	4 x no estimation 6 x love 1 x leaving love 1 x happiness	romantically lovingly slowly imploring and deeply felt as it is in G minor
B	4 x searching / longing for love 3 x love / lovingness 1 x declaration of love 1 loss of love	romantically, sadly, slowly, amorously, with love sweetly, gently, delicately, emotionally, dreamily with gentle desire, lightly urgently, somewhat sadly fervidly joyfully eyes like two wells
A	1 x desire for love and to be loved 1 x searching for a way to true love 1x festive song	fervidly deeply felt, lovingly, with hope, with desire with inner joy and enthusiasm

Table 2. The meaning and the interpretation related to the groups

2.3 Analysis of results

All participants translated the text for the first time; 90% of them defined correctly its main theme (love) based on the correct words usually encountered in similar lyric texts (Amor, heart, sweet, rays, breast). The best translations were produced by participants who studied and memorized the vocabulary previously. Among the best six translations, there were 2 fourth-year part-time students, 2 second-year students and 2 first-year students. This result proves that a good translation can be produced regardless the student's grade or type of study programme.

The depth of comprehension and of interpretation increased with the amount of translated text. The authors of more successful translations provided more detailed descriptions of the meaning and interpretation possibilities of the text. Some of the interpretations were not correct (joy, happiness), but this occurred in a very low number of cases. In one instance, even figurative language was employed (eyes like two wells).



3. Strategies for teaching translation

The main strategy not to follow, applied in the presented research, is a direct assistance of the teacher. The participants were prepared for autonomous translation of the text, which was then reused in the classroom. Different strategies were used to reach this aim and can be suggested for teaching translation.

3.1 Using pictures

The use of pictures, enabled by the Quizlet application, was chosen for different reasons. It helps to display synecdoche or metaphors like *penne* (quills) which stands for *ali* (wings), *nodi* (knots) which stands for *capelli* (hair) or *rai* (rays) which stands for *occhi* (eyes). A picture, or even a moving picture, can better express certain interjections like *deh* (up!). The association with an appropriate picture can provide a link to an unusual context, like *spiegare* intended as “unfold” and not as “explained”.

3.2 Showing orthographic specifics

It is important to distinguish capital letters in the text like *Amore* (Amor, Cupid) and *amore* (love). Typical Italian apocopes and elisions should be studied, for example, *fin* which means *fino* (up to) and *pur* which means *pure* (just), *ch'hai* which stands for *che hai* (that you have) or *d'oro* which stands for *di oro* (of gold). Different transcriptions of one word must be known, like *cor*, *core*, *cuor*, *cuore* (heart) or *rai*, *raggi* (rays).

3.3 Choosing the right meaning

Preparing the vocabulary in advance helps avoid imprecise translations, especially in cases when it is impossible to find the word in dictionaries or know whether the word is used in a very exceptional way like *ratto* (rapidly) or *inviarsi* (take to the road). Specific features of the target language must be included in the teaching process too, since it is frequently necessary to translate one word in different ways, such as *sapere*, which means both “to know” and “to be able” or *dolce*, which is both “sweet” and “gentle”. The biggest challenge is the relevance of the context when translating *seno* as “breast” and not as “gulf”, *sereno* as “serene” and not as “clear”. Also the prepositions should be translated in relation to the context, such as *tra*, which is better understandable as “via” and not as “between” in this case.

3.4 Giving grammar explanations

Most importantly, Italian tenses and modes should be explained, such as *troverai* for future (you will find) and *va'*, which represents the imperative *vai!* (go!). All irregular forms should be given, such as *sai* (you know) of the verb *sapere*, archaic *coi*, which stands for *con i* (with the) or *bei* as one of the plural forms of *bello* (beautiful). And all the compound forms should be decomposed, like *spiegarle*, which stands for *spiegare+le penne* (unfold the wings), and expressions such as *del* composed of a preposition and an article *di+il* (of the).

3.5 Studying misinterpretations

Even the best teaching strategies cannot guarantee a student's success in translation. Another activity done after the evaluation of translations was the analysis of misinterpretations. The most frequent mistakes encountered in the presented research were based on interference, *Amore* translated as “love” and not as “Amor”, *fin* translated as “to finish” and not “up to”; orthographic similarity, *via* translated as “life” (*vita*) and not as “journey”, *pur* translated as “pure” (*puro*) and not as “just” (*pure*); incorrect part of speech, *volo* translated as “to fly” (*volare*) and not as “flight”, *ratto* translated as “rat” and not as “rapidly”.

3.6 Making use of comic translations

The mistakes and misinterpretations can also bring humour to the classroom. After the analysis of translated texts, the most comic versions, for which the Italian, Czech and English versions are shown (Fig. 3.), were presented to participants underlining the incorrectly translated expressions.



Tu ch'hai le penne, Amore,
Ty máš rohlík (pečivo), Amorku
You have a roll (bakery product), little Amor

Deh muovi ratto un volo fin là dov'è 'l mio core
Hýbající se myši létají, schovají se (ně)kde v mém srdci
Moving mices are flying, they will hide (some)where in my heart

O tra' l dolce sereno de' luminosi raì
Je to sladké a klidné, prostě světlý ráj
It's sweet and calm, simply bright paradise

Fig. 3. The most comic translations

4. Conclusion

Since the aim of the research was to find out whether a low language competence can be sufficient for production of a good translation of an unknown lyric text, it can be concluded that when using the right strategies in teaching translation, even for students with a very low CEFR level, it is possible to translate scores or musical texts. It was shown that even first and second-year students were able to succeed in translating.

The success of translation is closely related to strategies adopted, as specifically described (use of pictures, showing orthographic specifics, grammar explanations, etc.).

More research on how to teach translation of lyric texts is definitely needed, as is research on how to create a good lexical and grammar database for opera singers.

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