



Teaching Translation of Italian Lyric Texts to Opera Singers: Analysis of Tools

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Abstract

The process of teaching translation of Italian lyric texts to opera singers is influenced both by linguistic factors - quality of the scores and orthographical varieties, specific vocabulary, obsolete grammar, poetic word order, unknown context - and by the accessibility and the range of translation tools. The aim of this paper is to analyse the tools used for translation of operatic language. The results are based on research conducted at the Conservatory of Pilsen, Czech Republic, and it includes analysis of a student questionnaire and comparison of the data with previous research. Samples of Italian texts and translations in other languages used for pedagogical translation are included. The paper also discusses limitations of the online dictionaries commonly used by the students which should be taken into account in the teaching process.

Keywords: *pedagogical translation, online dictionaries, Italian, operatic language, lyric texts.*

1. Introduction

This paper presents the research conducted at the Conservatory of Pilsen which is one of thirteen conservatories in the Czech Republic where future opera singers are being prepared. The conservatories are secondary schools located in towns with theatres where graduates search for their first employment. Students usually enter at the age of 15 with A1-A2 knowledge of English and no knowledge of Italian.

The paper provides an initial overview of the specific language of Italian lyric texts. The research in its first stage evaluates the students' questionnaire, in the second stage the most used translation tools indicated by students are analysed. These results are compared to the situation investigated at the same institution in 2014. In this paper always the pedagogical translation, also called study translation, is considered [1].

The research questions to be answered are: Is there any tool more suitable for such a specific translation? What are its limitations?

2. Operatic language

The language of lyric texts differs significantly from the language commonly taught in modern language classes. Orthographically, words vary in connection to the historical period of the source text, e.g. *cor(e) / cuor(e)* (heart) and elisions are frequent [2]. As only a limited number of Italian words are oxytones, librettists often use apocopes, e.g. *son(o)* (I'm) [3]. Morphologically, historical verbal forms or other parts of speech are encountered, e.g. *dovea* (I had to). A considerable part of the lexicon is not only poetic but even obsolete, e.g. *alma* (soul), and historical denotations differ if compared to the modern meaning. Atypical word order such as hyperbaton is frequent. These specifics are of eminent difficulty even for students of B1 or B2 levels [4] while students of opera normally don't reach any CEFR level [5].

3. Research on the translation process

The research was conducted at the Conservatory of Pilsen in 2014 and again in 2019, aimed to understand which tools opera singers use while studying a new part, and what are the limitations of these tools.

3.1 Methodology

The research was based on the questionnaire distributed among the students of lyric singing from the second to the sixth year of study. The total number of participants was 20, between the ages of 16 and 35. They were all native Czech speakers. In the first part, the questionnaire focused on the use of translation tools and research into the context. In the second part, the participants were given 10 options with concrete examples of difficulties related to translation and were asked to scale them.



3.2 Results of the research

All the participants sing in Italian and they usually search the plot of the piece they interpret.

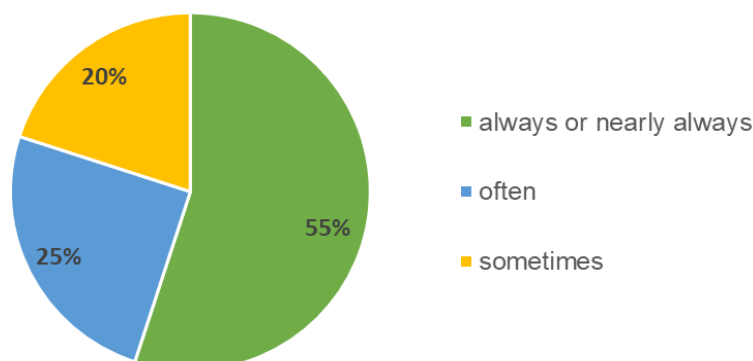


Chart 1. The percentage of participants searching the plot

The participants prefer searching the plot in their mother tongue rather than in any foreign language.

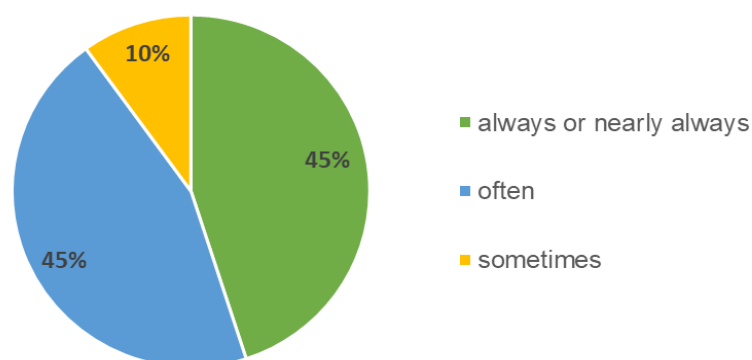


Chart 2. The percentage of participants searching the plot in the mother tongue

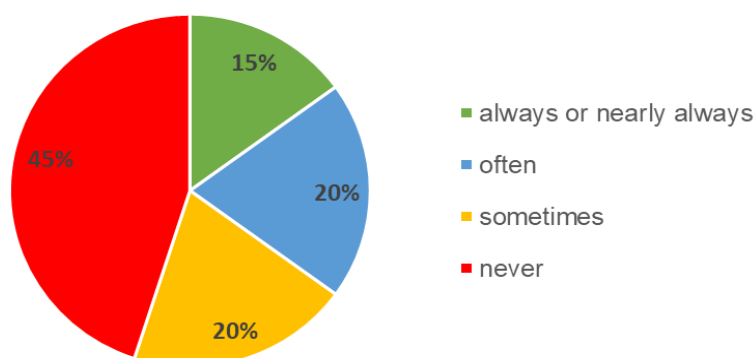


Chart 3. The percentage of participants searching the plot in a foreign language

Almost all the participants use Google Translator and more than half of them also use the online dictionary (Lingea) recommended by the teacher. Other online dictionaries are used only sporadically, as well as paper dictionaries or glossaries included in a textbook. Some participants also mentioned the teacher as a translation tool.

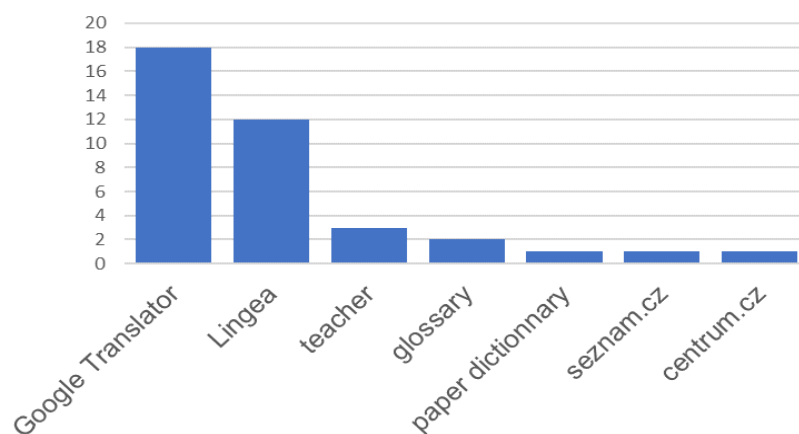


Chart 4. The quantity and type of tools used for translation

The difficulties of translation can be subsequently listed from the most to least frequent as follows:

1. The translation of isolated words is comprehensible but the whole sentence/verse isn't (e.g. *dove il diavolo ha la coda*).
2. The searched word is not present in a dictionary (e.g. *sempiterno*).
3. The meaning of the translated word is not related to the text (e.g. *albergo*).
4. The word can't be translated because it's contracted (e.g. *m'*).
5. The text can't be translated properly due to the unknown context.
6. The word can't be translated because it's not in its elementary form (e.g. *vado*).
7. In the source text there are spelling mistakes (e.g. *tute* instead of *tutte*).
8. The word can't be translated because the part of speech can't be determined (e.g. *legge*).
9. The correct meaning of a translated word can't be selected from present options (e.g. *casa*).
10. The translation is complicated due to missing interpunctuations (e.g. commas).

3.3 Comparison to the previous research

If compared to the results obtained five years before [6], in 2014 for 84% of participants the most used translation tool was Google Translator, in 2019 still 90% of them use it. But the Italian-Czech online dictionary (*seznam.cz*) used at the time by 53% of the participants was replaced by the Lingea online dictionary recommended by the teacher and used in 60% of cases. No one uses an electronic dictionary which must be installed on a pc. While in 2014 50% of the participants combined the use of online and traditional paper dictionaries, in 2019 paper dictionaries were completely abandoned. Also, the teacher as a translation tool is mentioned only in 15% while he/she was mentioned in 90% of cases in 2014.

Among the major difficulties of translation, three questions were added in 2019 (unknown context, spelling mistakes, and missing interpunctuations), based on the criteria of assessment of the source text [7]. At the top of both versions of the questionnaire, the whole sentence or verse comprehension is mentioned. A dictionary not able to give any result was in the second position of 2019's version, while in 2014's version this item was in the 6th position. The next position is occupied in both versions by the problem of a meaning that doesn't suit the text as a whole. The problematic contracted words came in the 4th position in both cases. In the new version, the question of unknown context is scaled as the fifth major difficulty.

4. Analysis of tools

While in 2014 the difference between traditional paper textbooks and dictionaries and the multimedia tools for the Italian language was described, in 2019 there are new resources in the field of Italian operatic language and its translation.

4.1 Textbooks for opera singers

The new textbooks, *L'italiano nell'aria 1* and 2 [8], [9], published in 2015, offer specific courses of Italian for the opera that covers the A1-B2 levels. The two volumes introduce nearly 200 arias and recitatives for pedagogical translation but most of them are fragments and context or generic



guidelines for translation are only given in the teacher's guide that can be downloaded separately. As a part of the textbooks, *Glossary of Opera and Music Terms* brings typical operatic expressions that are translated into English, Russian, German, and Chinese (a Czech version is not planned for now).

4.2 Online dictionary

At the Conservatory of Pilsen, the online Italian-Czech dictionary Lingea of 2017 is recommended by the teacher for several reasons. It offers pronunciation and it is also possible to search for declined or conjugated entries. In Italian, this dictionary presents 41.000 entries; 72.000 word meanings; 25.000 examples, phrases, and idioms; and 161.000 translations.

4.3 Glossary, translator, and dictionary

In the *Glossary of Opera and Music Terms*, there are 199 expressions consisting of 78 verbal forms, 66 substantives, 26 adjectives, 24 adverbs and 12 of these expressions are phrases. When these expressions are searched, almost 77% of them can be found in Google Translator and about 52% in the Italian-Czech online dictionary Lingea.

Tool	N	Event	Sample p
Google Translator	199	153	0,768844
Lingea	199	103	0,517588

Table 1. The proportion of translations found (N = total number of searched expressions, Event = found translations)

But when the two-proportion test is applied to the found expressions, almost 53% of them are translated incorrectly in Google Translator while the incorrect translation occurs in the Lingea dictionary only in approximately 13% of cases.

Tool	N	Event	Sample p
Google Translator	153	81	0,529412
Lingea	103	13	0,126214

Table 2. The proportion of incorrect translations within found expressions (N = found expressions, Event = incorrect translations)

Thanks to its multilingual database, Google Translator finds expressions like *onnipotente* (omnipotent) or *sacrifizio* (sacrifice). Also, 5 of 12 phrases like *v'ho* (there is) are correctly translated. But there's a high percentage of incorrect translations when the searched expression corresponds to a proper name like *brando* (Brando instead of sword) or *rio* (Rio instead of rivulet), and because the translation into Czech is based on English expressions like *diè* (to die instead of day), *empire* (empire instead of to fill) or *face* (face instead of torch). It often changes parts of speech and in some cases, it gives completely unsuitable results like *alfine* (all right instead of finally) or *piagare* (plague instead of to wound) which occurs very rarely in the Lingea dictionary. The Lingea dictionary indicates parts of speech correctly but doesn't recognize phrases.

Conclusions

While comparing the research conducted at the same institution five years before, it comes out that the context is the fifth important factor in the translation process, even if future opera singers prefer searching the plot of a new piece in their mother tongue instead of dealing with foreign languages. In 2019 participants indicated the fact that the searched word is not present in a dictionary as the second major translation difficulty, while in 2014 when participants combined online and paper dictionaries, this item was scaled at 6th place. In 2019 paper dictionaries were not used anymore but Google Translator is still the most used translation tool, accompanied recently by the Italian-Czech online dictionary Lingea.

Based on the analysis of typical Italian operatic expressions searches, it can be stated that Google Translator provides more responses (almost 77%) and is especially suitable for searching phrases but its error rate is very high (almost 53%) when used for searching single expressions, also because the



translation from Italian to Czech is made through English. The Lingea dictionary gives fewer responses (less than 52%) but its error rate is relatively low (less than 13%).

No one of the analysed online tools can be considered more suitable for pedagogical translation of Italian lyric texts due to their evident limitations. As there is not any Italian-Czech dictionary for opera, for now, students of conservatories have to rely on glossaries.

The presented research was limited by the number of participants, but it raises an interesting question of the pedagogical translation of opera and appropriate translation tools in other languages outside English.

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