

17

Contrastive topic and practical: Determiners

This chapter constitutes the material for all or part of a practical. It concerns four of the many types of determiner in Italian and English. A **determiner** is an expression which specifies the range of reference of a noun. We have chosen determiners which often pose problems in translation. The four types are: definite and indefinite articles (*the, a*); demonstratives (*this, that, those*); possessives (*my, your, etc.*); and relative pronouns, a subset of the *wh*-determiners (*what(ever), which(ever), whose*). We shall give most attention to cases where there tends to be asymmetry between English and Italian usage – that is, where one type of determiner tends to be rendered with a different type, or where a determiner is present in one language but not in the other.

We begin with articles. In general, the way articles are used in the two languages does not usually cause translation problems. However, there are significant differences in their use, which do need to be borne in mind. For instance, in Italian the definite article is used in some cases where it would be omitted in English:

I cani sono gli animali domestici più intelligenti. Dogs are the most intelligent (of) pets.

L'amore è una cosa meravigliosa. Love is a many-splendoured thing.

Generic plurals are unaccompanied by 'the' in English as a rule, as the first example shows. And, as the second example shows, English does not require the definite article before normally uncountable nouns (i.e. nouns like 'violence', 'obstinacy', 'furniture'), unless they are followed by modifiers in the form of prepositions or relative clauses (e.g. 'The furniture (*which is*) in this room is antique'). In Italian, modifiers of this type often have consequences for translation, as in the following example. (*Contextual information.* The

From:

Hervey, Sándor, Ian Higgins, Stella Cragie, Patrizia Gambarotta (2000)
Thinking Italian Translation. A Course in Translation Method: Italian to English.
London and New York: Routledge.

(Chapter 17: "Contrastive topic and practical: Determiners", pages 177-184)

protagonist lives alone in a house with a beautiful view of the harbour and the sea. She rarely goes out, and often stands gazing out of the window.)

La bellezza dalle sue finestre era la bellezza; i rumori che salivano dal porto erano i rumori.

This sentence contains two different SL uses of the definite article. The first 'la bellezza' is modified by 'da[ll]e': it is the particular beauty she sees from her windows. The second is generic beauty (i.e. beauty as a class, as in e.g. 'la bellezza è una specie di armonia', '[all] beauty is a kind of harmony'). Similarly, the first 'i rumori' are the particular ones she hears, and the second are generic (as in e.g. 'questa camera è isolata contro i rumori').

Clearly, the generic expressions cannot be translated using the English definite article:

The beauty from her windows was *the beauty*; the noises that rose from the harbour were *the noises*.

The immediate response to this sentence is to assume that the expressions italicized refer to things already mentioned in the text – *which* beauty? *which* noises? The trouble is that if the articles are omitted, as English grammar demands, then it is not clear that the second 'beauty' and the second 'noises' are not TL partitive constructions – i.e. that the reference is not to a part or sample of beauty or noises, as one might say '(some) milk and (some) eggs':

The beauty from her windows was beauty; the noises that rose from the harbour were noises.

Here, for discussion, are three possible ways round the problem; which is preferable will depend on the register, the emphases and possibly the prosodic features of the immediate context.

- (a) The beauty from her windows was Beauty; the noises that rose from the harbour were Noise.
- (b) The beauty from her windows was all of/the whole of beauty; the noises that rose from the harbour were all of/the whole of noise.
- (c) The beauty from her window was what beauty was; the noises that rose from the port were what noise was.

One reason why the differences between Italian and English definite articles are important is that Italian is so much more heavily nominalized than English, as we saw in Chapter 16. Where there is a noun, there either

is or is not an article; and significant instances of the presence or absence of articles are more numerous in a typical Italian text than in a typical English one. A good illustration of both points is found in expressions involving parts of the body. Here is an example for discussion, from the translation of *Trainspotting*. Compare it with (a) the interlinear back-translation and (b) the original English:

Lei lo guarda fisso per un istante o due, le labbra che le tremano, lo sguardo implorante. Sick Boy ha una faccia brutta, un'espressione malefica, da serpente, prima di schiaffarle in corpo quel cocktail che le arriva dritto al cervello.

(a) She looks at him fixedly for a moment or two, the lips which tremble to her, the look imploring. Sick Boy has an ugly face, a maleficent expression, of a serpent, before flinging to her into body that cocktail that arrives to her straight to the brain.

(b) Her lips are quivering as she gazes pleadingly at him for a second or two. Sick Boy's face looks ugly, leering and reptilian, before he slams the cocktail towards her brain.

As this example shows, the differences between English and Italian in respect of parts of the body are also a simple reminder that translating definite articles is not just a matter of keeping or omitting the article, but of deciding whether to exchange definite and indefinite articles, or even whether to use a completely different part of speech, such as a possessive adjective.

It is not only parts of the body that attract the characteristic choice between article and possessive. Here are two simple examples:

Sono nell'impossibilità di far fronte ai debiti. I just can't cope with my debts.

Non chiudere i quaderni. Don't close your books.

Sometimes, the three-way option (omit the article, swap definite and indefinite, use a possessive) is insufficient. Here is an example from the Vittorio Russo text in Practical 9.1; the reference is to all human souls, not those of specific individuals: 'Rafforzare il potere del papa sulle anime'. In context, 'strengthen the pope's power over the souls' is not an option; 'strengthen the pope's power over souls' sounds unconvincing, and is in any case potentially ambiguous – it could mean just *some* souls. A more accurate and idiomatic version would seem to require a different option, such as the partially overlapping translation 'the pope's power over people's souls'. If the alliteration here is unacceptable, an alternative might be 'the pope's power over the human soul' – but this is significantly different from the ST.

We have seen that the translator's choice may sometimes be between definite and indefinite article. As with the definite article, use of the indefinite article is broadly similar in the two languages, but there are certain variations. For example, the same form in Italian corresponds to English 'a/an' and 'one', and generalizations show divergent tendencies:

Lo studente che non conosce almeno una lingua straniera è nettamente svantaggiato. *A student who does not know at least one foreign language is at a definite disadvantage.*

Although 'the student' could be used here, it may sound unnatural. In some contexts, it might be even more natural to express the concept in the generic plural in English ('Students who ...'). Some of the simplest everyday constructions are reminders of the possible asymmetry of definite and indefinite articles, as in:

Tre volte al giorno. Three times a day.
2500 lire il pacchetto. 2,500 lire a packet.

It is one thing to spot how to translate an Italian article. It is another to spot cases where an idiomatic translation requires using an article in the TT where a different determiner is used in the ST. Particularly troublesome in this respect are the demonstratives *quello* and *questo*. In particular, ST demonstrative will often best be rendered with TT article and vice versa, or sometimes even by a pronoun. Here are some simple examples:

[Choosing a green shirt in preference to a red one] La preferisco a quella rossa. I prefer it to the red one.

[Shopping for clothes with a friend] Mi sta bene questa gonna? – Sì, ma quella rossa ti starebbe meglio. 'Does this skirt suit me?' 'Yes, but the red one would suit you better.'

Non è più quella di prima. She's not the woman she was.

In questi giorni l'Onu discute sulla criminalità transnazionale. Over the last few days UNO has been debating transnational crime.

Very often, the Italian demonstrative is best dropped altogether. Sometimes, an English demonstrative is preferable to an Italian article. Sometimes 'the ... one', 'the latter', etc. will be odd in context, and it will be more idiomatic to repeat the noun. Sometimes it is more idiomatic to render 'questo' with 'that' and 'quello' with 'this'. Here are some examples of TTs that may need revision. Revising them in discussion is a good way of sharpening

awareness of these asymmetries between Italian and English determiners, and of the need to use sometimes considerable grammatical transposition in translation.

[...] segue i discorsi e ride e gira intorno gli occhi verdi. E ogni volta i suoi occhi s'incontrano con quelli ombrati del Dritto [...]. *[...] she is following what's said and laughing and swivelling her green eyes around the room. And every time her eyes meet the shadowed ones of Dritto [...].*
(Calvino 1993: 87) (Calvino 1976: 77)

[In reply to someone boasting that he has stolen a sailor's pistol] Una pistola marinaia: sarà di quelle a acqua! A naval pistol; it must be one of those water ones.
(Calvino 1993: 76) (Calvino 1976: 68)

[...] le parole enigmatiche di Tancredi, quelle retoriche di Ferrara, quelle false ma rivelatrici di Russo, avevano ceduto il loro rassicurante segreto. *[...] the enigmatic words of Tancredi, the rhetorical ones of Ferrara, the false but revealing ones of Russo, had yielded their reassuring secret.*
(Tomasi di Lampedusa 1963a: 29) (Tomasi di Lampedusa 1963b: 34)

[Looking at paintings of ancestral lands and castles, the protagonist reflects on the fading of wealth and feudal power] E di già alcuni di quei feudi tanto festosi nei quadri avevano preso il volo e permanevano soltanto nelle tele variopinte e nei nomi. Altri sembravano quelle rondini settembrine ancor presenti ma di già radunate stridenti sugli alberi, pronte a partire. Already some of the estates which looked so gay in those pictures had taken wing, leaving behind only bright-coloured paintings and names. Others seemed like those September swallows which though still present are already grouped stridently on trees, ready for departure.
(Tomasi di Lampedusa 1963a: 26) (Tomasi di Lampedusa 1963b: 31)

The fourth type of determiner is the relative pronoun. The most common problems are posed by Italian relative clauses beginning with expressions corresponding to *whose/of which* or *preposition + whose/of which + noun* (e.g. '(on) the sides of which/(on) whose sides'). Often, a relative clause turns out to be unidiomatic or cumbersome in an English TT, and grammatical transposition is needed. Here are two typical examples. (*Contextual information.* The narrator is looking into a coach-house from

the doorway. The building has also been used as a makeshift gymnasium in the past.)

All'interno del vasto stanzone, in fondo al quale, nella penombra, tralucevano le sommità di due lustre, bionde pertiche da palestra, alte fino al soffitto, aleggiava un odore strano [...]. Il centro della rimessa era occupato da due vetture affiancate: una lunga Dilambda grigia, e una carrozza blu, le cui stanghe, rialzate, risultavano appena più basse delle pertiche retrostanti.

(Bassani 1991: 92)

Inside the enormous room, at the end of which, in the half light, there gleamed the tops of two pale polished gymnasium poles that reached the ceiling, an odd smell hung about [...]. The middle of the coach-house was taken up with two vehicles, side by side: a long grey Dilambda and a blue carriage, the shafts of which, standing on end, were only slightly lower than the gym poles.

(Bassani 1989: 116)

Grammatically, there is nothing wrong with the TT, even if 'at the end of which' and 'the shafts of which' sound bookish and a bit old-fashioned. In academic or technical texts in English, such structures are not unusual, but in most genres a TT containing more than an occasional instance would be off-puttingly leaden. Many translations from Italian do render relative pronoun with relative pronoun; this can have the advantage of preserving the ST sequential focus (and thus focus of attention), but at the cost of idiomaticity. As with so many grammatical structures, it often happens that this loss of idiomaticity actually disrupts the reading process, drawing attention less to what the text is saying and more to how it is trying to say it. There is therefore often less serious translation loss in restructuring the sentence than in keeping the ST relative pronouns and sequential focus. Here is a revised version of the Bassani TT which does this; compare the three texts in respect of grammar, idiomaticity and translation loss:

In the half-light at the end of the enormous room gleamed the tips of two pale, polished gym poles that reached the ceiling. Inside, an odd smell drifted in the air [...]. The middle of the coach-house was taken up with two vehicles, side by side: a long grey Dilambda and a blue carriage, its upturned shafts only slightly lower than the gym poles behind it.

Note that Bassani's translator has *added* a relative clause where there is none in the ST: 'alte fino al soffitto' is translated as 'that reached the ceiling'. In context, this surely reads better than a literal translation of the adjectival phrase would. The example is a reminder that translating from Italian is not simply a matter of getting rid of as many relative pronouns as possible! Indeed, it very often happens that a relative clause is inserted in English

when translating an Italian past participle used quasi-adjectivally. Here is an example adapted from the text in Practical 2.1:

Il fungo atomico levatosi nel cielo al momento dello scoppio del reattore. The mushroom cloud that rose into the sky when the reactor exploded.

A particular feature in Italian relative clauses is that Italian has a choice between two different forms of the relative pronoun: sometimes, 'che' could be ambiguous, referring to either of two antecedents. This ambiguity is easily avoided by using 'il quale', 'la quale', 'del(la) quale', etc., instead of 'che'. Here is a good example, adapted from the ST in Practical 2.1:

Una località in cui il 26 aprile del 1986 esplose – con conseguenze devastanti – un reattore della centrale nucleare, la quale era in funzione dal 1978.

If 'che' were used here instead of 'la quale', it would be unclear whether it referred to 'reattore' or to 'centrale'. English does not have such a choice: the only possible literal translation of the ST relative pronoun is 'which', but this would be ambiguous. The simplest idiomatic solution is to repeat 'power station':

A city where a reactor in the nuclear power station exploded on 26 April 1986 with devastating results. The power station had been in service since 1978.

(This TT incidentally also contains a good example of the use of 'where' to render 'in cui'; as so often, 'where' seems more idiomatic in this case than 'in which'.)

To conclude these comments on relative pronouns, here are two more examples with alternative TTs for discussion:

Un mare tutto trine di spuma, sul quale galere imbandierate caracollavano.

(a) A sea of white-flecked waves on which pranced beflagged galleons.

(b) A sea with beflagged galleons prancing on the white-flecked waves.

(c) A sea where beflagged galleons pranced on the white-flecked waves.

Si addormentò, in una sorta di disperata euforia, cullato dal trotto dei bai, sulle cui natiche grasse i lampioncini della vettura facevano oscillare la luce.

(a) He dozed off into a kind of tense euphoria, lulled by the trotting of the bays on whose plump flanks quivered the light from the carriage lamps.

(b) He dozed off, in a kind of despairing euphoria, lulled by the trotting bays and the light from the carriage lamps flickering on their plump flanks.

It is clear from the foregoing that although English and Italian share some types of determiner, they often use them in different ways. Some of the grammatical transpositions entailed in translating them are standard, others are optional and depend on context. Often, there are subtle differences which are imperceptible on first reading an ST, but which become very significant during the translation process. This is particularly true of articles, which can assume a stylistic, rather than a purely grammatical, role; in these cases, problems may arise in the reformulation, because of the whole context in which the ST was written and published.