Eye Dialect: Translating the Untranslatable

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1. Introduction

The term 'eye dialect' was first coined in 1925 by George P. Krapp in *The English Language in America* (McArthur 1998). The term was used to describe the phenomenon of unconventional spelling used to reproduce colloquial usage. When one encounters such spellings "the convention violated is one of the eyes, and not of the ear". Furthermore, eye dialect would be used by writers "not to indicate a genuine difference in pronunciation, but the spelling is a friendly nudge to the reader, a knowing look which establishes a sympathetic sense of superiority between the author and reader as contrasted with the humble speaker of dialect". While the phrase "the humble speaker of dialect" may smack of prescriptivism to the modern reader, this passage is important, as it finally gives a term for a device that has been used in literature for centuries. Krapp was referring to spellings like *enuff* for 'enough', *wimmin* for 'women', *animulz* for 'animals' and numerous other examples in which the standard spelling of the word belies in some way its pronunciation. One may envisage these spellings as a sort of insinuation on the part of the author that the character whose speech is depicted so would spell these words in this way, hence demonstrating a level of education and literacy substantially lower than the average.

Since Krapp's time, however, the term has acquired a wider meaning: it now covers any variation of spelling to indicate particular pronunciations or accents. Authors such as Wells (1982: 428) and Carter et al (1997: 46) use the term in this way, whereas others, such as Beal (2000) prefer the term "semi-phonetic spelling". In this article the term *eye dialect* will be used to refer to both forms of variant spelling, with the original meaning being distinguished as "eye dialect *sensu stricto*".

While it often retains the comic element Krapp refers to, the speaker in question is not always the butt of the joke: eye dialect may be used simply to indicate that a given speaker has such and such an accent. It may even be used in a context where the very readers have a similar accent and are amused by recognising what may be an exaggeration of the same. *Lets Stalk Strine*[1] 'Let's talk Australian' is one of a series of publications which takes a

humorous look at regional speech – in no way could it be said that the writer is nudging, winking at, or sniggering with the reader, as these books sell most in the localities in which the variety is heard. This viewing of one's own speech in the light-hearted mirror of eye dialect may not only be without malice, it may even have positive results, as the writer and reader acknowledge the full extent of their accent's diversity from the standard and this heightened self-awareness may well lead to higher appreciation of their (regional) identity.

While the term 'eye dialect' and its subsequent widening of meaning are of relatively recent date, the use of variant spellings to depict variant accents has been around for centuries, if not millennia. Shakespeare has the only Irish character in his plays, Captain Macmorris in Henry V (Act 3, Scene 2), say "What ish my nation?". What is possibly the earliest example in history depicts a substitution of phonemes which is exactly the contrary of that used by the Bard to portray an Irish accent. The origin of the term 'shibboleth' is to be found in the Book of Judges, 12, 5-6: forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed by the Gileadites after being identified by their inability to realise the initial post-alveolar fricative in 'shibboleth', pronouncing it instead as 'sibboleth'.

2. Eye dialect and translation

Based as it is on variations of pronunciation from the standard in one language and modifications of the standard orthography of the same, the presence of eye dialect in a text clearly poses problems for the translator. Few languages display such a tenuous relationship between sound and orthographic representation as there is in English, hence, the use of eye dialect *sensu stricto* may not be feasible in the target language. Furthermore, regional or class-based accents, and all the stereotypes they evoke, are unlikely to have exact counterparts in other languages.

Morini (2006) addresses such issues in dealing with source texts that are 'doubly foreign' outlining the strategies that can be adopted by the translator as follows:

> Whenever two or more variants of the same language inhabit the same textual space, the translator can: 1) write his target text in the standard version of the target language; 2) employ two or more variants of the target language; 3) translate one of the variants by a non-standard (incorrect, popular) variant of the target language.

In discussing the difficulties associated with such choices, the author notes that while 2) and 3) are clearly more effective than standardisation, by adopting these strategies, the translator risks transferring the text onto a sociolinguistic plane distant from that of the original, or creating hierarchies that are not present in the source text, respectively.

On the other hand, not all authors are so swift to dismiss standardisation. For instance, Leppihalme notes that the effects of standardisation are not always negative: the elements weakened or lost through this process may not be so readily missed if 'the reading experience is satisfying in other ways' (Leppihalme 2000: 266) and the translator is able to compensate for the loss by meeting the expectations of the addressees (who might be less interested in grasping the nuances expressed through dialect, than in concentrating on the plot of the narrative).

Morini rounds off his discussion by alluding to a fourth possibility: the creation of a synthetic target language, composed of incorrect or slightly modified words and phrases and by regional words and expressions phonetically adapted to the rules of the target language. More than one of these strategies may be adopted by a translator when approaching a text, indeed, there may be cases in which it is not easy to attribute a given feature to one strategy rather than another.

In this article, examples of eye dialect are illustrated in source texts in English, composed of excerpts from the works of three authors, dating from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. The orthographic variations in each are identified and classified, then the translations of these passages into Italian are examined in an attempt to verify which of the above strategies have been adopted by the translators in order to retain some trace of the characteristic speech of the fictional characters.

3. *Translations of passages containing eye dialect from English into Italian*

3.1 Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist

The first excerpt to be examined is from Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1838). The dialogue is that of a singularly unpleasant character by the name of Gamfield, a chimney sweep, who is presented as being cruel to animals and murderous to the young boys who have the misfortune to assist him as he plies his trade. On presenting himself in order to relieve the parish of the

burden that Twist represents, Gamfield is called upon to justify the deaths of boys he has previously been entrusted with:

> 'That's acause they damped the straw afore they lit it in the chimbley to make 'em come down again,' said Gamfield; 'that's all smoke, and no blaze; vereas smoke ain't o' no use at all in making a boy come down, for it only sinds him to sleep, and that's wot he likes. Boys is wery obstinit, and wery lazy, Gen'l'men, and there's nothink like a good hot blaze to make 'em come down vith a run. It's humane too, gen'l'men, acause, even if they've stuck in the chimbley, roasting their feet makes 'em struggle to hextricate theirselves' (Dickens 1994: 20).

Table 1 classifies the instances of eye dialect that can be found in the passage

FEATURE	EXAMPLES
/v/ => [w]	*wery*
/w/ => [v]	*vereas, vith*
/e/ => [ɪ]	*sinds*
Elision of interdental fricative (/ð/)	*'em*
Elision of alveolar stop (/t/) or realisation as glottal stop	*Gen'l'men*
Elision of labiodental fricative (/v/)	*o'*
Eye dialect *sensu stricto*	*wot, obstinit*
Intrusive 'h'	*hextricate*
Others	*nothink, chimbley*

As can be seen, this short passage is rich in eye dialect, however, the absence of features that the author could have availed of is hard not to note. There is no representation of h-dropping, a feature common in many working class accents, and especially common in the case of the pronouns 'he' and 'him'. Similarly, the diphthong /aɪ/ presents no anomalies, whereas in many accents of Southern England the starting point of the phoneme is farther back than in the standard, yielding eye dialect representations such as *loikes* for *likes*. The author does not specify the exact location in which this part of the story takes place, therefore it is not easy to make comparisons with any specific accent, we merely know that it is a small

town no more than seventy-five miles from the capital, the distance subsequently covered by Twist on foot.

The overall effect of the eye dialect in the passage, together with non-standard features on levels other than that of pronunciation, contributes to the depiction of a poorly-educated, as well as callous individual, contrasting with the well-educated, but hardly more sympathetic, gentlemen of the board-room.

Examination of this passage in Ugo Dettore's 1953 translation of the work shows that little or nothing of this local colour has been transferred into the target language:

> – Perché avevano bagnato la paglia prima di accenderla nel cammino per avvertirli di tornar giù, – disse Gamfield; – e allora è tutto fumo e niente fiamma; ma il fumo non serve a far scendere un ragazzo, perché lo addormenta, e lui non desidera altro. Signori miei, i ragazzi sono dei grandi ostinati e dei gran poltroni, e non c'è nulla di meglio di una bella fiammata per farli venir giù in fretta. Ed è anche un'opera meritoria, signori miei, perché, se son rimasti impigliati nel camino, a sentirsi bruciare i piedi fan certi balzi che riescono a liberarsi di colpo (Dickens 1953: 28).

The only feature of the passage that may represent a variation from Standard Italian is the elision of the final vowel of the infinitive verbs (e.g. *tornar, far scendere, venir*). This feature sounds slightly archaic in contemporary prose, although it was the norm in texts written in the same period as *Oliver Twist*. The feature is more common in colloquial speech in some regions, so it may be alternatively interpreted as a rather meek attempt to distinguish Gamfield's speech from that of the other characters. Apart from this, the general impression given is that of a surprisingly well-spoken, if not eloquent, chimney sweep, as there are no other cases of variant spelling and no grammatical or lexical anomalies.

3.2 Bram Stoker's Dracula

The second passage to be examined is from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). The dialogue portrays the speech of an unnamed labourer recorded in Jonathan Harker's journal on 30th September. To the contrary of Gamfield, the accent Stoker intended to render can be identified with some confidence: the action takes place in the centre of London, hence the speaker is most likely a Cockney. As Tom McArthur (1998: 129) notes:

"since the time of Dickens, Cockney dialogue has often been included in otherwise standard texts. A fairly consistent sub-orthography has developed for it", therefore, Stoker had a series of models on which to base his rendering of the working class London accent:

> That 'ere 'ouse, guv'nor, is the rummiest I ever was in. Blyme! But it ain't been touched sence a hundred years. There was dust that thick in the place that you might have slep' on it without 'urtin' of yer bones. An' the place was that neglected that yer might 'ave smelled ole Jerusalem in it. But the old chapel, that took the cike, that did! Me and my mate, we thort we wouldn't never git out quick enough. Lor', I wouldn't take less nor a quid a moment to stay there arter dark.

Table 2 classifies the instances of eye dialect that can be found in the passage:

Table 2. Instances of eye dialect

FEATURE	EXAMPLES
h-dropping	*'ere, 'ouse, 'urtin', 'ave*
/ɪ/ => [e]	*sence*
/e/ => [ɪ]	*git*
/ŋ/ => [n]	*urtin'*
Connected speech	*An', ole*
Eye dialect *sensu strictu*	*yer, guv'nor, thort*
/eɪ/ => [aɪ]	*cike*
Others	*slep, Lor', arter*

While Stoker exploits a series of variations to represent the speech of this character, a number of features typical of the Cockney accent are absent, features which the author also had the opportunity to represent, as the relevant phonemes are present in the dialogue.

Table 3. Eye dialect features not present in the labourer's speech

FEATURES OF THE COCKNEY ACCENT	PHONEMES PRESENT IN PASSAGE	COULD BE REPRESENTED AS
/aɪ/ = > [ɔɪ]	*I*	*Oi*
/ð/ => [v]	*that*	*vat*
/θ/ => [f]	*thick*	*fick*

Francesco Saba Sardi's translation of this passage displays a substantial attempt to render the variation from the standard that is found in the original:

> Quella casa lì, capo, è la più zozza che mai ci ho messo piede. Porcaccia! Sono cent'anni che nessuno la tocca. C'e una polvere così alta, là dentro, che uno può dormirci sopra senza farsi male agli ossicini, c'era un puzzo che sembrava di stare nell'antica Gerusalemme. Ma la vecchia cappella – quella, poi, era peggio di tutto. Me e il mio collega ci siamo detti: qui crepiamo se non veniamo fuori al più presto. Accidenti, neanche per un bel po' di grana non ci sarei rimasto dentro dopo il tramonto (Stoker 1979: 270).

Being unable to portray the accent depicted in the original via orthographic variation, Saba Sardi exploits several features to render the dialogue that of a non-standard speaker. Expressions typical of colloquial usage can be found: *Porcaccia*; *crepiamo*; the diminutive *ossicini*; and the unusual gender of *puzzo* (normally feminine). There are also instances of anomalous syntax: *Me e il mio collega*; and the inversion of the clauses in the last sentence. Finally, there is something clearly amiss in the relative clause in the first sentence. On the whole, it can be concluded that, without resorting to variant spelling, the translator has paid considerable attention to the depiction of the speech of this rough and ready labourer, indeed it could be argued that the impression is even stronger than the original: *Porcaccia* is definitely a more risqué exclamation than *blyme* (normally spelt 'blimey'); *we wouldn't never git out*, is translated as *qui crepiamo* (we'll croak it in here!).

3.3   J.K Rowling's Harry Potter series

Eye dialect is used extensively in the Harry Potter series. One character whose speech is consistently represented with variant spelling is the formidable, but kind-hearted, half-giant, Rubeus Hagrid. While his region of origin is never explicitly mentioned in the novels, in the film versions his accent is distinctly West Country.

The following excerpts are from *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (Rowling 2005: 216-217):

> "What's this? Feelin' sorry for me? Reckon I'm lonely or summat?"

> "They won' grow inter nuthin'," said Hagrid. "I got 'em ter feed ter Aragog"

> "It's … Aragog. … I think he's dyin'. . , He got ill over the summer an' he's not getting' better.... I don' know what I'll do if he … if he … We've bin tergether so long"

The depiction of the velar nasal stop realised in the alveolar position is the most consistent feature in these excerpts: Feelin', dyin', getting', nuthin'. There are examples of portrayal of connected speech, such as the elision of alveolars: won' grow, an' he's, don' know. There are two examples of eye dialect *sensu stricto*: nuthin' and the weak form of "been", bin, however, note that what, often rendered by other authors in these contexts as *wot*, is not modified. A clue to Hagrid's regional background may come from the rhotocity implied by the post-vocalic 'r' in syllables realised in the standard with a rhyme composed of a schwa: *inter, ter, tergether*. Areas where rhotocity survives in England include a large swathe of the country west of London and south of Birmingham and a small pocket in Lancashire. Note that it would probably be incorrect to classify *summat* as being eye dialect, in that it is a conventionalised spelling for a dialect variant of 'something', a feature particularly common in the north of England.

These three segments of dialogue are translated by Beatrice Masini as follows (Rowling 2006: 213-214):

> "Cosa c'è? Siete in pensiero per me? Pensate che mi sento solo o roba del genere?"

"Non diventano un bel niente" ribattè Hagrid. "Li tengo per darli da mangiare ad Aragog"

"È…lui…" singhiozzò Hagrid, gli occhi neri colmi di lacrime, asciugandosi la faccia col grembiule. "È…Aragog…Credo che sta morendo…si è ammalato d'estate e non migliora…Non so cosa faccio se lui…se lui…stiamo insieme da tanto tempo…"

While there are no examples of non-standard spelling, the translator has adopted other strategies. The dialect word *summat* is translated with a particularly colloquial phrase *o roba del genere*. Furthermore, Hagrid apparently does not know how to use the subjective: *Pensate che mi sento solo*; *Credo che sta morendo*. Finally, the use of the present indicative in *Non so cosa faccio*, rather than the future *farò*, would be considered incorrect in contemporary Italian.

Another example of variant spelling in the Harry Potter series is that of the sophisticated Fleur Delacoeur. A native speaker of French, her speech is rendered with modifications that most readers would effortlessly identify. The following examples come from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

"But evidently zair 'as been a mistake," she said contemptuously to Bagman. "E cannot compete. 'E is too young" (Rowling 2000: 241).

"An 'air from ze 'ead of a veela," said Fleur. "One of my grandmuzzer's" (Rowling 2000: 270).

The altered features are classified in Table 4 below:

Tab. 4. Altered Features

FEATURE	EXAMPLES
h-dropping	*'as, 'e, 'air, 'ead*
/ð/ => [z]	*zair, ze, grandmuzzer's*

It is of interest to note how the modification of the first phoneme of *there* to /z/ forces the author to change the spelling of the rest of the word. Representing the word as *zere* could quite plausibly lead to its being read as rhyming with 'here', therefore, for the sake of readability the rest of the

word is rendered with a spelling bearing a more regular phonographic relationship, indicating that the word should rhyme with 'fair', 'hair' etc.

Before examining the translations of these excerpts, the observation may be made that, in later works, Rowling adds an extra feature to Fleur's speech: her inability to realise the short close front lax vowel, realising it instead as the long close front tense vowel. Therefore, the native French speaker is grappling with the infamous 'ship/sheep' pair; despite the fact that she is now engaged to a native English speaker, Bill Weasley, her English pronunciation seems to be going downhill! The following example is from the last book in the series: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

> "Yes, and zat eez all very good," snapped Fleur, "but still eet does not explain 'ow zey know we were moving 'Arry tonight, does eet? Somebody must 'ave been careless. Somebody let slip ze date to an outsider. It is ze only explanation for zem knowing ze date but not ze 'ole plan" (Rowling 2007: 71).

Returning to the excerpts from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire,* Beatrice Masini's translations are as follows

> "Ma c'è uno sbalio, no?" disse sdegnosamente a Bagman. "Lui non può ontrare in gara. È troppo piccolo" (Rowling 2001: 236).

> "Un capello della testa di una Veela" conclude Fleur. "Era mia nonna" (Rowling 2001: 265).

While the second excerpt displays no anomalies, the first shows a very rare example of eye dialect surviving translation. In this exceptional case, the accent portrayed in the source is also recognisable in the target language. The variation from the standard is obviously based on different characteristics: the phonemic repertory of the target language possesses neither /h/, nor the 'ship' vowel, hence the translator cannot 'drop' the former, nor lengthen the latter. Instead, use is made of the stereotypical features of the French accent in Italian: the palatal lateral approximant is realised as a lateral alveolar approximant plus a vowel/semi-vowel (*sbalio*, rather than 'sbaglio'); and a vowel preceding a nasal is nasalised (*ontrare*, rather than 'entrare').

4. Conclusion

As is to be expected from the title of this article, the conclusions that can be drawn from this short survey of translations of passages containing eye dialect are on the whole negative. Since eye dialect (in both senses of the term) is a literary device that is based on the phonological and orthographic features of one language, rarely can such features survive the translation process.

The strategies that different translators adopt to compensate for this inability to render anomalous spelling in the source text have been examined. In the first example, a passage from *Oliver Twist*, the translator makes no attempt to differentiate the character's speech from that of his fictional interlocutors. Not only has the orthography been standardised, but so have numerous non-standard features on other linguistic levels that lie beyond the scope of the present article. Therefore, the translator has opted for strategy n. 1 in Morini's account. In the passages from *Dracula* and *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, on the other hand, the labourer's and Hagrid's dialogue, respectively, display strategies adopted by the translators to compensate for the lack of eye dialect by resorting to anomalies on levels other than the graphological/phonological: lexis pertaining to the colloquial register and non-standard grammar, thereby corresponding to strategy n. 3. On the other hand, the Italian version of another book in the Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter e il Calice di Fuoco*, contains an example of one of the rare cases in which eye dialect *can* survive translation. In this case the character is a foreigner and speaks with an accent the features of which are recognisable both by readers in the source and in the target language. It is of importance to note that, in order for this device to be successful in the translation, the accent must be more or less equidistant on a scale of 'foreignness' from the source and target language speech community. The example we have examined is that of a character with a French accent, which is easily recognisable as such by both English and Italian readers. Hence, we could interpret this as being the use of two variants of the target language (strategy n. 2), in which distance on a sociolinguistic level equivalent to that in the source text is maintained. On the other hand, it may be argued that there is hardly a widely recognised orthography to represent a French accent in Italian, therefore, the translator has made use of the synthetic language (strategy n. 4).

We may conclude with a simple consideration: the task facing the translator of rendering the effect that eye dialect produces in the original

text is daunting, if not totally doomed to failure; at best the effect can be only partially transferred, the remainder joins the myriad other features that are 'lost in translation'.

Note

[1] This work, published in Sydney in 1965, was a collection of humorous newspaper articles written by Alistair Morrison under the pseudonym Afferbeck Lauder (alphabetical order) purporting to be Professor of Strine Studies at the University of Sinny (Sydney).

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