

TRANSLATING A NON-STANDARD VARIETY OF RUSSIAN INTO ITALIAN: THE CASE OF THE ODESAN LANGUAGE

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Abstract. This paper aims to illustrate how a non-standard Russian variety is translated into the Italian language, by analysing some literary works. The analysis focuses on the so-called ‘Odesa language,’ a contact variety of Russian that originated in the city of Odesa at the end of the 18th century. This variety of Russian spoken in Odesa differs from the other varieties of Russian, as it emerged in a multilingual and multicultural space and shows several influences and calques from the languages present in the city. The results of this contact are found at all linguistic levels and can be attributed mainly to the strong presence of Yiddish and Ukrainian substrates. Considering that the language of Odesa displays different non-standard features, it may be challenging for any translator to convey certain linguistic structures. Therefore, I suggest that a successful translating practice should acknowledge the influence of other languages and thus resort to a third language as a mediating language to translate from one language into another. Focusing on the literary works of Isaac Babel, in particularly on *Odessa Stories*, I will try to show how the linguistic features of the Odesan language are displayed in the Italian translation. In order to do this, I will use three different Italian editions of *Odessa Stories*, comparing them with the Russian one. Furthermore, I will try to figure out which Italian edition is more adherent to the Russian original and which conserves the non-standard nature and the typical grammatical constructions of the Odesa language.

Keywords: translation; Odesa language; language interference; Odessa Stories; Isaac Babel

1. Introduction

Since its foundation in 1794, the city of Odesa¹ has been surrounded by various myths concerning its historical origins, its cultural space, and, most importantly, its

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¹ In Ukrainian, the city's name is spelled with a single 's' – Odesa – while in Russian it appears with a double 's' – Odessa.

In this article, I use different spellings depending on the context: Odesa in relation to contemporary times according to the norms of spelling established by Ukraine's government in order to respect what

multiethnic character. Over the centuries, this city attracted the attention of many artists, historians, and various figures, contributing to building a set of myths that persist nowadays within the Russian culture and outside its borders. Odesa has always been known for being a multiethnic city, since it was populated by different and heterogeneous communities, including Ukrainians, Jews, Russians, Belarusians, Poles, Greeks, Italians, Germans, French, Armenians, Bulgars, and Moldavians. Because of its liberal climate, economic centre, and its major port, Odesa attracted merchants, traders, and other people from different countries. Here, they were able to conduct their own affairs and enjoy rights, as the newly settled city was free from taxation and any form of restriction. The atmosphere of tolerance and respect, as well as the economic opportunities of the city attracted a large number of Jews in the course of the 19th century, whereby they could create new lives and conduct their own business activities without being victims of discrimination and persecution of various kinds. Towards the end of the 19th century, Odesa's population dramatically arose due to increased immigration, becoming the fourth-largest city of the Russian Empire after Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Warsaw.

By the end of 19th century, the city's population was extremely heterogeneous. The population was mainly composed of Russians, Jews, and Ukrainians. Russians held the majority of administrative positions, while Jews were predominant in the middle and lower classes, and only a small percentage of the population, mostly labourers, were Ukrainians. The Jewish population was the second largest non-Russian speaking group and occupied the full socioeconomic spectrum of the city (Grenoble 2017: 5). Because of its humorous character and the strong presence of Jews and criminals, Odesa has acquired in the course of its history the reputation of 'capital city of humour,' 'Jewish' city and 'town of criminals' in the Russian-speaking cultural environment (Sicher 2015: 221). The ethnically heterogeneous population, who had settled in the city during the 19th century, had contributed to the development of a unique contact variety known in the post-Soviet culture as the "Odesa language" (odes'ka mova; odesskij jazyk)².

This contact variety emerged during the 19th century as people from different nations settled in the city, and it became a means of communication among them. The Odesa language is often described as a form of 'corrupted' Russian, a broken language that enabled inter-ethnic communication in the region. This idiom shows a diverse range of norm violations that seem due to language contact, i.e., they can be explained as effects of the influence of the languages present in the town. The results of linguistic contact can be seen at all linguistic levels (phonological, lexical, morphological, and syntactic). The analysis of the Odesa language is, however, hampered by the high variability of its features and the scarcity of available sources; the only data about Odesa language are a collection of written records made between the 2nd half of the 19th and the 1st half of the 20th century. On the basis of a few accounts, it is likely that this

the sovereign country has chosen, and Odessa in relation to the stories by Babel set in the city on the Black Sea.

² Although the variety spoken in Odesa is an urban variety, and thus ascribable to the category of dialect, because of its prestige and representation in literature, it is often referred to as a language (e.g. Stepanov 2004, 2013, 2019; Kabanen 2008/ 2010/2021; Bakunsev 2011; Verschik 2003/2007; Stetsyuchenko, Ostashko 1999; Karpenko 1991; Sicher 2012 etc.).

variety was spoken by people with different native languages who used Russian as a lingua franca. Even though the Odesa language is widely known in Russian popular culture, and prominently features in literature, television, jokes, books, and oral tradition, it remains an understudied phenomenon and lacking in with limited linguistic documentation.

The first attempt to study the peculiarities of Russian speech in Odesa was made in the 19th century by Konstantin Zeleneckij, a professor at the Richelieu lyceum. In an academic work published in 1855, Zeleneckij argued that the local Russian speech was characterized by certain inaccuracies, such as the use of words and expressions from other languages, incorrect use of declensions and stresses, and various deviations widespread among the local population. In Zeleneckij's point of view, such inaccuracies could be traced to the influence of foreigners who had settled in the region.

Over the past few decades, the Odesa language has attracted the attention of linguists. Many have attempted to define its status, but no consensus has yet been reached, leaving it an open question. Some researchers examine this idiom in relation to various known linguistic phenomena, such as mixed languages (Mustajoki 2013), creoles, and pidgins (Kalmykova 2015), or koine (Stepanov 2004). Others consider it either a Russian-Jewish variety (Verschik 2003) or a regional variety of Russian (Bakuntsev 2011). Still, some argue that it cannot be directly attributed to any of these linguistic phenomena (Kabanen 2010: 287). Nevertheless, most modern scholarly works on the Odesa language focus on its linguistic features and how it is perceived in the imagination of people in the Russian-speaking cultural realm (Kabanen 2010/2019/2021; Stepanov 2013/2019/2004; Mečkovskaja 2006; Grenoble 2015/2017/2022; Verschik 2003).

2. Research Goals

The uniqueness of the Odesa language has become, over the century, a primary subject in different sources, particularly in the prose of the Soviet writer Isaak Babel, who contributed to spread out the myth of the Odesa language and shape a set of stereotypes and figures in the post-Soviet popular culture. In this research, the non-standard features of the Odesa language, as presented in the Russian edition of Babel's cycle *Odessa Stories*, will be compared across three Italian translations by Rosana Platone (2012), Franco Lucentini (1988), and Giovanni Pacini (2022) to investigate the differences between these versions. In particular, the current research aims to explore how the traits of the Odesa language are displayed in the Italian translations and determine which version better conveys the typical constructions and the vernacular character of the Odesan speech. In addition, we will investigate whether a secondary source language or variety was used during the translation process from the original text to the target one. Specifically, we will analyze the main peculiar features occurring in the characters' dialogues to observe their transformation in the Italian versions and explain them, focusing on linguistic interference possibly due to a third intermediary language, such as Yiddish or Ukrainian. To achieve this, we will describe each feature

as it appears in the different stories, providing a clear picture of the most salient traits of Babel's language.

3. Language of Odesa in Literature

3.1. Translating a Non-Standard Variety in Literature

Translating a literary text can be a complex process and poses a challenge for any translator, especially when encountering items such as vocabulary, grammatical structures, and *realia* specific to varieties and cultures different from the target one. Therefore, the translator should take responsibility for preserving the hybrid character of the text, including its multilingual elements and the cultural context in which it was created. Based on this last point, the translator should also take into account the author's biography in order to understand which aspects influence their writing style and ideas. Despite the large number of literary texts containing non-standard and dialect features, studies dedicated to hybrid languages in fiction, particularly in their written form, remain scarce (Grenoble 2015). In this research, I will examine a non-standard Russian variety (Odesa language) and its translations into Italian, which at times incorporate regional and non-standard varieties of the Italian language. It is important to note, however, that the translation of contact varieties in the Italian context has traditionally been overlooked as a subject of research in translation studies (Cavagnoli 2014: 174).

A possible reason for this narrow-minded approach to the translation of hybrid languages stems from the tradition, within the Italian publishing industry, where a translated text is deemed acceptable only if it reads fluently and shows no deviation. As a result, the final text is often manipulated, with foreign elements and stylistic peculiarities replaced by standard features of the target language. In our opinion, disregarding the hybrid features in a literary work results in a significant distortion of the text's cultural heritage and the community that produced it.

Therefore, the translator should employ translation strategies in order to preserve the otherness of the source text which constitutes its core. To achieve this and retain the peculiarities in the target text, different translation strategies must be chosen, particularly those that can reflect the hybrid character of the original text. One such strategy is the use of translation equivalence, that best conveys the specific characteristics and nuances of the source text. In translation studies, that of "translation equivalent" is a fundamental concept that refers to a word, phrase, or expression in the target language that carries the same meaning or serves the same function as a linguistic element in the source language. In other words, it is the unit in the target language that conveys the meaning and effect of the original word or phrase within the specific context of the translation. This concept is often debated because a direct or exact equivalent does not always exist between two languages, especially when it comes to cultural nuances, idioms, wordplay, or other forms of non-literal language. Therefore, translators must consider various aspects such as context, communicative function, and the original intention to select the most appropriate equivalent (Newmark

1988). However, it must be acknowledged that some loss of meaning in specific traits and expressions during the translation process is inevitable. In the context of translating contact varieties into Italian, one of the strategies often adopted by Italian translators is resorting to the varieties of the Italian spoken language, such as diatopic (i.e., regional and local) varieties and diastratic (i.e., popular) Italian. Some examples of such strategies can be found in numerous novels of Anglo-American and African literature, such as the works of Mark Twain and Amos Tutuola (Cavagnoli 2014).

These strategies are employed to introduce local colour, as well as to transpose the vernacular nature and the colloquial forms contained in the characters' dialogues. As we will see in the course of our analysis, such strategies were adopted also to convey the folk traits of Babel's characters' speech in the *Odessa Stories*.

3.2. The Odesa language as a Literary Dialect

Although research on the Russian spoken in Odesa is scarce, some studies have examined the Odesa language and its role in literature. Notably, Lenore Grenoble's study (2015) is one such investigation into the Odesa language's literary significance. Given that the Odesa language displays different non-standard traits and predominantly appears in written texts such as fictional narratives, humorous feuilletons, and jocular textbooks, Grenoble argues that it can be considered as a literary dialect (Grenoble, 2015, p. 344). Literary dialect refers to the depiction of non-standard language in literature and is defined as an author's attempt to represent a regional and social speech in written form (Grenoble 2017: 8). According to Grenoble (ibid.), the author deliberately chooses to portray a character speaking a certain language to convey insights into their history and social status within the narrative.

Grenoble points out three different techniques for representing the Odesa language in literature, each used by various Odesan authors. According to Grenoble, some Russian writers, born and raised in Odesa, including I. E. Babel, V. E. Zhabotinskii S.S. Iushkevich, used the Odesa dialect in their works resorting to three different techniques: (1) *selective reproduction*, in which marked features of the Odesa dialect are presented frequently enough to signal the use of a different dialect or language without compromising the reader's understanding, assuming they are not proficient in both varieties; (2) *explicit attribution*, in which the narrator or another character directly identifies a speech act as nonstandard; and (3) *verbal transposition*, or devised transitional interference, where a character's speech is reported as if they were speaking their first language (L1), but influenced by their second (L2).

Babel definitely resorts to the technique of 'selective reproduction,' in which the non-standard forms occurring in the characters' fictional dialogues do not interfere with the readability of the text (Grenoble 2015: 345-346). In other words, bilingual competence is not required, as the reader can infer the meaning of foreign words and non-standard constructions through the context or their transparent meaning (Grenoble 2015). This is clearly displayed by Babel in his tales, where Yiddish words regarding the cultural and religious spheres as well as Yiddish syntax with Russian words occur frequently. Aside from the challenges of translating Babel's hybrid language, it is

important for the translator to retain those cultural and extralinguistic aspects that constitute the basis for the “Odesanness” of the original text.

3.3. Isaac Babel and the Odessa Stories

As mentioned before, when a translator approaches a text with multilingual traits, they are compelled to consider not only linguistic and extralinguistic factors but also the biography of the author. Isaac Babel (1894-1940) is considered one of the greatest writers of Russian Jewry and one of the most important representatives of the so-called “Odessa School.” Babel was born in Moldavanka, a Jewish quarter of Odessa, to Jewish parents. He grew up in a Russian-speaking home, though he understood Yiddish and learnt Hebrew and French by reading Maupassant. As reported in many studies, his life was deeply marked by a constant conflict between his Russian identity and a purely Jewish identity. In 1939, he was arrested, charged with terrorism and then executed in 1940. His surviving manuscripts were confiscated by the NKVD and destroyed.

Following the upheavals caused by the Bolshevik Revolution, Babel decided to write a cycle of tales set in Odessa, with the purpose of preserving the city’s cultural heritage and depicting Moldavanka with its Jewish gangsters. Therefore, in the early 1920s, he rented a room in the Jewish neighbourhood to closely observe and authentically recreate the atmosphere and the Odesan citizens’ way of speaking as faithfully as possible. *Odessa Stories* was first published by Babel in Odessa in 1921, and in 1924 it appeared in Soviet magazines before being collected into book form, which brought him fame within Soviet Literature. The standard Russian collection of Babel’s tales is prevalently composed of four stories, including *The King* (Король), *How It Was Done in Odessa* (Как это делалось в Одессе), *Lyubka the Cossack* (Любка Казак), and *The Father* (Отец). However, in our analysis will also incorporate additional stories that feature significant traits of the Odessa Language. These stories can be viewed as tales of an exotic, vanished world, where Jews held a prominent place before the Russian Revolution (Sicher 2015: 233). Babel skilfully portrays a romanticized and ironized Moldavanka, capturing the adventures of its gangsters and creating a fictional and mythological imagine of the Odessa’s Jewish criminality.

In the cycle of *Odessa stories*, Babel writes using colourful metaphors, varying between standard Russian and the Odessa language; interestingly, the Odessisms mainly occur in the dialogues among characters. In his tales, Babel chooses certain morphosyntactic features and particular phraseologisms and lexicon based on the character, assigning a distinct linguistic code to those who are representatives of the Jewish community of Odessa. Babel successfully recreates the atmosphere of the Moldavanka and its dwellers by introducing items belonging to the Yiddish and the Jewish cultures. Many of the grammatical constructions in Babel’s works are typical to some Jewish-Russian varieties (Verschik 2003), whereas others are characteristic of Southern Russian dialects. Furthermore, some of these features are nowadays vastly known in Russian popular culture as stereotypical traits of Odesan Jews and employed in television and films to evoke the Odesan humour, which is strictly related to the Jewish humor (Kabanen 2021; Grenoble & Kantarovich 2017). This is because,

according to many experts (Verschik 2003; Grenoble 2015/2017), the Odessa jargon was prevalently spoken by the Odessa Jewish community. As far as the Ukrainian interference is concerned, the presence of Ukrainian features in the Odessa language can be seen in the use of prepositions (e.g., *за* + ACC instead of *о* + PREP, *с* + GEN instead of *ом* + GEN), lexical borrowings (e.g., *касун*, *вечерянь*, *тикать*), and pronouns (e.g. the use of *мене/мине*).

4. Translating Babel through Intermediary Languages: The Role of Yiddish or Ukrainian Languages

Translation from an intermediary language occurs when translation is not made directly from the original source language (Al Shunnaq 2019: 124). When translation occurs through an intermediary language, at least three languages participate in the process: (i) the source language, (ii) the intermediary language, and (iii) the target language. In other cases, however, the number of the languages involved in the process can be higher, as the source texts can have multilingual features. According to Al Shunnaq (2019: 124), an intermediary language can be defined as a language that mediates between two different languages. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that, unfortunately, the studies concerning intermediary translation are quite neglected in the world of scholarship (Mirzoeva 2016).

Translating Babel's works has always presented a challenge for any translator especially due to his stylistic peculiarities, colourful metaphors, and playful contrasts achieved through the use of creative language. In his literary works, the Yiddish component is crucial, as it is rooted in Babel's origins, with over a third of Odessa's population between the 19th century and the 20th century being Yiddish speakers (Sicher 2012: 99). Since his childhood Babel grew up among a mix of speakers of different languages. Although he wrote primarily in Russian, it was not strictly Babel's native language and he seemed to be fluent in at least Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish and French. From the biography studies by Sicher (2012) we know that Babel grew up in a Yiddish-speaking milieu, his first literary stories were written in French, and that he was also fluent in Ukrainian. So, considering Babel's Jewish origins and his fluency in several languages, and tendency to write in multiple languages, we assume that the translator should be aware of the Yiddish and Ukrainian linguistic influence and, as a result, recognize Yiddish and Ukrainian as possible intermediary languages during the translating process, as Babel's multilingualism could have left a clear mark on his prose.

However, trying to figure out which language is the mostly involved in the interference within the source text is a challenging task. As we will see later, in several cases it is difficult to ascertain whether Yiddish or Ukrainian is responsible for certain hybrid constructions, as both languages contribute significantly to the ungrammatical (i.e., non-standard) nature of the Odessa language. Considering the *Odessa stories*, the narration in the source text is given in Russian, but the dialogues of the characters display several 'corrupted' forms caused by the Yiddish and the Ukrainian influence. Therefore, it is inevitable to resort to an intermediary language when addressing the

deviations in the text. At the same time, it is important to comprehend which strategies the translator should use to interpret and translate constructions and words that do not belong to the standard variety of Russian.

As mentioned before, it is difficult to establish whether Yiddish or Ukrainian causes the linguistic deviations. However, given Babel's deliberate purpose to accurately recreate the speech of Odessa's Jews and his intentional use of Yiddishisms and other hybrid forms, we can assume that the grammatical constructions occurring in the speech of his characters are mainly the result of Yiddish interference. In light of this complexity, how can we determine whether the translator is aware of the Yiddish and Ukrainian linguistic interference? Firstly, we must consider that in the various Italian editions analyzed in this research, it was impossible to ascertain whether the translators used a third intermediary language when translating from the Russian source text into Italian. However, the three Italian are aware of the peculiarity of the Odessa language in Babel's works, as reported in their prefaces:

“In 1955 (or '56) I knew and I did not know Russian. *The Odessa Stories* posed a particular challenge due to their double local Jewish and Ukrainian colouring. Therefore, I would not have accepted Einaudi's proposal to translate them, if I had not discovered that Mrs. Babel, the writer's widow, was my neighbour.”³ (Lucentini 1988)

“Babel's language is enriched - among other things – by the powerful integration of Odesan speech and its various components, including foreign, Jewish elements.”⁴ (Pacini 2022)

Based on such statements, we can assume that the translators were aware of the hybrid linguistic features contained in the source text. Therefore, it is plausible that both Pacini and Lucentini resorted to a certain knowledge of Yiddish and Ukrainian when translating the Russian text into Italian.

Rossana Platone recognizes the strong influence of Yiddish and Ukrainian, as well as the ‘ungrammatical’ nature of Babel's language. She also acknowledges Babel's extraordinary skill in using *skaz*, a traditional Russian oral narrative form. As she notes in the preface introducing the edition of 2012:

“Babel skilfully masters the language of the Odesites, a blend of Ukrainian, Yiddish, Polish, and Russian, a mixture of jargons, a melting pot of proverbs of various origins, together with the characteristic errors of Russian-Jewish speech.”⁵ (Platone 2012)

5. Analysis of *Odessa Stories*

In this section, the source text of Babel's *Odessa Stories* (“Odesskie Rasskazy,” *Sobranie sočinenij v četyrech tomach*, Vremja, Moskva, 2006) will be compared with three different Italian translations, namely (1) *Racconti di Odessa*, translated by Franco

³ Translated by the author (F. B.)

⁴ Translated by the author (F. B.)

⁵ Translated by the author (F. B.)

Lucentini (Torino, Einaudi, 1988), (2) *Racconti di Odessa*, edited by Rossana Platone (Milano, BUR, 2012), and (3) *Racconti di Odessa*, translated by Gianlorenzo Pacini (Milano, Mondadori, 2022).

The comparison of parallel passages aims to explain the distinct linguistic features of the Odessa language and determine which Italian edition best reflects the ungrammatical and non-standard elements of the Odessan speech, as well as whether the translator has resorted to an intermediary language in the translation process. The analysis is based on select fragments of the stories, chosen for their critical features. These fragments are taken from *Odessa stories*, in particular from the tales *The King* (Korol), *How It Was Done in Odessa* (Kak eto delalos v Odesse), *The Father* (Otets) and *Sunset* (Zakat).

5.1. *The King*

Table (1) shows passages from “The King” in their original version and how they are translated into the three Italian versions. The non-standard forms in the source text are highlighted in bold, as well as their respective translations in the target text.

Source text	1 st Italian translation (Lucentini 1988)	2 nd Italian translation (Platone 2012)	3 rd Italian translation (Pacini 2022)
<p>- Беня, ты знаешь, что мине сдается?</p> <p>- Я имею Вам сказать пару слов.</p> <p>- Беня знает за облову.</p> <p>- Пусть вас не волнует этых глупостей.</p>	<p>-Benja, lo sai che mi pare?</p> <p>- Devo dirvi due parole.</p> <p>- Benja sa della retata.</p> <p>- non preoccupatevi di certe inezie.</p>	<p>“Benja, sai cosa mi sembra?”</p> <p>“Ho da dirvi un paio di parole.”</p> <p>“Benja sa della retata.”</p> <p>“e non vi preoccupino queste sciocchezze.”</p>	<p>“Benja, sai che mi pare a me?”</p> <p>“Ho due parole da dirvi”</p> <p>“Benja sa della retata.”</p> <p>“non state a preoccuparvi di queste sciocchezze...”</p>

Table 1: Passages from *The King*

In the select fragments, the influence of Yiddish and Ukrainian is extremely evident. In the sentence ‘*Беня, ты знаешь, что мине сдается?*’, the interferences of Ukrainian are displayed through the use of the Ukrainianized form of the personal pronoun *мине* ‘me-dative’ (instead of the Russian *мне*) and the Ukrainian verb *здається* ‘appear’ rather than the Russian equivalent *кажется*. Due to the influence of Yiddish and Ukrainian, some verbs such as *иметь* ‘have’ and *делать* ‘do’ are used differently than in Russian.

In the utterance *Я имею Вам сказать пару слов* ‘I have to say you a few words,’ the verb *иметь* functions as a modal verb, conveying a sense of duty or necessity. In Ukrainian, the verb *мати* ‘have’ carries the same meaning (as seen in *я маю іхати до Києва* ‘I have to go to Kyiv’). Furthermore, the Ukrainian verb *мати* ‘have’ can also be used in possessive constructions, as in *я маю книгу* ‘I have a book,’ unlike the Russian locative possessive construction *у меня есть книга*, lit. ‘the book is at

mine's.' We must note that the same functions are expressed by the Yiddish equivalent *hobn* 'to have.' Since both Yiddish and Ukrainian are "have-languages," it is difficult to determine which language causes the abovementioned syntactic construction, i.e., either the Ukrainian *я маю вам сказати кілька слів* 'I have a few words to say to you', lit. 'I have to you-DAT say few words,' or the Yiddish *Ikh hob a por verter aykh tsu zogn*, lit. 'I have to you-ACC/DAT a few words to say' (Stepanov 2013: 400). We might assume that the constructions with the Russian verb *иметь* 'to have' in the Odesa language are influenced by Yiddish, with additional support of the Ukrainian grammatical system. As for the Italian translations, no significant differences are noticeable, since the construction containing the verb *avere* 'to have' conveying a sense of duty or necessity also exists in the Italian language, as in *ho da dirvi due parole*, 'I have to tell you a few words.'

Based on this aspect, it is crucial to keep in mind that the perception of the original text by a Russian-speaking reader significantly differs from that of an Italophone reader, as the have-construction in Italian – unlike its Russian counterpart – is not ungrammatical. However, it is interesting to note that the translation by Lucentini uses the verb *dovere* 'must,' suggesting that he may not have relied on Yiddish or Ukrainian but instead translated it directly from Russian.

Other salient and typical features of the Odesa language include variants of case government that are probably due to Ukrainian interference, as well as an overuse of the genitive plural instead of the accusative form. For instance, in the Odesa language, instead of the preposition *о*, *об* 'about' followed by the prepositional case, it is common to use the preposition *за* 'for' followed by the accusative case, as in *Беня знает за облову* 'Benja knows ZA-about the raid-ACC.' This pattern reflects the Ukrainian usage, as in *она знає за тебе* 'she knows about you,' lit. 'she knows ZA-about you-ACC.'

5.2. How It Was Done in Odessa

Table (2) present passages from the story *How it was done in Odessa* in their original version, along with its/their translation into the three Italian versions.

Source text	1 st Italian translation (Lucentini 1988)	2 nd Italian translation (Platone 2012)	3 rd Italian translation (Pacini 2022)
- Беня говорит мало, но говорит смачно . - Он думает об выпить хорошую стопку водки, об дать кому-нибудь морде [...]	-Benja parla poco, ma parla saporito . - Pensa a bersi un buon gotto di vodka e a picchiare qualcuno sul muso...	“Benja parla poco, ma c’è succo in quel che dice.” -Pensa a bere un buon bicchiere di vodka, a picchiare qualcuno sul muso...	“Benja parla poco, ma parla colorito .” -Pensa a mandare giù un bel bicchiere di vodka, a rompere il muso a qualcuno...

Table 2: Passages from *How It Was Done in Odessa*

The Odesa language features a unique lexicon, enriched by borrowings from Ukrainian, Yiddish, and other languages. Ukrainian has contributed the most foreign

lexical elements to the Odesan speech. Some of these borrowings can be found in Babel's tales, as illustrated in the example: *Беня говорит мало, но говорит смачно* 'Benja does not talk a lot, but he speaks deliciously.' In this sentence, the Ukrainian adverb *смачно* is used to mean 'deliciously.'

Rosanna Platone's translation offers an interesting version by introducing the word *succo* 'juice,' used here in a figurative sense. In Italian, the word *succo* can serve as a synonym for 'gist,' 'essence' when discussing the main topic of a conversation, speech, or problem, as in *il succo della questione* 'the gist (lit. the juice) of the matter.' Calques from Yiddish are more evident at the syntactic level. In the *Odessa stories*, several object infinitives are preceded by a preposition. This structure is ungrammatical in standard Russian but common in Yiddish, as shown in the following example: *Он думает об выпить хорошую стопку водки, об дать кому-нибудь мордё* 'he thinks about drinking a glass of vodka, hitting someone on the muzzle.' This is a calque from the Yiddish *Er trakht vegn oysdrinkn a glezl, vegn shlogn emetsn* 'he thinks about drinking a glass of vodka, hitting someone on the muzzle.' A similar construction is also found in Italian, where a dependent clause can be realized using a preposition (*di* or *a*) followed by the infinitive verb: *pensa a bere* 'he thinks about drinking.'

5.3. The Father

Table (3) provides passages from *The Father* in their original version, along with its/their translation in the three Italian versions.

Source text	1 st Italian translation (Lucentini 1988)	2 nd Italian translation (Platone 2012)	3 rd Italian translation (Pacini 2022)
<p>- Если хотите что-нибудь наблюдать из жизни, то зайдите к нам на двор есть с чего посмеяться...</p> <p>- но я выведу этот грязь.</p> <p>- Или сделайте со мной что-нибудь, или я делаю конец моей жизни...</p>	<p>-Se volete imparare qualche cosa dalla vita, entrate qui da noi. Riderete.</p> <p>- Ma adesso, - gridò, - faremo pulizia!</p> <p>- O vedete di farci qualche cosa, papà, o io la faccio finita e m'ammazzo.</p>	<p>“Se volete osservare qualcosa della vita, entrate nel nostro cortile, c’è da ridere...”</p> <p>“ma la butterò fuori questa sporcizia.”</p> <p>“O fate qualcosa per me papà, o metterò fine alla mia vita...”</p>	<p>“se volete imparare qualcosa dalla vita entrate da noi, vi farete due risate...”</p> <p>“ma ve lo sistemo questo sporco!”</p> <p>“O voi fate qualcosa di me, papà, oppure io la faccio finita con la mia vita...”</p>

Table 3: Passages from *The Father*

In the first excerpt, it is difficult to determine which language influenced the deviant use of preposition *c* + genitive case instead of *на* + instrumental case with the verb *смеяться* 'laugh,' as both Yiddish and Ukrainian may have contributed to this governance pattern: *с чего посмеяться* (Russian) / *сміятися з чимось* (Ukrainian) / *lakhn fun epes* (Yiddish). The same issue arises in cases, where gender agreement is violated, as shown in the following example: *но я выведу **этот грязь*** 'but I take out

this-MASC dirt-FEM.' In this case, the agreement violation could be attributed to both Yiddish and Ukrainian, as the equivalents of the noun *грязь* ('dirt,' feminine in Russian) are masculine nouns in both languages, e.g., *бруд* (Ukrainian) and *der koyn* (Yiddish). In the Italian translations, the rendering of this deviant form is missing, as the agreement between the adjective and the noun is maintained: *ma la butterò fuori questa sporcizia* 'but I'll throw out this-FEM dirt-FEM'; *ma ve lo sistemo questo sporco* 'but I'll take care of this-MASC dirt-MASC for you.' In the final fragment, we can observe how the verb *делать* 'to do' is used in unusual and unexpected combinations. According to Stepanov (2013: 235), its widespread use is likely influenced by Yiddish, as in *делать конец* 'to put (lit. do) an end to,' mirroring the expression *der sof makhn* 'do the end.' Also in this case, the effect of the Odessan 'broken' grammar is lost in translation, as the Italian translators employ idiomatic expressions with the same meaning, such as *farla finita* 'lit. make it finished' to convey the idea of putting an end to one's life.

5.4. *Sunset*

Table (4) presents a passage from the story *Sunset* in its original version, along with its translations in the three Italian versions.

Source text	1 st Italian translation (Lucentini 1988)	2 nd Italian translation (Platone 2012)	3 rd Italian translation (Pacini 2022)
- Заворачивайте биндуг, дяденька Крик, бо сыны ваши хочут лупцовать вас...	<i>Not available</i> ⁶	“Voltate il carro, zietto Krik, i vostri figli vogliono picchiarvi...”	“Voltate il carro, zio Krik, perché i vostri figli vogliono bastonarvi...”

Table 4: A passage from *Sunset*

The passage in Table (4) illustrates several features of the Odessa language, that can mainly be attributed to the interference of Ukrainian: *Заворачивайте биндуг, дяденька Крик, бо сыны ваши хочут лупцовать вас...* 'Turn your cart, uncle Krik, because your sons want to beat you.' The first non-standard element is the conjugation *бо*, which serves as a more informal and colloquial variant of the Ukrainian equivalent *тому що* 'because' and is never used in standard Russian. It is interesting to note that this word has not been translated in the version by Platone's version, unlike in Pacini's version, where the Ukrainian borrowing was translated. Other non-standard elements include the endings of the word *сыны* 'sons' (instead of *сыновья*) and *хочут* 'they want' (instead of the form *хотят*). It is interesting to notice that, in both cases, the required endings are exceptions, while the endings in the Odessan variety - though ungrammatical - align with the declension and conjugation patterns of Russian. These features are completely lost in the Italian version, which presents only morphologically well-formed words.

⁶ The translation of the story *Sunset* is not present in the edition written by Lucentini.

6. Exploring the Non-Standard Character of the Odesa Language in Italian Translations

After analysing and comparing the grammatical features of the Odesa language in both the source text and the target texts, this section aims to determine whether any of the Italian editions conserves, though only partially, the non-standard character of the Odesan speech. Through a careful analysis of fragments from the *Odessa stories*, we have observed that certain features are also present in some traits of popular Italian and informal spoken Italian. Such features suggest that the italophone translators deliberately incorporated traits of colloquial Italian to convey a certain vernacular character, thereby preserving the popular nature of the Odesa language in the target text. The characteristics of spoken Italian present in the translations of *Odessa Stories* is illustrated and discussed below.

In the tale *The King*, the sentence ‘Беня, ты знаешь, что мне сдается?’ has been translated into Italian by Pacini as: ‘*Benja, sai che mi pare a me?*’ This sentence exhibits a typical linguistic phenomenon known as ‘left-dislocation’ (cf. Cinque 1977), which is characteristic of neo-standard and popular Italian. Neo-standard Italian refers to a variety of the Italian language that incorporates elements of colloquial speech. This variety was defined by Francesco Sabatini with the term “Italiano dell’uso medio” (Italian of an average use), indicating a form strongly influenced by the spoken language (Fiorentino, 2018: 92). One of the distinctive features of this variety is the so-called ‘left-dislocation’ (Fiorentino 2018), a typical phenomenon of spontaneous speech, where the indirect object is fronted and recalled, resulting in its duplication, via a pronoun within the same sentence.

Let us consider the following example:

Sai cosa mi pare a me? (Do you know what it seems to me)

The construction is not permitted in standard literary Italian due to the repetition of the indirect pronoun (*a me* and *mi*), although it is commonly used in colloquial speech. Additionally, the verb *parere* is less used in standard Italian than its equivalent *sembrare*, but it remains a distinct feature of some regional Italian dialects.

Popular Italian, on the other hand, represents the language of semi-literate individuals, who do not fully acquire the standard Italian language. According to some Italian sociolinguists (cf. Berruto 1987), there exists a continuum between informal spoken Italian and popular Italian, as both varieties share certain features, such as the use of regionalisms and various types of redundancies, including left-dislocations.

Another feature characteristic of spoken Italian appears in the sentence uttered by Benja Krik in Pacini’s translation: “*non stare a preoccuparvi di queste sciocchezze...*” ‘Don’t let these silly things bother you.’ where, the construction *stare a + infinitive* ‘be about to’ (lit. ‘to stay at’) represents a typical trait of the dialect spoken in Rome (Treccani 2010).

Besides the traits linked to spoken Italian and regional varieties, the translators employed various idiomatic expressions that frequently occur in the colloquial speech in order to convey and preserve the popular tone of the source text, as seen in the following sentences:

- “*Pensa a **mandare giù** un bel bicchiere di vodka*”: in this context, **mandare giù** (lit. ‘to send it down’) is used idiomatically to mean swallowing (WordSense Online Dictionary. s.v. “mandare giù.”).
- “*Oppure io la **faccio finita con** la mia vita...*”: **farla finita con la vita** (lit.‘to make it finished with my life’) is used with the idiomatic meaning of committing suicide.
- “*Benja parla poco, ma c’è **succo** in quel che dice.*”: here, the word ‘**succo**’ (lit. ‘juice,’ ‘secretion,’ ‘gist’) can take on different connotative meanings depending on the context. In this case, the word is used with reference to the idiomatic expression of ‘**il succo del discorso**’ ‘the gist of the speech.’
- “*Vi **farete due risate**...*”: the idiomatic expression **farsi due risate** ‘make a couple of laughs ourselves’ corresponds to the expression ‘to have a laugh.’

7. Conclusion

The analysis conducted on some selected fragments has shown that none of the translations considered is able to convey the ungrammatical nature of the Odesa language, although they partially manage to preserve the popular character of the original text. The deviant forms occurring in the source text do not find an equivalent result in the target texts due to certain similarities between Yiddish and Italian’s grammatical structures, as well as differences between the Russian and the Italian linguistic systems. Since the main ungrammatical traits of the Odesa language are primarily achieved through the ungrammatical use of government rules, prepositions and syntactic borrowings from Yiddish, finding an equivalent in Italian that corresponds to the broken Russian spoken by Babel’s gangsters is absolutely impossible. Based on this, translating the Odesa language into Italian without losing its inherent incorrectness is extremely difficult, as the Italophone translator must contend with hybrid constructions which are hard to reproduce. Achieving an adequate and precise translation is particularly challenging especially in those passages where syntactic calques from Yiddish and Ukrainian occur, as the Italophone audience may struggle to discern the syntactic differences among these languages.

However, when translating the hybrid writing of foreign works, one can consider Cavagnoli’s proposal (2017) to explore those strategies in the Italian language that reflect linguistic variation in oral speech, which lead the language to deviate from the standard written norm. These strategies include the use of conjunctions governing the indicative mood, expressions like *mi sa che* to express opinions, as well as an extensive use of the imperfect tense and simplified forms of the conditional. Additionally, this includes the use of the polyfunctional *che*, the polyfunctional pronoun *gli, fare* as an auxiliary verb, as long as colloquial expressions and lexical regionalisms.

Finally, it could be beneficial for future translators to explore a translation technique that resorts to an intermediary language to convey the ungrammatical forms influenced by Yiddish and Ukrainian. Although translating Babel presents certain challenges, it has been observed that translators can, in some cases remain faithful to the original text and while also creating something new through their creativity,

considering the cultural space of the target text. In conclusion, we hope that the translation of the Odessa language and its prominent feature be subjects of future research: as we have demonstrated translating Babel poses unique challenges, but it is a worthwhile endeavour.

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The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.