

## THE ROLE OF INTERMEDIARY LANGUAGES IN LITERARY TRANSLATIONS FROM RUSSIAN INTO ITALIAN: A BRIEF HISTORICAL SURVEY

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*The original is unfaithful to translation.*  
Jorge Luis Borges<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** On the background of the historical development of literary translation from Russian into Italian, the present study will focus on some examples of translations made through intermediate languages. In fact, translating from an intermediary language may lead to well-known adverse effects, such as distortion of the contents or deviations from the original text, but it may also provide interesting insights about intercultural dialogue. The purpose of the work is to highlight some of the problematic areas resulting from these types of translation processes, analysing concrete examples of literary products in which the mediation, mainly through French editions, may affect the content and the form of the original text on the syntactic, semantic and stylistic plans. We will also consider to what extent the loss and gain of meaning have taken place because of such shifts. In this respect, it could be argued that in intermediary translation the employment of adaptation strategies is an important element to produce an acceptable and fluent text to the “receptor language” audience.

**Keywords:** intermediary translation; Russian literature; French language; Italian versions

### 1. Introduction

Despite its quantitative importance and ancient practice, intermediary (or indirect) translation has not been seriously investigated by scholars and theorists until quite recent times. In the past the lack of interest for this mode of translation was also connected to the scarce consideration for the status and role of translators, who were named in editions and reviews only if they were poets, writers or literary critics on their own.

As it is known, in general terms intermediary translation may be defined as a version of an original text made through another translation, which functions as third

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<sup>1</sup> J. L. Borges, *Sopra il «Vathek» di William Beckford*, in Id. *Altre inquisizioni* (1952).

and *medium* element between the source and the target linguistic contexts. Nowadays an in-depth examination of this phenomenon reveals several different transfer procedures, often referred to with distinct terms as **relay, indirect and ‘support’ translations** (see Dollerup 2000 and 2009; Al Shunnaq 2019). The notion of ‘intermediate language’ alludes to the language that concretely mediates between the two different semiotic systems taken into account. Therefore, there are at least three languages and cultures involved in the process; in some cases, there may be even more, depending on a variety of circumstances. Even if it has not often been the focus of scholarly attention, this method is still used in translation practice, in particular when the original text is no longer available, or when the translator does not know the source language, but he/she rather masters the one of the translated version (i.e., the intermediate one). In the history of literary translation, other motives to recur to indirect translation were related to:

- the geographical or genetic distance between two cultures;
- a work written in a quite rare original language, or spoken by a minority of people;
- the intention to stimulate the development of the receiving culture (Popovich 2006: 44).

In the past as in the present, some extralinguistic factors have also played a meaningful role: in fact, intermediate translation gives the possibility to spare time and reduce the costs when there is a need to translate a text into several languages, especially if a translator masters more than one of them. This is a major reason why nowadays this modality has gained a special space and legitimation in the domains of automatic and digital translation (Cronin 2019: 183-192). However, in the literary context intermediary translation is often still regarded as a second-class activity, which produces versions with lots of errors or devoid of any effective fidelity to the original text on the philological and stylistic levels (Ghini 2017: 160). This vision traces back part of its aura of ‘substandard practice’ to the theory of **untranslatability**, which for a long time prevailed in the cultural debate about translation. Besides, due to its world success Russian literature has stimulated up to the present day phenomena of editorial speculation on its greatest masterpieces, and notwithstanding the ample diffusion and flourishing academic tradition of Russian studies cases of undeclared indirect translations are still far from rare in the Italian market (Ghini 2017: 161-163). These versions are mainly published in economic editions: let us consider, for example, some recent Italian translations mediated from English of E. Zamyatin’s dystopian novel *We* (1921), or of other works belonging to the science-fiction genre (see Cifariello 2023). Consequently, we need to be aware of the problems that might face a translator in such situations, especially if we assume that one of his/her main tasks should be to make it possible for a speaker of a natural language to receive as integrally as possible the content created by a speaker of another language (Salmon 2017; Torop 2010: 63-64). One major risk may consist in reproducing the same mistakes or translation gaps eventually present in the intermediate version; among other common problems related to literary indirect translation we can find **semantic shifts, incronguence and linguistic deviations**. As Jovanović observes, deviations from the norm tend to be systematic, i.e. they follow certain rules of their own, and at the same time systemic, alluding to the fact that they originate in the language system they deviate from

(Jovanović 1991: 84). Deviations often occur in literary works because these texts are characterized by figures of speech and emotive expressions that cannot be easily translated into the target language, and which are not normally present in other textual typologies. In fact, whether prose or verse literary works may be paraphrased differently by different critics or students of literature and can normally have more than one interpretation. Deviations are difficult to render in translation precisely because they can change, add to, or modify the meaning of the texts they are parts of.

Taking the cue from these introductory remarks, the aim of this essay is to analyze the contribution of intermediary languages in literary translations from Russian into Italian. Focusing mainly on the period between the second half of the XIX and the first part of the XX century, we are going to propose a synthetic historical survey about the role of French, which can be considered as the intermediate language *par excellence* in the diffusion of Russian literature in Italy. Overshadowing the prejudicial idea of “second-hand” translations, we will draw our attention to some authors and editions which witness and reflect the reciprocal relations between the two countries through French. In fact, if translating from an intermediary language may lead to adverse effects such as distortion of the contents or deviations from the original text in terms of syntax, semantics and style, in specific social circumstances it can also provide interesting insights about the development of an intercultural dialogue (Washbourne 2013: 485-492).

## 2. Russian Literature in Italy: Phases of Knowledge and Diffusion

On the background of the historical evolution of literary translation<sup>2</sup>, we can roughly distinguish three periods of knowledge and diffusion of Russian literature in Italy:

**a) from the second half of the XVIII to 1860** Russian literature was scarcely known, and apart from a few exceptions, like the Ticinese G. G. Cetti's direct translations of some poems by Lomonosov and Karamzin<sup>3</sup>, it reached a small minority of Italian intellectuals mainly through indirect translations from French or, to a lesser extent, from German versions. This choice was in many cases a necessity due to the limited knowledge and diffusion of Russian language in the country. In fact, even though the first Italian chair of Russian was officially established in Naples in 1836, at the beginning of the century Slavic literatures still held a subordinate role compared to what happened in other European cultures. The sporadic editions substantially depended on the efforts of single scholars and translators based on the mediation of French. Overall, there were still no conditions for a direct and stable diffusion of

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<sup>2</sup> On literary translations from Russian into Italian see the pioneering works by Cronia: 1958, Renton: 1961, Cavaion: 1994 and De Michelis: 1997, who provided a synthetic survey about the knowledge of Russian literature in Italy in the first part of the Twentieth century. For some recent studies on the topic which account for the last thirty years see the thematic contributions (Caratozzolo: 2023 and Cifariello:2023) in the journal «Studi Slavistici» XX, 1, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> See *Poesie e prose di Karamzin*, translated from Russian by dr. Cetti, P. Feodosij, Mletki, 1812; *Altre prose e poesie di Karamzin*, translated by dr. Cetti, Bologna, Lucchesini, 1814; *Classici russi*, popularized by Gian Giannide Cetti, Bologna, Tipi Archiepiscopali, 1816.

Russian literary works: as we already observed, the knowledge of the language was rather poor, and there were very few skilled translators or professional specialists of Russian Studies.

**b) In the second half of the XIX century** the interest in Russian literature progressively grew and expanded, with the publication of a lot of Italian editions; the fact that foreign literature copyrights cost less also played a relevant role. Among the most popular authors we find Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gogol', Pushkin and Turgenev; since the beginning of the new century Chekhov added to them, and several of his tales soon became a favourite choice for editors and translators (see Marcucci: 2022). Russian classics, anyway, were still translated prevalently through the mediation of French versions. In fact, differently from Italy at the time France already boasted extensive knowledge, critical studies and a tradition in the translation of Russian works, which was rooted in the intense cultural relations between the two countries<sup>4</sup>. An example of these publications is the first Italian version of the novel *Anna Karenina* (1877) by Lev Tolstoy, which came out on the literary journal "Gazzetta di Torino" ("The Turin Gazette") in 1885 (Gallo 1979: 28-29). As Baselica points out, this translation, anonymous and impaired by cuts, was based on a French edition which had been published in the same year<sup>5</sup>, and even with the limits mentioned it had the great merit of bringing the Italian public closer to Tolstoy's works, themes and atmospheres:

Queste e le molte altre edizioni, per la maggior parte indirette, di *Anna Karenina* offerte al pubblico italiano se, da un lato, risultano colme di errori di traduzione, di gallicismi o di calchi dalla lingua francese, se propongono al lettore del tempo una versione del tutto naturalizzante del romanzo russo e del contesto culturale di provenienza, se trasformano il grande Lev in un esponente del naturalismo francese, proprio quelle edizioni, oggi forse addirittura illeggibili, ebbero il grande merito di avvicinare il pubblico italiano alle opere di Tolstoj o, almeno, alla loro ombra. (Baselica 2011)

[Even though, on one hand, these and many other mostly indirect versions of *Anna Karenina* offered to the Italian public are full of translation mistakes, Gallicisms or calques from French, even though they propose to the readers of the time a completely naturalising version of the Russian novel and of its original cultural context, even though they turn the great Lev into an exponent of French naturalism, those editions, today perhaps even illegible, had the great merit of bringing the Italian public closer to Tolstoy's works, or, at least, to their shadow]. (Trans. by me)

As further evidence of the deep cultural ties with France, let us think that echoing Tolstoy's success in that country some excerpts from *War and Peace* had been published in Italian translation in the literary journal "Rivista contemporanea" ("Contemporary Review") already in January 1869. At that time the famous Russian novel had not been finished yet, and consequently not even a French version was available. So, the passages translated into Italian by Sofya Bezobrazova (1830-1907)

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<sup>4</sup> As it is known, these deep interrelations date back to Peter the Great's times (1682-1725), during which French language and culture were introduced among Russian aristocracy: see Egorov: 2017.

<sup>5</sup> The French intermediate translation of 1885, also anonymous, had these indications on its cover page: "Comte Léon Tolstoï, *Anna Karénine*, roman traduit du russe, Paris, Hachette, 1885."

represent the first world version of Tolstoy's work in a foreign language (Baselica: 2011). Even though Italian readers enthusiastically welcomed the first concrete opportunities of getting to know some great Russian classics, the cultural phenomenon was not yet officially recognised as such, and this circumstance still relegated it to a secondary role.

c) On the wake of the **Bolshevik Revolution of 1917** the interest in Russia increased considerably in the literary, historical and especially in the political-economic fields. This led to a wider number of Italian intellectuals studying Russian language, and to an increment of publications also due to the intense activity of passionate popularisers of Slavic literatures as the eclectic scholar and Indianist Angelo De Gubernatis (1840-1913)<sup>6</sup>, Federigo Verdinois (1844-1927), Domenico Ciampoli (1852-1929), Eugène Wenceslao Foulques and Nina Romanovskaja (1861-1951)<sup>7</sup>, a Russian teacher and prolific translator who settled in Milan around the beginning of the century. In the early '20s Russian novels became a fashionable cultural phenomenon (Béghin 2007). The opening of Italian publishing houses like Bietti, Treves and Sonzogno to the cultures of Eastern Europe was also favoured by the birth of academic Slavistics (Mazzucchelli 2006), with the establishment of chairs of Slavic philology in Padua and Rome. Alongside the classics among the most translated works started to appear editions of works by contemporary Soviet writers like Gorki and Andreev, to name just a few. Notwithstanding the relevant innovations, several literary translations from Russian of the period were still anonymous and mediated from French, or were obtained through what we define today as a '**support translation**' process (Dollerup 2000: 24), which involves extensive consultation of versions into languages different from that of the actual target text. In fact, even signed works did not guarantee a direct and faithful version of the original. The main aim of Italian translations of those years was to make reading easy and smooth, with frequent cuts, omissions, adaptations or arbitrary additions to realize final texts more accessible to Italian readers. With some notable exceptions, both direct and indirect translations tended to be incomplete and unfaithful if considered with contemporary parameters, and on the whole they were unable to convey the distinctive features of the original works. As the Slavist Arturo Cronia (1896-1967) observed, most of the editions were not inspired by philological principles and betrayed their indirect origins already at first sight (proper names and toponyms, for example, were transliterated recalling slavishly French or German phonetic transcription). The scholar remarked that, in his view, this *status quo* was not only due to translators' shortcomings, but also to the still low level of demands of the audience.

Sono versioni di opere amene, che tendono al diletto o alla divulgazione, a una prima, frettolosa e superficiale informazione e non hanno ancora il vero concetto, la vera coscienza dell'arte e della responsabilità del "tradurre," dell'immedesimarsi nello spirito e nella forma dell'originale. [...] Sono versioni che hanno i difetti di tutte le versioni non ispirate a criteri filologici; tradiscono quindi, di norma, la loro origine indiretta, già a

<sup>6</sup> On De Gubernatis's pioneering activity in the new-born Italian Slavistic Studies (see Aloe 2000).

<sup>7</sup> On the figure of the Slavist, teacher and translator Nina Romanovskaja see the project *Russi in Italia* at the webpage <https://www.russinitalia.it/dettaglio.php?id=450> (Accessed September 24, 2023).

prima vista, nell'uso improprio delle forme onomastiche e toponomastiche alla francese o alla tedesca, accusano mancanza di scrupolo e di fedeltà e abbondano di grossolani malintesi e di arbitrari rifacimenti. Omissioni sostanziali, aggiunte ornamentali, stilistiche e libere o false interpretazioni sono le loro note essenziali. Del resto, la colpa non è tutta dei traduttori, ma anche del pubblico che ancora non ha maggiori esigenze. (Cronia 1958: 530-531)

[They are versions of pleasant works, which tend to delight or to popularization, to some first, hasty and superficial information. They have not acquired yet the true concept, the true consciousness of the art and responsibility of "translating" intended as an identification with the spirit and the form of the original. (...) These versions have the limits of all translations not inspired by philological criteria; as a rule, they thus betray their indirect origin already at first sight, in the inappropriate use of proper names and toponyms slavishly moulded on French or German phonetic transliterations. These versions are characterized by lack of scruples and unfaithfulness, they abound in gross misunderstandings and arbitrary reworkings. Substantial omissions, ornamental, stylistic and free additions or false interpretations are their essential attributes. Anyway, it is not all due to the translators' faults, but also to the audience that still has no greater demands]. (Trans. by me)

It is also worth mentioning the ironic comment of another outstanding figure in Italian academic Slavistics as Ettore Lo Gatto (1890-1983), who in one of his several reviews (1921) of published translations underlined that the increase of Russian literary heritage in Italian demonstrated that even through mediated versions Russian works managed to affirm themselves and conquer target readers (Mazzucchelli 2007: 26):

Peccato che la traduzione, che si sforza di essere fedele, seguendo quelle tedesca e francese, non sia fatta direttamente dal russo. Siccome quella tedesca è però fedelissima, anche questa italiana non risente troppo di essere una ritraduzione. (Lo Gatto 1921: 249)

[It is a pity that the translation, which strives to be faithful following the German and French versions, has not been made directly from Russian. However, since the German version is very faithful, the Italian text does not suffer too much to be a re-translation]. (Trans. by me)

**d)** In the period from 1924 to 1945 we can distinguish four different sub-phases in the history of Italian literary translations from Russian (Sorina 2009). In particular, 1926 opens with a crucial editorial event: the establishment of **Slavia** publishing house, founded in Turin by the translator and journalist Alfredo Polledro (1885-1961). The firm proposes new editions as authentic "revelations" for the Italian public, because they give the possibility to read direct, integral and reliable versions from original Russian works (Mazzucchelli 2007: 27). Therefore these years (1924-1929) can be globally considered as a **growth phase**, followed then by a **period of saturation** of the market in the early 30's (1930-1933). It is important to underline that over the entire interval of time alongside these new direct translations mediated versions from French or German continue to be published, re-edited or re-printed (Messina: 1949). As is known, with the rise of the nationalistic fascist regime prior censorship on foreign translated literature was established (1938). State censorship was directed more

towards contemporary works, and especially towards Soviet ones, which were considered “dangerous” from an ideological point of view (Marcucci 2022: 14). Besides authors like Trockij, Lenin and Stalin among banished works we also find Gorki’s tales and the editions by writers of Jewish origins. As a consequence of those measures in the ’30s the number of translations from Russian continued to decrease, determining a **phase of decline** (1934-1940). During the years of the Second World War we can notice a **gradual recovery** (1941-1945) in the amount and quality of publications, which preludes to the formation of some brilliant translators from Russian and other Slavic languages who will be active in the second part of the century, like Küfferle, Landolfi, Poggioli, Ripellino, Bazzarelli, Zveteremich, V. Strada and many others (Mazzucchelli 2006; Scandura 2002).

### 3. The Role of French as an Intermediate Language and Culture

From what was reported above, it is quite easy to highlight the **negative aspects** of the afore-mentioned examples of indirect literary translations, especially if we consider the manifold contemporary contributions in Translation theory and practice. In fact, in the last forty years a series of concepts, scientific approaches and techniques concerning the process of translation have widened and enriched our perspective. As we already remarked, in the case of Italian indirect translations from Russian literature there are some typical shortcomings or mistakes from which we can deduce the dependence on French versions, such as:

1) The presence of **transliterations of the French type** instead of the Scientific phonematic transliteration of Russian Cyrillic alphabet (norm ISO 9), as it is established in the Italian context. Examples of surnames and patronymics like Ivanitch, Koukouchkine e Grouzine instead of Ivanyč, Kukuškin and Gruzin. Let us also think of the surnames of some popular Russian authors spelt following the French usage like Tchekhov or Tourghenieff (Ghini 2017: 165-166).

2) **Literal calques from French**, which can generate serious misunderstandings, especially when we have to do with phraseologisms. For example, the French expression “*casser une croûte*,” proposed as translation of the Russian “*или в столовую подзакусить*,” in Italian means “fare uno spuntino” (to have a snack), while the literal version “rompere una crosta” makes no sense at all.

3) **Translation mistakes, gaps and typos** present in the French version reproduced in the target text: this happens when there is not a direct control on the original.

4) Errors caused by **poor knowledge of French** by translators (we refer in particular to double senses, “false friends,” figurative uses, idiomatic expressions, etc.)

### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is less obvious, in our view, to underline the **positive aspects** of the French intermediary role. In fact, in the given historical and socio-cultural context

precisely these elements may provide interesting insights about the development of an intercultural dialogue (Zaborov: 2008):

France had a leading role in the knowledge and diffusion of Russian culture in Western Europe, and for a long time French was the language of the court and of the educated *elite* in Russia. Thanks to their deep knowledge of it Russian intellectuals travelled, kept their correspondence, read and studied, showing an excellent mastery of the idiom (Yegorov 2017; Offord, Rjéoutski & Argent 2018).

As it is known, French represented the language of culture and education also in Italy, and some prominent Italian figures of the XIX century read Russian novels directly from French editions. These intellectuals entertained a deep, “organic” relationship with French culture and trends (for example, Collodi translated Perrault and so on).

In addition, we must consider the phylogenetic and lexical affinities between Italian and French, both belonging to Romance languages, which made the intermediary process easier, more natural. Therefore, even taking due account of concrete shortcomings and mistakes, in the Italy of those times the French semiotic and cultural system represented much more than a “technical” medium to obtain second-hand products (Stroilova, Dmitriev 2016).

If any language “shapes the world,” reflecting the culture, habits and mentality of the people who speak it, we may affirm that in diachronic perspective these mediated translations, which have their roots in the deep interrelations between Italian and French cultures, have created the conditions for the reception of Russian literature by Italian common readers. In cultural terms, then, we can talk of a pivotal role of the French semiotic system in the diffusion of the knowledge of Russian literature in Italy.

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