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Abstract: This paper suggests that we rethink what the relationship between social change and evolution of language usage might look like. To offer a different perspective on the subject, it asks how a Translation Studies paradigm helps us reflect on the “gay rights” vocabularies that have appeared in various guises in Italy since the 1960s.

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Translingual Queer Practice¹

SERENA BASSI

In this brief contribution, I suggest that we rethink what the relationship between social change and evolution of language usage might look like. To offer a different perspective on the subject, I will ask how a Translation Studies paradigm helps us reflect on the “gay rights” vocabularies that have appeared in various guises in Italy since the 1960s.

One of the political strategies of the mainstream Italian lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement is to oppose “the permanence in Italy of discourses on gender and sexuality oriented in a homophobic and transphobic way.” National LGBT organizations have adapted and localized transnational vocabularies of sexual citizenship—words that interpolate subjects as members of a sexual minority forming part of the national community thus far excluded from the right and obligations of full citizenship. The Italian translation of this political lexicon includes terms such as *la visibilità lgbt*, *il coming out*, *la comunità lgbt*, *i diritti lgbt*, *outing*, *il supporto*, *la diversità*, *l'omofobia*, *il bullismo omofobico* and *crimini d'odio omofobico*. In this sense, these organizations are the Italian translators of an emerging global LGBT rights-oriented political culture and its international terms.

My current research project interrogates the trajectories of the transnational signifier “gay” in Italy by following its multiple lexical trails, albeit with no expectation of linearity and progression. What stories redeploy in Italian context vocabularies drawn from the International English of the global LGBT movement? In my article “Translingual Queer Practice: International English and Translated Sexualities,” I analyzed the Italian web localization of a US awareness-raising campaign (the “It Gets Better” project) which collects stories of survivors of homophobic bullying. Localization is a mode of translation that entails the production of a new text based on the alleged needs of a particular locale. A localization is needed when an interlingual translation of the source text would remain too “foreign” for the target culture to assimilate and re-utilize it.²

The videos of the American online campaign follow a predictable script, which might ring distant to Italian victims of homophobia. An LGBT individual overcomes the hardships of their teenage years, finishes school, moves to the big city, finds a stable romantic partner and lives a happy “out” adult life. Such script positions sexual minorities alongside the ethnic minorities famously exhorted to “pull themselves up by the bootstraps” if they want to “make it” in American society.³ The localized Italian campaign appeared to disavow the idea underwriting the original US campaign of an ongoing struggle against injustices of all kinds, which we will eventually win by raising awareness that a “more diverse society” already exists. The majority of Italian users complicate this message by locating “homophobia” internally rather than externally. Employing a narrative approach to reading a translation, I zoomed in on a series of stories of surviving homophobia that utilize the language of sexual citizenship but unsettle some of its ideological premises.⁴ The US campaign located homophobia in a set of clearly demarcated social spaces, such as the mid-sized American city, the rural backwater, the Church, the Catholic school. By contrast, many of the Italian narrators argue that homophobia is located in the minds of the victims of homophobic bullying, that is, “homophobia” is only there if you are invested in seeing it.

The localizers whose work I examined transpose the message of the source text (for it to get better, LGBT individuals should move out of the family home and improve one’s socio-economic status) by encouraging viewers to work on one’s own Self and change one’s mentality, attitudes and behavior, as basic step towards moving beyond homophobia. Whilst the international terms of LGBT

¹ An extended version of this presentation is forthcoming with the title “Translingual Queer Practice: International English and Translated Sexualities” in *Feminist Translation Studies*, ed. by Olga Castro and Emek Ergun from Routledge.

² See Anthony Pym, *The Moving Text* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), 57.

³ Puar, Jasbir. “In the wake of It gets Better.” *Guardian Online*, November 16, 2010, Accessed 28 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/nov/16/wake-it-gets-better-campaign>

⁴ For the narrative approach to translation see Mona Baker, *Translation and Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2006).

politics—“coming out,” “supporto,” “diversità,” “omofobia”—recurrently appeared, translating and embedding them in a different set of stories of resistance and change worked towards re-semanticizing them through a series of translingual practices. These translingual practices *at once* assimilated *and* displaced LGBT International English into Italian.

The Gay International may figure the linguistic borrowing of international LGBT terms in English as an instrument to foster forms of democratic participation and extend citizenship to excluded subjects.⁵ The trope of borrowing evokes translation as an even playing field where a national culture can conveniently turn to a foreign archive of solutions, notwithstanding the resulting indebtedness to the source. Thus, borrowing is imagined as a “movement forward” juxtaposed to the backwardness of homophobic language. My findings encourage us to rethink this conceit. The pervasiveness of homophobic language on the Italian media can certainly be interpreted as an anomaly, setting Italy apart from what Eric Fassin calls the Western “sexual democracy.”⁶

In this interpretation, Italy’s deficiencies vis-a-vis model sexual democracies support the familiar “Italy as Western anomaly” argument. As Danielle Hipkins remarked, this argument reifies sexist media representations as “national” and “cultural,” rather than interrogating them as part of the transnational emergence of neoliberal gendered subjectivities.⁷ In my case study, because the Italian narrators follow a format devised in response to LGBT youth suicides in the US, they combine their ability to look inward, “know themselves” and tell their own story as survivors of abuse, with an intercultural and interlingual literacy that allows them to interpret and adapt the narratives and analyses of the Gay International.

Drawing on queer critiques of teleological approaches to the temporality of change, I suggest we take stock of the ambiguities of the language of liberation. In the Italian localization of a popular awareness-raising campaign, the translated version interpreted the original by holding a mirror up to it, so to speak, and shoring up a constitutive discursive tension between social change and individual responsibility. The work of the Italian translators exposes and implicitly critiques the language of inclusive citizenship. By approaching translation as an interrogative mode of reading, we might be able to complicate teleological investments in the “evolution of language usage” and attendant binaries of “conservative” versus “progressive language.”

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⁵ For the notion of the Gay International see Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁶ Eric Fassin, “National Identities and Transnational Intimacies: Sexual Democracy and the Politics of Immigration in Europe,” in *Public Culture* 22, 3 (2010):512.

⁷ Danielle Hipkins, “Whore-ocracy: Show girls, the beauty trade-off, and mainstream oppositional discourse in contemporary Italy,” in *Italian Studies* 66, 3 (2011):428.

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