

Raffaella Bombi, *La Linguistica del contatto – Tipologie di anglicismi nell'italiano contemporaneo e riflessi metalinguistici*. Roma. Il Calamo. 2005. pp. 380. ISBN 8889837039

It is a commonplace to comment on the contemporary experience of the Italian language as one of vociferous and avid borrowing, of semantic concepts, of single words and even morphological influences from the all-pervasive effects of global English. It is as if Italian is enduring a period of virtual creolization, and there is the tacit suggestion that what we will soon be left with is a language that will be to some extent dependent upon a dominating linguistic 'big brother' controlling discourse, affecting syntax and contributing an excess of neologisms inadequately absorbed into a language system used by a still largely non-English speaking population, or one which is of limited proficiency in English.

Perhaps there is a certain snobbery in this, both on the part of those unhappy with innovation in the Italian system and on the part of English speakers critical of the 'abuse' of English words and phrases in Italian. It is all the more pleasing, therefore, to note the publication of the present volume, *La linguistica del contatto*, by Raffaella Bombi (2005). The author is dealing with a topic of the greatest relevance both for students of the Italian language and for those interested in linguistics. Immediately in the introduction we may be struck by the positive note Bombi offers in suggesting that a loan, far from being a sign of degeneration in a language, or of inadequacy in its capacity for expression (as is commonly supposed¹), can instead be seen as an indication of creativity and vibrancy of the tongue, offering 'new and flexible communicative options' (p. 12).

Besides the potentially partisan question of whether loans constitute a linguistic 'good' or should be considered harmful to a language, however, this volume points straight away to the significance of the phenomenon from the linguistic aspect. Detailed analysis of the effects of linguistic contact, of loans and calques and other perceived changes to a language, merit the close attention of linguistics as a science. If we can take for granted the reality of infinite points of contact between English and Italian, we can assume little else. As Bombi outlines, through a brief description of various categorisations (including those of Weinreich, Klajn, Rando and Gusmani), and through her own attempt at a detailed taxonomy of the different loans and calques currently existing in Italian, the picture of linguistic contact and its effects is rich and complex.

To remind ourselves of the importance of the topic one only has to pick up an Italian national newspaper and cast an eye over the language in use. Taking as an example the front page of *La Repubblica* of Tuesday 14th July 2009, I find more than twenty clear-cut examples of loans and

¹ See, for example, *Some Languages are Just Not Good Enough* – Ray Harlow, in *Language Myths* edited by BAUER – TRUDGILL (1998).

calques (e.g. 'il nuovo guru della city', 'shock in America', 'Bushismo', 'Botox', 'City Angels', 'Cia buona', 'on line', etc.). Immediately we are struck not only by the number of items, but their variety and complexity: we have 'the City' as a subtle socio-political concept imported into Italian with perhaps only a limited awareness of the original semantic load, and 'guru' as an individual socio-cultural idea, a registered trademark (Botox), a simpler, single word loan (shock) and the loan phrase (on-line); not to mention the highly intriguing *Bushismo*, combining an American surname with an Italian suffix, or *Cia buona*, where the initials of the organisation form an acronym in Italian in stark contrast to their usage and phonology in American English.

Clearly there is something very complex going on here, and Raffaella Bombi's book is a great help in approaching the issues concerned with clarity and some authority. This mass of intrusions into Italian can be observed, described and, in most cases at least, placed into a grill of loans and calques that are differentiated according to their characteristics and their relationship with the original language. She takes Gusmani as the basis of her system, even if she adds significantly to it, offering the potential for much greater precision of categorisation with such concepts as the '*calco strutturale di derivazione*' (which takes into account the importance of a common Latin root in the formation of the calque) and, in addition to Gusmani's '*prestito camuffato*', the differentiation of perfect and imperfect calques and the semi-calque.

Bombi makes it clear that calques were notoriously neglected, probably due to the intrinsic difficulty in identifying them, and it is this same complexity which results in the rather involved nomenclature that has been adopted. However, her choices are well-reasoned and clearly explained, based upon the major authors and offering an attempt to make sense of the linguistic complexity of the calques we find in everyday Italian. As she herself claims on page 19, the aim is to tackle the danger of seeing virtually everything as a semantic calque, and thus furthering our observation and understanding of the contact between Italian and English not one iota.

It might be objected that such a complicated and theoretical approach risks having little practical application in the field, but the numerous examples given in section 1, chapters 2,3 and 4 demonstrate amply that this is not the case. All of the examples mentioned above as being present on a typical front page of an Italian newspaper may be effectively analysed with the framework Bombi offers. We might suggest the modest reservation that this is the easy part: categorisation is not sufficient for complete theoretical understanding, and indeed reading the worked examples given one is surprised: pleasantly by how numerous they are, but also by how brief they tend to be. Although I found most of the descriptions of loans and calques in Italian intuitively convincing, I felt they perhaps lacked adequate demonstration through citation. Now this is only to be expected due to lack of space, and the linguistic rather than socio-linguistic aims of the author, but the effect

can sometimes be to leave a story half-told, and so not fully accurate. An example is the discussion of 'happy end' (p. 26). Bombi is quite right to attribute importance to both synchronic and diachronic elements but this will always entail a certain mass of information. In the example of *happy end* (Italian, 1975) the mediation of French is hypothesised (1945), without mention of the German usage which dates back at least to 1929 and to a well-known if not greatly successful musical involving Brecht². It is at least feasible that this was the mediator rather than the later French model, and it requires more thorough analysis. The same issue is raised with the albeit brief discussion of 'devoluzione', which is offered (on p. 23) as an example of the parallel adaptation of the original English as a loan and use of the Italian form: but no mention is made of the interesting semantic turnaround that Italian has had to endure. *Devoluzione* once upon a time had a contrasting meaning in Italian (virtually the opposite, referring to returning something to the original owner or power flowing back to the original authority³) and the discussion lacks this additional information, that would add something significant, not merely in terms of precision or completeness, but also in terms of the origins of these changes, and whether they can be ascribed to prestige issues (as one definition is 'pushed out' by another that comes from the English-speaking political environment).

We should repeat, in fairness, that such detail is impossible in studies of this kind which are first and foremost attempts to offer a systematic terminology and even taxonomy to the phenomena, and with this categorization we might well follow up with detailed diachronic analysis ourselves. Indeed, later in the volume (in section 2, especially chapter 4) Bombi dedicates significant attention to the processes of integration through linguistic interference. Citing the work of Weinreich, Gusmani and Filipovic, the concepts of primary and secondary adaptation are explained and the role of a third (mediating) language is emphasised, repeating Orioles' claim that there is every justification for the role of the third language (p. 225).

Perhaps greater mention could be made of the role of translation in this process; not so much at a theoretical level, but simply when the fortunate translation of a certain concept has a long-lasting effect on the receiving language. On our front page of 14th July, for example, we can find the phrase '*stretta creditizia*', that we may assume is a rendering of 'credit crunch'. Time will tell if this establishes itself as the form of choice in Italian (and we may well doubt it!), but a diachronic awareness of when and how the phrase eventually selected by Italian speakers entered the linguistic system would be, I maintain, of fundamental importance in our understanding of the richness of the processes of linguistic interference. To put it bluntly, Bombi gives us an admirable contribution to

² *Happy End* was a musical comedy by Kurt Weill, Elisabeth Hauptmann and Berthold Brecht, first performed at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm 2nd Sept 1929.

³ For example, the *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, published in 1966, does not even conceive of the modern meaning, but gives only the historical and legal definitions summarised here.

describe the state of play in contact linguistics as it affects Italian, but this should prefigure the next step: systematic study of numerous as well as paradigmatic examples with detailed diachronic evidence. Here we might add that the use of corpora, that can offer both a high number of cited uses and ancillary information such as dates and, perhaps most valuably, context, could be of great benefit, with the obvious proviso that the corpora used be designed with robust principles, relevant to the issues in hand⁴.

The work is a collection of articles that together offer a full introduction to the technical aspects of the presence of English loans in Italian. Often volumes of this sort lack true coherence because they are effectively the work of ten or so years stitched together to make a piece long enough for publication in book form. Here, instead, we have a highly coherent collection of pieces that are very relevant to one another and that work in concert to explain the complexity of the subject of loans and calques in Italian. Each chapter adds to the overall picture, contributing to the author's aim of trying to clarify or add to the terminology of the field, while at the same time the book gives the reader a very thorough outline of the main issues and processes involved. A student of linguistics would find great benefit from the work, even if the originality of the content perhaps takes second place to an exposition of the theoretical framework.

The work is divided into four main sections: the first describes the typologies of contact linguistics, while the second deals with the metalinguistic aspects of interference and plurilingualism. A third section is devoted to the effects of linguistic interference on word formation in Italian. Lastly, a section on word histories and examples of 'contacts' is added, but this is perhaps tantalisingly brief and rather lacking in coherence. The whole volume is well-structured and easy to use, even if the reviewer, in true Anglo-Saxon style, felt that a full index would have improved the book substantially, especially when we consider that the subject under analysis requires cross-referencing the same words and phrases that are discussed more than once, in different sections.

The book is perhaps lacking when we are tempted to venture beyond categorisation and the description of process and we ask for the 'why' of these linguistic phenomena: what makes these cases of interference actually occur? The question is almost inevitable, and indeed is often expressed by Italian native-speakers in frustration at the presence of yet another loan when 'there is a perfectly good Italian word in the dictionary'. In defence of the author we must admit that this is precisely the moment when we start looking beyond the stated scope of the work. However, there are examples in the work itself where Bombi is tempted to ask the same question (especially when discussing the 'borderline cases', e.g. pp. 359 onwards). In the discussion of 'bug' and *baco* the author mentions technical register, but is not clear whether this can be defined as a formal register

⁴ An example of this is Domenico Torretta's volume on English adjectives in Italian economic language, which is based on a specifically designed, if limited corpus of about 51 million words.

(we may well doubt this). Indeed the issue of register variation might contribute a great deal more to the analysis of linguistic interference, as could socio-linguistics as a whole.

In addition to this, especially if we agree (as is reasonable) that translations are often the source of primary adaptations in Italian, there is a need to make reference to Toury's view of interference and, more specifically, the concept of prestige levels⁵. Indeed, the idea of prestige is the latent presence in this whole discussion: is the prevalence of English forms in Italian the result of a lame kind of imitation and simple economic dependence, or the result of other factors? Here, of course, we leave the safe ground of theoretical linguistics and venture beyond socio-linguistics and even into politics⁶.

Another theoretical avenue to explore might be the dynamic rather static conception of interference and the phenomenon of loans and calques. The concepts of primary and secondary adaptation are perhaps a little inadequate as a description of what is occurring on a linguistic level. The situation can be conceived of as more fluid, with more potential for innovation, before a linguistic solution is 'chosen' by speakers of the receiving language. This is certainly likely on a phonological level, and perhaps semantically, where we can imagine different speakers having differing awareness of the loan word's provenance and capacity for meaning.

On a more philosophical level, we might suggest that the categorizing approach lacks something on the ontological level: by categorizing we confer entity status upon things or ideas, thus giving them identity invariably based on prototypical examples. However, we need more complete evidence for this to be entirely convincing, otherwise the danger is simply that the academic world will continue presenting and re-presenting taxonomies, discussing them and developing others, without truly comprehending the picture. Raffaella Bombi's volume gives us a good overview of the issues, but she also, even if inadvertently, serves as a salutary reminder that linguistics must 'get its hands dirty' if it aims to be entirely convincing in its description of language. The importance of contact linguistics is precisely in how it forces us to focus on words and phrases that are in origin extraneous to the adopting language system, and so can act as a highly informative mirror on the language itself. But again, this involves more than just prototypes, and requires us to run the risk of mixing with the infinite complexity of language in actualization and in use.

⁵ For a brief discussion of these issues see BAKER (1998). But the concept of prestige, both of translation in a particular target culture and of one linguistic system *vis-à-vis* another requires more attention.

⁶ We may even go further and embrace Mona Baker's conception of narrative, in this case seeing a way of seeing the world as extending beyond the USA or Great Britain and into the Italian speech community's interpretation of events and expression of them in language.

Richard Chapman

Università degli Studi di Ferrara

Dipartimento di Scienze Umane

Via Savonarola, 27

I – 44100 Ferrara

richard.chapman@unife.it

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