

LANGUAGE USE AND STYLE IN 'LETTERA A UNA PROFESSORESSA'

"Because only language can render equal. Equal is he who can express himself and he who understands the idiom of others." (Page 110)

1. INTRODUCTION

The link between language and power and the indispensable and urgent need for the oppressed to master the dominant language for emancipatory purposes are among the recurrent themes of *Lettera a una professoressa*. Developing communicative abilities and learning the 'art' of writing are seen by the authors of the *Lettera* as instruments of empowerment and means to resist the dominant location of hegemonic groups who reproduce their power through an education process that self-serves the interests of the most powerful. One of the main notions expressed constantly throughout the *Lettera* is that each and every child can learn how to reflect on his/her use of different languages, including the mother tongue, and that all learning experiences in life are valuable, regardless of one's socio-economic status. However, when children with different backgrounds start attending school they go through different experiences, even because of the form of language used by teachers: in some cases this may be a natural transition from what they are exposed to at home, even in their pre-school years; in other cases the language of schooling is totally different, the language register may be more formal and the variety used may approach standard forms which contrast with local or regional varieties used at home. The language of schooling may therefore represent one of the first obstacles towards the socialisation and integration of some pupils.

From the beginning of the *Lettera*, the authors stress the importance of learning the 'art' of writing. Failure to do so leads to social disadvantages as the negative repercussions which result from linguistic and communicative deficiencies affect one's life:

In June of the third year at Barbiana I sat for the *licenza media* exam as a private candidate. The essay title was: "The train wagons speak". At Barbiana I had learnt that the rules of writing are: to have something important to say and that it may be useful to everybody or to many. To know who you are writing to. To gather all that is necessary. To find a logical way of putting it in order. To eliminate any unnecessary words. To eliminate any word which we do not use while speaking. Not to set any limits of time. (...)

But faced with such an essay title, what could I do with the humble and sound



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rules of the art of all times? If I were to be honest I would have to leave the page blank. Or criticise the essay title and whoever had assigned it to me. (p. 44)

From the above extract it is clear that there is a distinction between writing for communicative purposes and the writing tasks which were given at school, especially those set for examination purposes: students at Barbiana were taught to develop specific skills which were related to self-expression and to convey one's thoughts in a manner which is relevant to the reader. On the other hand the author of the above extract found himself involved in a writing task which was distant from the ones with which he was familiar.

Departing from such considerations, in this chapter an overview of language-related aspects in the *Lettera* is provided in order to illustrate both the authors' reflections on languages as well their use of syntactic and discursive features of Italian. This will also lead to observations which are deemed fundamental for the translation of the *Lettera* from Italian into English, presented in the next section of this book. The main objective of this translation is to present the *Lettera* in a manner that reflects as closely as possible the philosophy of Don Lorenzo Milani and his students.

2. THE LANGUAGE OF SCHOOLING IN THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE *LETTERA*

Since language is a reflection of the society in which it is spoken and written, any linguistic considerations regarding the *Lettera* must take into account the historical background of Italy in the Sixties. During these years the country was going through the final phase of an economic boom which changed it radically and put the suffering and humiliation of the Second World War firmly behind its back. Although this led to immense wealth for some individuals, many others were left in dire poverty. This was also a very significant era for standard Italian¹: the widespread diffusion of mass media (especially television²) as well as internal migratory movements (mostly from the South of the country to the North) enhanced and strengthened the use of standard Italian while local and regional dialects and language varieties became less widespread, thereby leading to a decline in their status.

As a result of this, those who had an elite family background, sufficient economic means and the necessary cultural milieu in order to be exposed regularly to and comprehend standard Italian were in an advantageous position at school: in fact, lessons were held in standard Italian, which was obviously also used in writing. Local and regional dialects were not only absent within the schooling context, but their use was frowned upon and discouraged by teachers. The *Lettera* addresses this very precisely:

After all one ought to agree as to what correct language is. Languages are created by the poor who then continue to renew them infinitely. The rich crystallise them in order to taunt those who do not speak as they do. Or to fail them.

You say that Pierino, son of the doctor, writes correctly. Of course you say so, he speaks just like you do. He is part of the firm. (p. 43)

Standard language forms are normally determined through the status and prestige gained by specific language varieties that, in the course of time, become a reference point in order to establish grammatical rules. Such norms, however, can also be used as an instrument of discrimination as indicated in the above extract from the *Lettera*.

The spoken varieties used for everyday communicative purposes do not necessarily correspond to the standard forms used at school. Whereas spoken language is normally spontaneous and fulfils immediate communicative and social functions, the formal written word often requires more reflection and its correctness and appropriateness are measured against grammatical and orthographic rules³. As far as schooling is concerned, language is used to examine, select and classify students thereby favouring those who possess the cultural capital which allows them to develop and master such forms:

... your little rich boys used to ask you things they already knew, putting on an angelic face. And you used to encourage them: "It's an intelligent question!" A useless comedy for all of us. Damaging for the soul of those suckers. Cruel for me as I did not know how to play the game. (p. 134)

You used to make me keep a copybook with notes to force me to learn that language by heart. And to whom would I speak this other language that I had to learn? (p. 135)

Moreover, besides the role of standard Italian as a medium of instruction in schools, within the educational and social context in which the *Lettera* was written, great importance also used to be attributed to Latin. In fact, in the Italian educational system, students would study Latin language and literature at the *liceo classico* which was considered to be a highly prestigious institution attended by the most academically inclined students. In the *Lettera*, this is considered discriminatory against students who do not possess the cultural background in order to learn those languages, including Latin itself, which are devoid of everyday social communicative functions and which are therefore very distant from the reality of those who, at the time, were part of the lower social classes of society:

In your school the most important subject is the one that we should never teach. You even expect to translate from Italian to Latin. But who placed a sign where Latin ends and Italian begins? Somebody, who knows who it may have been,

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even wrote a grammar book for you. But it's a vulgar swindle. For every rule it would be necessary to have the date and the region where it was spoken in that way. The career-oriented children accept the imposition, they learn it by heart. They are only concerned with passing exams and with repeating the game when they will be teachers. (pp. 123-4)

Latin was distant from the daily life of most children in Italy, including those who attended Milani's classes in Barbiana. The teachers of this language are described as being 'as solemn as priests. Custodians of the extinguished wick' (p. 52) and the *Lettera* is also openly critical about the fact that in order to become a Primary school teacher at the time one had to pass examinations of Latin. One of the authors, who used to attend the *istituto magistrale*, was given the following 'advice':

You told me, I repeat your words: "You see, you do not know Latin. Why don't you go to a *scuola tecnica*?" Are you sure that to form a good teacher Latin is indispensable? Maybe you have not thought about it. (p. 118)

The authors of the *Lettera* therefore view Latin in schools as a selective tool, often used to exclude those who do not possess the means to learn this language and to translate its literary texts into Italian. This is an example of how language in a school curriculum could potentially turn into an instrument used to exclude rather than to include, a means to discriminate between students with different backgrounds, rather than to learn about and appreciate the linguistic identity and the culture of oneself and of others.

3. THE LINGUISTIC CAPITAL OF THE STUDENTS OF BARBIANA

Since in the Italian schooling system of the Sixties great importance was given mainly to high and prestigious culture, only sporadic reference used to be made to whatever was part of the daily life of individuals from different social strata of society. The very fact that the language of school, be it implicitly through the standard forms of Italian or explicitly through the importance attached to Latin, was distant to that used at home by those pertaining to lower social strata of society was enough to make it impossible for them to engage even in the simplest form of discourse.

In the case of Barbiana, many students had a rural background and therefore found themselves immersed in a situation which was totally detached from the one they experienced in their home environment. Anything which was related to rural culture was either totally excluded from school or looked down upon. In some cases, examples related to this field, used in textbooks or by teachers, were totally incoherent:

If one leafs through a primary school textbook it's full of plants, animals, seasons. It seems that only a peasant could have written it. However, the authors come out of your school. It's enough to look at the illustrations: left-handed peasants, round shovels, hooked-shaped hoes, blacksmiths with tools used in Roman times, cherry trees with plum-tree leaves.

...

I even know the plant-shoots. I pruned them, I gathered them, I used them to bake bread. You marked the word *sormenti*⁴ as an error in my work. You say that one should say *sarmenti* because that's how it is said in Latin. Then, making sure nobody sees you, you go to check what it means in the dictionary. (pp. 121-2)

Although, as in the case exemplified above, students with rural background were certainly aware of the misconceptions being presented in class, they would not normally find the courage and motivation to speak up.

Similar considerations are also included towards the end of the *Lettera*, when one of the authors recounts his experience in England⁵. In this context, although it is not possible to compare English regional varieties to Italian dialects because of their different historical evolution and social use, the author notices that a friend of his who speaks cockney 'is branded'. Children like him find it hard to master Received Pronunciation⁶ just like students with a rural background in Italy encountered problems with the use of standard Italian and Latin:

In London they're worse off than in the rural areas. We were in the basements of the City unloading lorries. My workmates were English and they did not know how to write a letter in English. Often they told Dick to do it for them. Dick sometimes asked advice from me who had studied it from records. Even he only speaks in cockney.

Five metres above our head there were those who spoke "Queen's English". Cockney is not very different, but whoever speaks it is branded. In their schools they do not fail. They turn students to schools of lower prestige. The poor, in their schools, perfect their incorrect speech. The rich their correct speech. From the pronunciation one may understand how rich one is and what job one's father does. (pp. 108-9)

Moreover, in the *Lettera* the methods used to teach and assess languages are harshly criticised, mainly on the grounds that prominence is given to prescriptive and grammatical rules, leaving little space for communicative linguistic functions, which reflect the fundamental use of language:

The French paper was a concentrated series of exceptions. Exams should be abolished. But if you set them, at least be honest. Difficulties must represent a percentage of the ones we face during life. If you include a larger number of

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them it means that you have got trap-mania. It's as if you were at war with your children. Who makes you do this? Is it for their good? It's not for their good. A boy, who in France wouldn't even know how to ask where the toilet is, passed with a nine. He only knew how to ask for owls, for pebbles and for fans both in the plural and in the singular⁷. He probably knew two hundred words which were chosen as exceptions and not because they are used frequently. The result was that he hated French just as much as one could hate Maths. (p. 45)

Similar considerations are also made with regards to English as taught in Italy during the time the *Lettera* was written:

In the class next door there were some students of English. As misguided as ever. Even I know that English is useful. But if one really knows it. Not just by touching upon it as you do. Other than owls and pebbles. They did not even know how to say good evening. And they were discouraged forever. The first foreign language is an important event in a child's life. It must be a success, otherwise there will be trouble. (p. 47)

Although this situation has evolved over the course of time and nowadays schools accept non-standard varieties more readily, especially in the spoken form, the powerful status of standard varieties is still very influential⁸. This is especially evident in language textbooks and gains prominence in examination-oriented schooling systems where languages are taught mainly in order to obtain certification, rather than to allow students to express themselves and to use them as means to explore local and foreign cultures. The authors of the *Lettera* had a remarkable foresight as far as learning the communicative features of language is concerned:

I studied languages by listening to records. Without even realising it I first learnt the most useful and frequent things. Just as one learns Italian. That Summer I had been to Grenoble and I washed the plates in a restaurant. I immediately felt comfortable. In the hostels I had communicated with boys from Europe and from North Africa. I had returned determined to learn as many languages as possible. Many languages badly rather than one correctly. As long as I could communicate with everybody, get to know people and new problems, feel amused at the sacred boundaries of the homelands.

In the three years of *medie* schooling we had done two languages instead of one: French and English. We built a range of vocabulary that was sufficient to keep up any discussion. As long as no fuss was made on grammatical mistakes. Grammar comes to the fore only when one writes. In order to read or speak one can do without it. Then slowly slowly one acquires it by ear. Later, whoever wishes to do so, may study it. (p. 46)

4. SYNTAX AND LEXIS OF THE *LETTERA*

Issues related to languages, included in the *Lettera*, do not only engage with the way they are taught or with the implications that their use in schools may have on students. In fact, the style chosen in order to write the *Lettera*, the variety of Italian used by the authors, as well as syntactic structures often resorted to in order to create a sense of emphasis, all implicitly transmit a message of immediacy and, in some cases, outright urgency. To do so, in a number of instances, the written word of the *Lettera* is heavily marked by colloquialisms to the extent that it seems a direct representation of spoken forms. The *Lettera*'s intrinsic linguistic style is distant from conventional Italian writing and especially from those structures which are very heavily conditioned by prescriptive standard Italian, a language variety which is rarely used for everyday communicative purposes⁹. Although the writers only resort to dialectal and local forms very sparsely, they explicitly use a language variety which is accessible to all readers. Distance is deliberately kept between this style and academic or literary forms of writing which the authors define as "the second dead language"¹⁰ (p. 134).

The linguistic style of the *Lettera* is extremely direct and straightforward and often the language variety used approaches spoken Italian through the use of several discourse markers, short fragmented sentences, ellipses and deixis. This is also rendered more engaging as the *Lettera* is addressed to a specific individual: a teacher in a Primary school who personifies his/her profession. The direct reference to this addressee is often based on the interplay between the use of the first person (I), referring to the author/s, and the second person (you), referring to the teacher:

You will not even remember my name. (...) On the other hand, I have often thought of you, of your colleagues, about that institution that you call school, about the children who you "turn away". (p. 35)

The *Lettera*, because of its intent and purpose, is also rife with irony and metaphors, the latter often containing negative connotations. This implies that, at a lexical level, terms are chosen purposely by the authors in order to convey very specific meanings. This emerges clearly, for example, when the authors refer to some of the negative teacher's comments on their written work and when they include their reactions to them:

"Childish. Puerile. Shows immaturity. Unsatisfactory. Trivial".

What use is it for the child to know this? He'll send his grandfather to school, he's more mature. (p. 129)

These comments contrast sharply with those on Pierino's work, and the authors are very ironic about this, as clearly expressed in the final sentence of the extract below:

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Until you get to those children touched by the gods: “Spontaneous. You are not short of ideas. Work done with your own ideas that denote a certain personality”.

Once you’re at it, just add: “Blessed be the mother who gave birth to you”. (pp. 129-130)

Pierino, who represents children of families of high socio-economic status, is “touched by the gods” and the authors cannot refrain from writing their provocative thought in reaction to the way the teacher writes her comments: “Once you’re at it, just add: “Blessed be the mother who gave birth to you””. Besides irony, such comments also transmit a sense of spontaneity, typical of spoken discourse. The same occurs when the authors vent their anger and frustration, as in the following case with reference to words said by the teacher to Gianni who, in contrast to Pierino, represents those coming from families of lower socio-economic backgrounds:

But during the exams a female teacher told him: “Why do you attend a private school? Can’t you see that you do not know how to express yourself?” “...”

At this point we wished to add the words that we wished to say that day. But the editor would not print them. (p. 43)

The language variety used to write the *Lettera* also reflects the authors’ feelings through the syntactic structure of several sentences. The following example, which is quoted in Italian followed by the translation in English, represents an example of how specific syntactic structures are used in order to reproduce a style which approximates spoken, informal speech:

*Un professorone disse: “Lei reverendo non ha studiato pedagogia. Polianski dice che lo sport è per il ragazzo una necessità fisiopsico...” Parlava senza guardarci. Chi insegna pedagogia all’Università, i ragazzi non ha bisogno di guardarli. (...) Finalmente andò via e Lucio che aveva 36 mucche nella stalla disse: “La scuola sarà sempre meglio della merda”. Questa frase va scolpita sulla porta delle vostre scuole. Milioni di ragazzi contadini sono pronti a sottoscriverla. Che i ragazzi odiano la scuola e amano il gioco lo dite voi.*¹¹

An important professor said: “You, Reverend, have not studied Pedagogy. Polianski says that for boys, sports is a physiopsych... necessity”. He spoke without looking at us. Those who teach pedagogy at University do not need to look at the boys (...) Finally he left and Lucio, who has 36 cows in the stable, said: “School will always be better than shit”. This sentence ought to be engraved on the door of your schools. Millions of peasant-boys are ready to subscribe to it. It is you who say that that boys hate school and love play. (p. 38)

From a semantic point of view the schoolchildren are the main focus of the above extract. They are represented through the words of a poor peasant-boy (Lucio) and they are the object of the *professorone*'s¹² indifference. Towards the end of the extract their role becomes more prominent through the use of *milioni di ragazzi contadini* (millions of peasant-boys) who all wish to unite as one voice in order to express their thoughts about schools. The focus on the role of these schoolchildren is marked through the syntactic structure of two sentences: in the first one, *I ragazzi non ha bisogno di guardarli* [literally: 'The children he does not need to see them'], one finds a syntactic structure that does not follow the subject-verb-object sequence of written standard Italian¹³. The constituent '*i ragazzi*', which is the main focus of this utterance, is placed in sentence-initial position and is then also referred to by means of the enclitic third person masculine pronoun '*li*' in '*guardarli*'. In this sentence the grammatical subject ('*un professorone*') is not explicitly expressed through a noun or through a pronoun, as Italian is a pro-drop¹⁴ language.

A similar syntactic structure is also found in the final sentence of the extract presented above: *Che i ragazzi odiano la scuola e amano il gioco lo dite voi* [literally: 'That the children hate the school and love play you say it']. In this case the subordinate clause ('*che i ragazzi odiano la scuola*') precedes the main clause ('*voi dite*')¹⁵. Even here '*i ragazzi*' is placed in sentence-initial position and is anaphorically linked to the preceding sentence referred to in the paragraph above (*I ragazzi non ha bisogno di guardarli*). Another feature, which is also present in the example above, regards the final segment: *lo dite voi*, which in a word-for-word transliteration reads as 'it say you'. This phrase is marked by the fact that the pronoun *voi* 'you (plural)' follows the verb rather than precedes it, despite being the grammatical subject. The phrase is therefore a direct accusation towards the teacher, as the authors implicitly express the thought that "it is you (referring to the teacher) who say it (not anybody else)". Consequently, syntactic order has an important communicative function, as throughout the *Lettera* the authors repeatedly stress the information which is most relevant to them by altering the position of the linguistic constituents that form their utterances.

The following example represents another instance in which syntactic structures are characterised by and organised according to communicative prominence:

Di latino naturalmente ne sapevamo poco, literally 'Of Latin naturally we knew little of it'. (p. 52)

In this sentence there is a typical syntactic feature of colloquial Italian, namely dislocation. Dislocation in Italian involves a reduplication of a particular constituent. The subject-verb-object order of the sentence above would read as follows: *Noi sapevamo poco di latino*, 'We knew little about Latin'. However in the above sentence a constituent, namely '*di latino*' is placed in sentence-initial position as it becomes the main feature of the marked sentence. Moreover, it is reduplicated by the use of the partitive pronoun *ne*. Since such forms are associated to spoken language

their correctness in formal written varieties of Italian is debatable. Yet today such syntactic structures are a very common feature in forms of Italian writing which are close to the spoken variety, such as informal e-mails, computer chat and even newspaper articles. It is indeed noteworthy that this feature is used extremely frequently in the *Lettera*, despite being written in the 1960s, and this represents a clear indication of the authors' intent to use an informal style of writing. The authors of the *Lettera* often resort to such structures when they wish to stress those concepts which are at the heart of their writing.

Pronoun reduplication, in syntactic structures which are communicatively similar to the one presented above, is found in other instances in the *Lettera*. In the two examples below one finds two forms of indirect pronouns used simultaneously, the first person singular forms *a me* and *m' (mi)* and the second person plural forms *a voi* and *vi*:

(1) *A me invece m'hanno insegnato* [literally: To me, on the other hand, they taught me]¹⁶

(2) *A voi vi fa paura* [literally: to you (plural) it frightens you (plural)]¹⁷

A prescriptive, normative grammar of Italian would consider such forms to be inappropriate – if not outright incorrect – in the standard written variety, although they are frequently used in spoken language (e.g. '*a me mi piace*', literally: to me I like it). By using a pronominal form, such as '*a me*' or '*a voi*', together with a contracted form of the same pronoun, more emphasis is placed on the concept being expressed. Personal deixis is further strengthened by the explicit use of two pronouns thereby creating forms which, in the spoken variety, would also normally be accompanied by prosodic features, such as variation in intonation, raising one's voice etc.

The above syntactic structures are rendered even more emphatic through lexical choices: the 'art' of writing becomes alive in the *Lettera* through the very fact that words are chosen with great care. Furthermore, derivational suffixes are used in order to convey explicit meanings: the professor of pedagogy is therefore ironically addressed as a *professorone* 'a great professor'; Homer's translations are produced '*dalla testolina del Monti*'¹⁸, with '*testolina*' clearly carrying a disparaging connotation; the children of the rich are *signorini*, *figlioli*, *studentelli*.

Pierino is often called '*creatura*'¹⁹ in order to refer to the fact that these children are mollycoddled by their family from the day of their birth. On the other hand, children who have problems at school are *respinti* (repelled, turned away) by this institution: schools do not 'just' fail them but they are made to feel different and unwanted in order to avoid becoming an obstacle towards whoever, for various reasons, may have a better predisposition towards learning. School is an *infezione* (infection) from which successful students may be 'breast-fed' '*poppare*' till when they are twenty-five years old and are therefore ready to enter the *casta* ('caste') or the *razza pregiata* ('prestigious, chosen race'). One of the concluding extracts of the

Lettera is aptly entitled *disinfezione* (disinfection): the authors express their extraneousness from the system created in schools and the need to ‘disinfect’ themselves from it.

5. TRANSLATING THE *LETTERA* INTO ENGLISH

Since language use and style, together with linguistically-related reflections, are deemed to be such a central part of the *Lettera*, it follows that translating this work needs to take account of all the implications and connotations which result from the authors’ writing. The importance given to communicative skills implies that the authors choose their words and organise their sentence structures with specific communicative intentions in mind, as illustrated above. Translating entails the responsibility of reproducing the words and sentences in the original version in Italian as faithfully as possible, as well as conveying meanings which are vital in order to transmit the philosophy underlying the *Lettera* in a precise manner.

In the translation of the *Lettera* presented in this volume, wherever possible and feasible, a faithful, almost word-for-word approach was preferred to a more general one: the main priority is to limit the distance from the original text as much as possible.

However, translating from Italian to English involves a number of linguistic constraints which are mainly due to the fact that the source language (Italian) is typologically different from the target language (English), especially at a morphological level. For example, whereas Italian has a very rich verb inflection morphological system, which therefore implies an alteration, through suffixation, to each verb ending in agreement with personal pronouns (e.g. verb *cantare* [to sing], present tense: *io canto* [I sing]; *lui canta* [he sings]; *noi cantiamo* [we sing]), this is not the case for English which, for example, only adds the morpheme –s to the third person singular of verbs in the present tense, whilst the rest of the paradigm is unaltered. Italian, being a pro-drop language, allows the omission of personal pronouns, whereas this is not the case for English (e.g. in Italian one may simply say *cantiamo* [we sing], but in English one cannot omit the personal pronoun ‘we’ to express the equivalent form). Languages which are rich morphologically have more syntactic freedom. Therefore, whilst in Italian the subject-verb-object syntactic order is altered very frequently, according to emphasis and prominence which may be placed on one linguistic constituent rather than on another, this is much less common in English. This implies that certain structures, which are perfectly acceptable in forms of both spoken and written Italian, cannot be translated literally into English, as they would be ungrammatical.

Reference is made to a sentence which has already been quoted previously: *Che i ragazzi odiano la scuola e amano il gioco lo dite voi*, literally ‘That boys hate school and love play you say it’. A literal, word-by-word translation of the above sentence would be unacceptable in English, but, as explained earlier, since this syntactic

structure is used by the authors to reach a precise communicative goal, in a translation it is necessary to provide a faithful representation of the message being transmitted. For this reason, whenever it was not possible to translate such sentences into English by retaining an identical word order as in the original, or the same syntactic structure, every effort was made so that the communicative goal being expressed would be presented in a manner considered to be as close as possible to the authors' intentions. The above sentence was therefore translated as: "It is you who say that that boys hate school and love play", a cleft sentence in English which corresponds communicatively to the marked syntactic structure used in the source language of the *Lettera*.

This is also relevant in cases of pronoun reduplication and topicalisation, discussed earlier, which would be ungrammatical if a transliteral word-by-word representation in English were to be provided.

At a lexical level, certain terms are chosen purposely by the authors of the *Lettera* in order to convey very specific meanings. In the translation, a corresponding term was used so that such meanings and connotations would not be lost. Yet another issue regards the use of punctuation. In many parts of the *Lettera* punctuation is used sporadically and sometimes also unconventionally. In the English translation the use of punctuation reflects the original Italian text as closely as possible, although because of linguistic constraints, in some instances the use of punctuation in the translation varies slightly from its use in the source text.

For the reasons illustrated above, certain extracts of the translated version include sentence structures and lexical items which may not correspond to what one might expect in formal, written English. This is a deliberate choice as it reflects the intrinsic style of the *Lettera*, as documented through various examples in this chapter. After all, when referring to Don Lorenzo Milani, a friend of his and a renowned Italian journalist, Oreste del Buono stated that: "*Era diverso da tutti noi: spregiudicato, bastiancontrario. Gli piaceva sempre andare controcorrente. Si comportava come scriveva: senza curarsi della punteggiatura e della sintassi*". (Fallaci, 1994:70) [He was different from all of us: open-minded, controversial. He always liked to go against the current. He behaved just like he wrote: without giving much thought to punctuation and syntax"].

6. CONCLUSION

The authors of the *Lettera* clearly show that language use, as well as the languages they learned at school and the way they were taught, were very close to their heart. In some instances their powerful choice of words and their use of Italian syntax craftily match their provocative intentions and the accusations made at the teacher. They convey their message in an unconventional manner which often does not reflect, in terms of style and content, the standard written use of Italian. Their linguistic style is accessible to all and distances itself from a scholarly form of writing: the authors

adopt a communicative technique, also aimed at raising widespread awareness on the social situation that existed in the Sixties in Italy.

Their message has certainly reached its destination if one considers that today, over forty years after the publication of the *Lettera*, it is still being read and discussed: what was reported through these students' experience in the tiny mountain village of Barbiana has been extensively debated and reflected upon in Italy and beyond. It still creates a stir and has an impact on teachers, educators and pedagogists. Don Milani himself is still a highly controversial figure: on the one hand, he is considered to be a saintly and prophetic individual; on the other, he was also called a 'mascalzone' (rascal)²⁰: undoubtedly, however, the *Lettera* and Don Milani himself have a major impact on whoever comes in contact with them and they rarely leave one indifferent or unmoved.

In the final part of the *Lettera*, the authors ask readers to correspond with them in order to provide feedback and share thoughts. Sadly, any such letters would have never been read by Don Milani himself, who died shortly after it was published. One of such letters, dated 14th January 1968, sent by a teacher of a school in Sora, in Central Italy, shows that the *Lettera* reached its goal and left its mark. It is a reply which is still relevant today and which stimulates reflection among all educators: *I am a teacher. I have read your book which, in a certain sense, is also addressed to me (...) I recognised myself in some of your writings, I was unmasked in some of my attitudes, exposed in some words (...) I owe it to you if, over the last few days, in my classes, I look at those who are weakest and incompetent with a new heart, and with a sort of, I am not ashamed to say it, astonishing fondness.*²¹

NOTES

- ¹ The notion of standardization of languages is a complex issue, which has been dealt with in the works of several authors (e.g. Fishman, 1972; Trudgill, 1992; Duranti, 1997). This notion will not be discussed in this context, but it is worth pointing out that many contemporary European languages have attained their status as a result of their use in writing, mainly after prestigious literary works and historical developments led to the Western ideology of "one State equals one Nation". As a result of such processes certain languages were elevated to 'standard' forms, against which other varieties, including regional dialects, are often 'judged' and 'measured'. This is also the case of Italian, the standard variety of which was largely influenced by the literary tradition that emerged in the Middle Ages through the works of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. Whereas the prestige of the Tuscan variety rose, other dialects did not attain the same status and were considered to be inferior, despite being extremely widespread and although they are still used by large communities till the present day.
- ² "Means of information and of entertainment that use traditional techniques, such as periodical and non-periodical printed matter and theatre, and means which rely on recent techniques, such as cinema, radio and television, have exerted a double linguistic action in Italy: they have spread and consolidated the knowledge of the common language at the expense of dialects; they have led to new stylistic models which are intrinsically part of the techniques used to determine and transmit messages" (De Mauro, (1995, 1st edition, 1963:110-111, *my translation*).
- ³ The distinction between spoken and written form is not a dichotomous one, as clearly shown by Berruto's (1987, 2004) and Crystal's (2005) works. For example, there are cases where spoken forms are more written-like (e.g. a university lecture) and writing forms which are more spoken-like (e.g. SMSs, computer chat).

LANGUAGE USE AND STYLE

- ⁴ *Sormenti* is a local variant of *sarmenti*, ‘plant-shoots’.
- ⁵ Some students of Barbiana recount their experiences in foreign countries where they could practice the foreign language learnt at school. Don Milani managed to organise these trips abroad for them, despite the logistic problems faced at the time. This anticipates one of the aspects that today is considered vital in order to learn a second or foreign language, namely using them in practical contexts which go beyond the classroom, possibly by interacting with native speakers.
- ⁶ Received Pronunciation (RP) has been subject to extensive debate, which is beyond the scope of this paper. The discussion of RP will therefore be restricted to two definitions, which are also useful in the light of the topic under study: “Great prestige is still attached to this implicitly social standard of pronunciation (...) suggesting that it is the result of a social judgment rather than of an artificial decision as to what is ‘correct’ or ‘wrong’” (Gimson, 1980: 89); RP is “widely regarded as a model for correct pronunciation, particularly for educated formal speech” (Wells 2000: xiii).
- ⁷ *owls, pebbles and fans* refer to three words in French which, in the words of the authors of the *Lettera*, “are harder than the others. Old-fashioned teachers make students learn them by heart from the first days of school”.
- ⁸ Although over the recent years there has been an important shift in second and foreign language teaching – from a grammatical-translation approach to more communicative-oriented (Nunan, 1989) and task-based (Ellis, 2003) approaches and methods – one still encounters contexts where foreign modern languages are taught devoid of a communicative context with emphasis placed on declarative knowledge (*savoir*) rather than on skills and know-how (*savoir-faire*) and ‘existential’ competence (*savoir-être*), (Council of Europe, 1996: 101-108). This occurs especially in highly exam-oriented schooling systems where ‘coaching’ students takes priority over communicatively meaningful goals. As also mentioned in the *Lettera*, languages cannot just serve the purpose of being taught for their own sake without including aspects related to the culture they represent.
- ⁹ Berruto (1987: 59, *my translation*) affirms that, “there are no native speakers of standard Italian: in Italy nobody (if not in the case of some notable exceptions, which are very special) possesses standard Italian as a mother tongue: the standard variety is not learnt by anyone as a native language, there are no standard native speakers. The standard pronunciation is the artificial result of specific training, and as such it is reserved to specific socio-professional groups”.
- ¹⁰ According to the authors of the *Lettera* the gap between formal literary Italian and colloquial forms is so large that this too, like Latin, is a ‘dead’ language.
- ¹¹ Scuola di Barbiana (2007:13).
- ¹² *Professorone*. The augmentative suffix – *one* in this case adds an ironical and somewhat demeaning connotation to the term.
- ¹³ The subject-verb-object syntactic structure of this sentence reads as follows: *Il professorone non ha bisogno di guardare i ragazzi*.
- ¹⁴ A language in which the grammatical subject may not be expressed explicitly (either through a noun or through a pronoun). Pro-drop languages are morphologically rich, especially as far as verb inflection is concerned.
- ¹⁵ The subject-verb-object syntactic structure of this sentence reads as follows: *Voi dite che i ragazzi odiano la scuola*.
- ¹⁶ Scuola di Barbiana (2007:110).
- ¹⁷ Scuola di Barbiana (2007:112).
- ¹⁸ Scuola di Barbiana (2007: 28).
- ¹⁹ This may be considered to be roughly equivalent to ‘darling’.
- ²⁰ This refers to an article written by Sebastiano Vasalli, in the newspaper *La Repubblica*, on the 30th June 1992. This article entitled *Don Milani, che mascazone*, led to widespread controversy. It is published, together with the reactions it provoked, in Scuola di Barbiana (2007: lxx-xcix).
- ²¹ Scuola di Barbiana (2007: lxxv).

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