

LOST IN TRANSLATION: CULTURAL AND PEDAGOGICAL PITFALLS OF WORD-FOR-WORD LANGUAGE TRANSFER IN ITALIAN L2 LEARNING

Mohammad J. Jamal¹

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is more than a system of grammar and vocabulary; it is a gateway to culture, history, and social norms (Faudree and Hansen, 2014: 234). When second-language (L2) learners attempt to master their target language, a significant stumbling block is the habit of translating word-for-word from their native tongue (Vâlcea, 2020: 2). This approach is tempting for beginners: scanning each source word in a dictionary or plugging words into a translation application can feel straightforward and reliable. Yet, literal translation – the kind that preserves word order and direct vocabulary equivalences at the expense of context – often produces unintended comedic, confusing, or even offensive results (House, 2015: 104). From students rendering “over easy eggs” as *uova super facilmente* instead of *uova fritte* (or *uova rivoltate*) to those writing *quello è perché* (“that is because”) instead of *ecco perché* (“that is why”), there are many examples that highlight the pitfalls of reducing language to mechanically matched words.

This paper explores these pitfalls of direct language transfer, with a specific focus on Italian L2 acquisition. Drawing on a broad body of scholarship in translation studies and second-language pedagogy, it underscores why word-for-word strategies often fail to capture the vital cultural, semantic, and pragmatic nuances of Italian. From idiomatic expressions such as *in bocca al lupo* (“in the wolf’s mouth”) to the sociolinguistic complexities of polite forms like *Lei*, the Italian language teems with structures and references that do not neatly align with English or other source languages (Pierini, 2015: 17). When L2 students fail to read beyond individual words, the outcomes can be misleading or even unintentionally insulting. In many instances, these students innocently believe they have produced acceptable sentences, only to discover that their translations – such as *non lasciarmi tenerti indietro* (word-for-word: “don’t let me keep you behind”) – sound unnatural or confusing compared to the idiomatic *non ti voglio trattenere* (“I don’t want to hold you back”).

Moreover, translation mistakes go beyond the classroom. In business, such errors may derail marketing campaigns or tarnish corporate reputations (Katan, 2014: 115). In literary contexts, they may distort the emotional and aesthetic essence of a text (Venuti, 2017: 244). Even high-stakes domains like international relations and law can suffer severe consequences from seemingly trivial linguistic oversights (House, 2015: 53). Thus, the responsibility rests on both translators and teachers to convey the importance of contextual and cultural understanding. Rather than serving merely as “word conveyors,” translators must operate as cultural mediators, engaging in a nuanced negotiation between languages to preserve their essential meaning (Venuti, 2017: 264).

¹ University of Toronto.

While literal translation's limitations are widely known, this article reframes the issue through the concept of (un)translatability. Idiomatic expressions often resist direct translation because of their deep cultural and historical embedding. In this sense, the title phrase "lost in translation" does not refer simply to lexical failure but to a broader erasure of cultural context, emotional resonance, and communicative intent. As used here, it reflects the difficulty in capturing those cultural nuances that make language meaningful beyond the words themselves.

By analyzing the common structural, semantic, and cultural misalignments between Italian and other languages, this paper illuminates why word-for-word translation fails. It advocates for teaching strategies that foster an intercultural mindset, equipping learners to recognize idiomatic language, respect cultural norms, and adapt meaning to new contexts. Ultimately, it argues for a more holistic view of translation one that moves beyond literal equivalence to acknowledge the rich tapestry of beliefs, values, and worldviews encoded in every linguistic exchange (Katan, 2014: 171). Through real-world examples, including common student errors, this paper illustrates how educators can help learners cultivate an awareness of the sociocultural frameworks that shape Italian language use, thereby minimizing reliance on purely literal translation.

2. LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: AN INSEPARABLE BOND

One of the core reasons that literal translation is problematic is that language and culture are inextricably intertwined (House, 2015: 4). Words do not exist in a vacuum; they evolve within specific historical and social environments. For instance, the everyday Italian word "ciao", though commonly understood as a casual greeting, has historical roots linked to the Venetian dialect, originally meaning "I am your slave" (Treccani)². These cultural layers can be lost – in this case, it mostly, if not completely, is when learners simply match "ciao" with "hello", ignoring its background and nuanced transformations over time.

Similarly, Italian grammar encodes social hierarchies and degrees of formality through specific pronoun choices. The distinction between the formal *Lei* and the informal *tu* is crucial for signaling respect, social distance, or intimacy. An English speaker learning Italian might automatically translate "you" as *tu*, unwittingly crossing cultural boundaries by sounding overly familiar or casual in situations demanding a more formal tone. Conversely, using *Lei* with close friends would sound cold, condescending, or oddly distant. These examples underscore how translation is never just about "getting the words right"; it is also about fully understanding the social context in which communication occurs (Katan, 2014: 42).

Idiomatic expressions further embody the cultural and historical contexts that shaped them. Phrases like *avere le mani in pasta* ("to have your hands in the dough") conjure images of Italian culinary traditions – bread-making and pasta-rolling – that tie back to centuries of cultural practice. Literally translating *avere le mani in pasta* as "to have your hands in dough" might leave an English-speaking reader puzzled, unless they grasp the underlying notion of being deeply involved or influential in a particular endeavor. Consequently, successful translators and educators must embrace the cultural dimension of language if they wish to effectively bridge cultural divides. This means delving into historical context, sociolinguistic norms, and the lived experiences that words evoke in native speakers (House, 2015: 95).

² Cfr. Ciao - Significato Ed Etimologia, in *Vocabolario Treccani*: www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ciao/.

2.1. Student Errors: Cultural Context Oversights

In real classroom settings, L2 Italian learners frequently commit cultural-linguistic errors due to their unfamiliarity with cultural norms. For instance, in an activity related to dialogues at a restaurant, a group of undergraduate students at an English-speaking university taking an A1-A2 level Italian grammar course literally translated “Enjoy your meal!” as *Goditi il tuo pasto!*, which, though understandable to Italians, lacks the culturally resonant and widely used phrase *Buon appetito!*. Another group might try to convey “break a leg” in Italian by literally translating it to *rompiti una gamba*, which, unlike *in bocca al lupo*, has no idiomatic significance and can sound aggressively literal or even bizarre to an Italian. These are not just minor inaccuracies, but indicators of how direct translation fails to convey culturally embedded nuances.

3. WHY WORD-FOR-WORD TRANSLATION FAILS

Literal translation, sometimes termed “direct” or “word-for-word” translation, aims to preserve the original structure and meaning by matching each source word with its nearest target equivalent (Newmark, 1988: 69-70). While this method can sometimes work for highly technical or unambiguous content (such as chemical formulas or specific instructions), it frequently fails when dealing with the intricacies of everyday language (Newmark, 1988: 30). Languages rarely map one-to-one; a single English term may have multiple Italian counterparts, and vice versa, each colored by subtle contexts.

For instance, the English verb “to miss” can be translated into Italian in various ways – *mancare*, *perdere*, *sentire la mancanza*, or *fare a meno* – each carrying a distinct nuance. A direct, one-size-fits-all strategy ignores these differences, potentially confusing interlocutors. Similarly, the idiomatic phrase *prendere due piccioni con una fava* (“to catch two pigeons with one broad bean”) corresponds to the English “to kill two birds with one stone”. Yet a literal rendition in English – “to catch two pigeons with one bean” – would sound strange if taken at face value. These pitfalls increase in second-language acquisition contexts, where learners may not yet possess the broader cultural and linguistic awareness to catch such mismatches (Irujo, 1986: 287).

Due to the challenges associated with teaching pragmatics, L2 instructors often prioritize grammar over the pragmatic aspects of language. As a result, students may develop insufficient pragmatic competence, which can lead to communication failures and, in some cases, a total breakdown in understanding (Fernández Amaya, 2008: 12). Thus, L2 teachers commonly observe students producing literal translations that, while grammatically coherent, fail to capture the “spirit” or pragmatic function of the original statement. Over time, relying on these faulty mappings can hinder communicative competence, the very skill L2 learners need to hold nuanced discussions or interpret complex cultural references in Italian. In a sense, word-for-word translation is a false promise: though it seems to offer a quick solution, it can severely limit a learner’s capacity to engage meaningfully with texts or native speakers.

4. STRUCTURAL, SEMANTIC, AND CULTURAL MISMATCHES

Word-for-word translation is consistently tripped up by mismatches between the source language (e.g., English) and Italian. These mismatches occur at multiple levels – structural, semantic, and cultural – each posing unique challenges to L2 learners.

4.1. *Structural Mismatches*

Structurally, Italian and English differ in significant ways. While both languages generally follow a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) syntax, Italian allows more fluidity, rearranging sentence elements to create emphasis or manage topic-focused structures (Beccaria, 2004: 707-708). A student who mechanically maps an English sentence onto Italian might produce a clumsy and unnatural construction that puzzles native speakers. For example, “Yesterday, I only saw the movie” can become *Ieri, io solo ho visto il film*, which inadvertently emphasizes *solo io* (“only I”) as though no one else saw it. A more idiomatic rendering, *Ieri ho visto soltanto il film*, clarifies that the speaker watched only the film and did nothing else.

Italian’s morphological system further complicates direct translation. Words in Italian reflect number (singular/plural) and gender (masculine/feminine) more extensively than in English, which leads to challenges in ensuring consistent agreement among nouns, adjectives, and pronouns (Beccaria, 2004: 29). Overlooking these markers, or assuming they function identically as in English, can produce glaring errors. Similarly, Italian has a robust system of clitic pronouns that attach to verbs in variable positions, a feature largely alien to English syntax. Translators must move beyond literal mappings to consider the morphological and syntactic demands of Italian, recognizing that an English structure might need reconfiguration to sound natural (and be correct) in Italian.

4.2. *Classroom Examples of Semantic Mismatches*

Semantic differences loom equally large. Words that appear cognate or directly translatable frequently diverge in connotation and usage. A classic example is the Italian *attualmente*, which translates to “currently”, not “actually” (Sampedro Mella, 2023: 186). This is a common “false friend” that lures L2 students into embarrassing errors. Another is *parenti* meaning “relatives”, not “parents.” A naive literal translation that does not account for these traps misleads the audience and warps the intended message.

Moreover, certain Italian terms lack neat English equivalents, demanding creative solutions or expansions. The concept of *la dolce vita* transcends the literal “the sweet life”, encapsulating a cultural ethos of savoring life’s pleasures – food, beauty, leisure – that might require explanatory footnotes or contextualization when rendered in English. Conversely, English terms like “privacy” require careful handling in Italian, since the direct cognate *privacy* is used in modern Italian media but historically the notion of “private sphere” was often expressed with different terminologies or phrasing. These semantic nuances underline the complexity of trying to shoehorn a word from one language into another without considering context and cultural resonance (Alpa, 2019: 2).

4.3. *Observed Cultural and Pragmatic Gaps*

Italian culture values rituals around meals, family gatherings, and regional identities, all of which shape everyday language (Counihan, 2021: 77). References to *lasagne* or *tiramisù* convey more than just flavors; they evoke familial warmth and local pride. An inattentive translator might reduce these references to generic dishes or omit them, unwittingly stripping the text of cultural significance. Pragmatic factors like politeness, indirectness, and the use of formal registers further demand translators adapt language, not just words. For example, responding to a formal invitation in English with a casual “Sure!” might be

rendered more suitably in Italian as *Senza'altro, grazie!*, reflecting a culturally appropriate register of polite acceptance.

An additional cultural-pragmatic mismatch surfaces in business contexts. An enthusiastic English expression like “We’re so excited to have you on board!” might be more suitably adapted in Italian to *Siamo lieti di averti con noi!* (in an informal context) or *Siamo lieti di averLa con noi!* (in a formal context). A literal translation, such as *Siamo così eccitati di avervi a bordo!*, conveys a sense of emotional or even physical excitation, which can seem odd or overly dramatic to Italian ears.

5. IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS: A GATEWAY TO CULTURAL INSIGHT

Idiomatic expressions represent an especially rich and risky terrain for L2 learners, as they crystallize cultural attitudes, historical references, and community-specific humor (Baker, 2018: 71). Consider the Italian phrase *in bocca al lupo* (“in the wolf’s mouth”), which perplexes many newcomers. Despite its ominous wording, it is akin to saying “good luck” in English. A literal translation, “into the wolf’s mouth,” is largely nonsensical and can bewilder an English-speaking audience unfamiliar with the idiom. The conventional response, *crepi* (“may the wolf drop dead”), further illustrates how deeply rooted cultural conventions shape expressions that outsiders might find perplexing.

Puns and wordplay offer another dimension of idiomatic complexity. A pun may rely on the dual meaning of *conto* (“bill,” “check,” or “account”) in Italian a pun that might not exist in English. Translators then face the choice of preserving some semblance of the pun by substituting an English pun, or else using footnotes to explain it (Vandaele, 2010: 150). Such decisions are not trivial, as they determine whether the humor or rhetorical impact of the original text survives the translation process.

5.1. Classroom Insights: Observed Idiomatic Errors

Word-for-word mistranslations are a staple of language classrooms. While they might appear as harmless or even humorous slip-ups, they reveal deeper issues in language acquisition and cultural understanding. This section takes a closer look at some errors Italian instructors have encountered in the past, focusing on how these mistakes reflect a broader tendency to overlook context.

In an Italian L2 setting, teachers often notice that students who rely on word-for-word translations struggle with Italian idioms. For example, an English speaker wanting to say, “It costs an arm and a leg”, might produce *costa un braccio e una gamba*, which reads as a random bodily harm statement in Italian. A more culturally aligned expression might be *costa un occhio della testa* (“it costs an eye from your head”) or *costa un patrimonio* (“it costs a fortune”). Another frequent slip is translating “it’s raining cats and dogs” as *piove gatti e cani*, which, again, is incomprehensible in Italian. Instead, a common idiomatic expression is *piove a catinelle* (“it’s raining in buckets”) or *diluvia* (“it’s pouring”). These seemingly small errors can impede communication and highlight the importance of learning idiomatic equivalences rather than relying on direct lexical mappings. Below, the paper illustrates three noteworthy examples taken from classroom compositions. Each example of student mistranslation has been observed in a second-semester undergraduate Italian language course. These were part of assignments requiring students to translate English idioms or everyday expressions into Italian without the use of translation software. The students were primarily English speakers with under a year of formal Italian instruction, working within structured classroom activities designed to reveal idiomatic gaps.

5.1.1. “Over Easy Eggs” → **Uova super facilmente*

Students who enjoy American breakfast foods often attempt to describe them in Italian, sometimes resorting to a literal translation. In English, “over easy” references a cooking technique for eggs: frying on both sides but keeping the yolk runny. Translated directly, “over easy eggs” might become *uova super facilmente*. To an Italian ear, this phrase is, at best, meaningless or, at worst, conjures the bizarre notion of eggs “super/very easily”. The correct Italian phrase, *uova fritte*, places emphasis on the technique used to cook the egg: *friggere* (to fry something).

5.1.2. “That Is Why” → *Quello è perché* Instead of *Ecco perché*

In English, “that is why” signals a causal explanation or rationale for something previously stated. Students sometimes directly translate “that is why” as *quello è perché*. While this may be parsed by an Italian speaker, it comes across as clumsy, and it fails to capture the succinctness and clarity of *ecco perché*. The word *ecco* in Italian has no perfect English equivalent, blending a sense of “behold”, “here is” and “that’s why”. By ignoring the idiomatic resonance of *ecco* – a word that frequently appears in everyday Italian (e.g., *ecco fatto*, *ecco qui*, *ecco perché*, etc.) – as a device to point things out or draw attention to them, learners lose the natural flow that native speakers expect.

5.1.3. “Don’t Let Me Hold You Back” → **Non lasciarmi tenerti indietro*

Another observed mistranslation is *non lasciarmi tenerti indietro*. This phrase is, to say the least, partially intelligible and suggests, “Don’t allow me to keep you behind”, which is both ambiguous and unnecessarily literal. The more natural Italian phrase would be *non ti voglio trattenere* (“I don’t want to keep you,” with an implied sense of “I don’t want to hold you back”).

Grammatical confusion often compounds the problem, as the phrase *tenerti indietro* involves coordinating multiple pronouns and verb forms in ways that might not align with standard usage. Such an example becomes a valuable teaching moment, emphasizing how idiomatic expressions in L2 instruction should be learned holistically rather than piecemeal. Instructors can highlight the difference between *trattenere* and *tenere indietro*, the latter of which might conjure an image of physically restraining someone rather than politely allowing them to leave or proceed.

6. HIGH-STAKES CONTEXTS: BUSINESS, LITERATURE, AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Though word-for-word translation errors often appear in everyday language learning, the repercussions can be far more severe in professional or public spheres. From brand marketing to legal treaties, translation carries major implications.

6.1. *Business and Marketing*

In commercial settings, misguided translations can damage or misrepresent a brand’s image (Katan, 2014: 115). Many international corporations have learned that a witty

English slogan might become clumsy, confusing, or offensive in Italian if translated literally. For instance, a car company promoting “Experience the thrill!” might, via literal translation, end up suggesting recklessness or danger rather than excitement. Similarly, attempts to highlight a product’s freshness or authenticity can backfire if the direct translation inadvertently conjures negative imagery.

Translation errors in advertising have led to several notorious branding mishaps, many of which are widely documented in publications and online sources. For instance, Ford’s *Pinto* faced an unfortunate reception in Portugal, where the name is a slang term for “small penis”, creating unintended humor and potential embarrassment for the brand. Similarly, Colgate’s *Cue* toothpaste encountered issues in France, as its name coincided with that of a well-known adult magazine, leading to unintended associations that clashed with the product’s clean and fresh image. Another case involved General Motors’ *Body by Fisher* slogan, which was poorly translated in Belgium as *Corpse by Fisher*, completely altering the intended message and evoking morbid connotations (Katan, 2014: 116). These examples illustrate how direct translations without cultural awareness can significantly impact a brand’s reputation and reception in international markets. Such mistakes underscore that language choice must be informed by cultural context, audience expectations, and linguistic norms.

6.2. *Literary Translation*

Literary translation illuminates the delicate interplay between linguistic fidelity and reader engagement (Venuti, 2017: 264). Authors often wish for their original style and voice to remain intact, but preserving nuance in Italian can demand creative choices. A literal approach may undermine emotional resonance, comedic timing, or thematic subtlety. For instance, Dante Alighieri’s works challenge translators to handle archaic forms, theological references, and poetic structures that may not map directly onto modern English. Each line can carry layers of religious, political, and historical nuance that require interpretative strategies beyond mere word substitution. Similarly, a contemporary American short story might allude to 21st-century pop culture references that demand “cultural transposition” when rendered in Italian. Preserving the comedic or emotional impact in the target language often takes precedence over direct lexical equivalence (Venuti, 2017: 6).

6.3. *International Relations and Legal Documents*

Translation errors can have far-reaching effects in both diplomatic and legal contexts (Katan, 2014: 190). Contracts, treaties, and other official documents depend on precise language, where even a small misinterpretation – such as confusing “should” with “shall” – may shift obligations and trigger international disputes. This risk is pronounced in the European Union, where Italian is merely one of several official languages, and all versions must match exactly. Minor ambiguities can undermine legal clarity, spur lengthy litigation, and are exacerbated by how legal and diplomatic terms vary across jurisdictions.

Diplomatic messages also hinge on carefully chosen words to maintain international relationships (Katan, 2014: 314). In critical negotiations, a literal or clumsy translation can inadvertently communicate aggression or condescension. For example, translating “Our government is committed to pursuing every avenue to resolve this conflict” in a way that distorts the nuance of “committed” might imply either an ultimatum or unconditional surrender in Italian, escalating tensions instead of fostering mutual understanding. These

missteps underscore the importance of tone, register, and implicature when working between languages.

Likewise, even minor mistakes in legal contracts can lead to major disputes (Katan, 2014: 263-264). For instance, the English clause “Party A shall deliver goods by March 15” uses “shall” to denote a legal obligation. A simplistic translation – *La parte A consegnerà la merce entro il 15 marzo* – merely conveys a future event and omits the mandatory force of “shall.” A more accurate rendition would be *La parte A è tenuta a consegnare la merce entro il 15 marzo*. In litigation, such nuances affect enforceability and can undermine the original contract’s clarity. Consequently, professionals drafting and translating legal documents must remain vigilant about linguistic and cultural subtleties to ensure that every clause is valid and enforceable in the target legal environment (Katan, 2014: 264).

6.4. *Marketing Mishaps*

One illustrative case is that of a multinational fast-food chain seeking to emphasize fresh, high-quality ingredients. Its English slogan – something akin to “Taste the freshness!” – was directly translated into Italian in a way that inadvertently implied tasting something raw or unappetizing. Consumers found the slogan off-putting, and the brand had to invest in rebranding efforts across multiple franchises to mitigate the damage of their literally-translated slogan (Katan, 2014: 116). This scenario highlights how deeply culture influences the interpretation of even simple words like “fresh”, demonstrating that brand messaging cannot be divorced from the cultural lens through which an audience perceives it.

7. MOVING BEYOND LITERAL TRANSFER: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Recognizing that word-for-word translation is insufficient, translation scholars and educators emphasize functional, communicative, and culturally informed strategies (Le, 2024: 27). Translators ask, “What is this text trying to accomplish for its audience?” rather than “How can I match these words directly?” Through cultivating cultural competence, collaboration, wise technology use, and reflective classroom practice, L2 learners of Italian can progressively escape the trap of literal translation.

7.1. *Embracing Functional and Communicative Approaches*

A functional or communicative approach prioritizes the target context and the desired effect on the audience (House, 2015: 23). Rather than seeking direct equivalence at the lexical level, translators strive to reproduce the function of the source text. For instance, translating “Don’t judge a book by its cover” into Italian might lead to the proverb *L’abito non fa il monaco* (“The habit does not make the monk”), a phrase that conveys a parallel moral without literally mentioning books or covers. This approach accepts that each language and culture may require distinct imagery or idiomatic constructions to elicit the same response from readers or listeners.

A communicative orientation also supports a more flexible handling of registers. A casual English instruction “Grab a quick bite!” might become *Facciamo uno spuntino veloce!* or *Prendiamo al volo un boccone!* in Italian, depending on the desired tone. While a word-for-word translation *Afferra un morso veloce!* makes little sense, the communicative approach

ensures the final statement sounds natural and aligns with the social context of the speaker and audience.

7.2. *Cultivating Cultural Competence*

Translators must immerse themselves in the cultural context of both source and target languages (Katan, 2014: 21). For Italian L2 learners, this means reading about regional cuisines, festivals, historical traditions, and contemporary pop culture. Through such cultural literacy, they become adept at recognizing terms imbued with cultural significance – like *prosciutto di Parma* is not any prosciutto made in the city of Parma but is the type that is approved by the Consorzio del Prosciutto di Parma (*Parma Ham Consortium*)³.

Building this competence also entails understanding sociohistorical developments. Many everyday Italian expressions link to Catholic traditions, medieval commerce, or regional folklore. Likewise, gestures – an integral aspect of Italian communication – do not always have direct parallels in English or other languages. The more culturally aware a student or translator becomes, the less likely they are to commit jarring literal renderings.

7.3. *Collaboration and Peer Review*

Professional translation is rarely a solitary process (Gough *et al.* 1). Teams of translators, editors, and subject-matter experts collaborate, refining choices and double-checking for cultural pitfalls (Al-Shehari and Almannan: 456). This dynamic offers a model for L2 classrooms: students can exchange translations of short texts, compare interpretive strategies, and debate how best to handle idiomatic phrases. These peer review sessions cultivate a sense of translation as a dialogic process: a conversation that weighs potential equivalents before converging on the most culturally apt solution. This communal approach helps students recognize their blind spots and learn from each others' insights (Insai and Poonlarp, 2017: 83).

8. FOSTERING TRANSLATION COMPETENCE IN THE ITALIAN L2 CLASSROOM

The classroom is an ideal space for developing language proficiency and understanding how culture informs communication. By emphasizing communicative competence and cultural awareness, educators can reduce students' reliance on literal translation. Targeted interventions that merge explicit instruction with immersive practice help learners move away from word-for-word renderings and adopt a culturally nuanced approach. In my teaching experience, I have integrated several methods to help students move beyond literal translation. For example, in role-play exercises simulating interactions at Italian cafés or airports, learners practice inserting idiomatic expressions like *fare uno spuntino* into dialogues. These exercises are followed by peer reviews and reflection journals to consolidate understanding. Collaborative workshops using anonymized student errors as case studies help learners identify and correct literal translations, reinforcing pragmatic accuracy.

³ www.prosciuttodiparma.com/en/parma-ham-consortium/.

8.1. *Analytical Approaches: Error Analysis, Contrastive Research, and Comparative Linguistics*

Instructors can begin by collecting anonymized student translations that contain typical errors – such as using *anche* where *inoltre* fits better – and guiding the class in a collaborative critique (Oussama and Hassane, 2023: 229). By examining literal translations, discussing why they fail, and proposing improvements, students learn to spot recurring pitfalls. These sessions nurture critical thinking about syntax, semantics, and cultural nuances, revealing how widespread literal translation can be.

Encouraging learners to investigate specific grammatical or lexical features across English and Italian sharpens their understanding of structural divergences. For instance, students might explore how pronouns differ or why reflexive verbs convey unique nuances in Italian. During this research, learners often stumble upon pitfalls, for example, confusing *sentirsi* (“to feel emotionally”) with *sentire* (“to hear” or “to feel physically”). Presenting these findings fosters a shared sense of discovery and clarifies the underlying logic of Italian.

Systematic contrastive analysis further enhances vigilance toward “false friends,” such as *attualmente* (“currently”) versus the English “actually” (Balboni, 2009: 25). By dissecting sentence structures, students see why Italian may invert subjects for emphasis or position clitic pronouns differently from English. Such analytic exercises dispel assumptions of direct equivalence, illuminating Italian’s deeper syntactic and morphological logic. This awareness strengthens learners’ ability to construct idiomatic expressions without defaulting to word-for-word translation (Balboni, 2009: 27).

8.2. *Project-Based Learning: Themes, Adaptation, and Authentic Texts*

Short, theme-based projects on culturally rich topics – food, tourism, business, or family traditions – immerse learners in authentic Italian contexts. For example, a unit on Italian cuisine might culminate in students writing recipes or menu descriptions for both Italian and English speakers, prompting them to handle idiomatic expressions (e.g., *al dente*, *soffritto*) while adapting each text to suit different audiences.

Similarly, working with authentic materials – newspaper articles, film subtitles, social media posts – acquaints learners with up-to-date language use, regional slang, and dialect (Balboni, 2009: 12). Translating or summarizing such texts compels them to grapple with subtleties rarely addressed in textbooks, including local references and humor. Adaptation tasks, like rewriting an English advertisement for an Italian audience, illustrate how cultural expectations shape effective translation. By focusing on the need to “localize” humor, tradition, or innovation, students move beyond direct word matching, learning instead to weigh context and cultural resonance in each translation decision.

8.3. *Authentic Media, Subtitling, and Intercultural Pragmatics*

Films, TV series, and online videos offer highly engaging content for translation practice. Subtitling a brief clip requires condensing idiomatic Italian into concise captions without losing humor, tone, or emotional impact (Vandaele, 2010: 149). Learners soon see how direct translation often fails when confronted with timing constraints, body language, and other audiovisual cues that shape meaning.

Including intercultural pragmatics further deepens students’ awareness of how cultural norms influence speech acts – requests, apologies, compliments, or negotiations (Ellis, 2015: 130). Role-plays, simulations, and similar exercises embed language instruction

within real-world scenarios, guiding learners to consider audience expectations and social conventions rather than defaulting to literal translation. This combined focus on media-based activities and pragmatic appropriateness equips students with a more holistic view of language, emphasizing meaning over mechanical word substitution.

9. ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF TRANSLATION

Translators must carefully consider the ethical implications of their work by examining how their choices interact with both the source text and the cultural context of the target language. Ethical responsibility in translation extends beyond linguistic accuracy, requiring a deep awareness of cultural hierarchies, ideological influences, and historical translation practices. Since translation is an interpretive act, decisions regarding word choice, tone, and structure inherently shape meaning and perception. Concepts such as “domestication” and “foreignization” should not be viewed as fixed labels but as dynamic strategies whose ethical significance depends on the specific translation context (Venuti, 2017: xvi).

Language reflects and constructs social realities. An apparently harmless phrase in one language can become overtly discriminatory or offensive when translated literally into another cultural-linguistic context. Translators, therefore, walk a tightrope between faithfully rendering the source text and ensuring their translation does not perpetuate harmful stereotypes or distort critical messages.

9.1. *Avoiding Harmful Stereotypes*

In certain historical or socio-political contexts, literal translations of terms describing race, gender, religion, or disability can perpetuate outdated or pejorative connotations (House, 2015: 92). Translators must decide whether to include, omit, or paraphrase problematic words or phrases, balancing the author’s intent with ethical considerations. For example, certain archaic terms in Italian may now be considered discriminatory, and rendering them directly into English (or vice versa) could preserve offensive rhetoric unless context is provided or reworked. While some argue for “fidelity” to the source text, others prioritize the target audience’s cultural sensitivities. The translator must carefully negotiate these competing demands, often consulting with editors, authors, and cultural experts.

9.2. *Historical and Political Nuances*

When dealing with historically or politically charged content, literal translation can sanitize or distort the complexities of the original text (House, 2015: 55). For instance, references to fascism in early 20th-century Italy, or to specific political parties might carry connotations that do not translate neatly into English. Merely matching words can erase the emotional or historical weight those terms possess for Italian readers. Conversely, broadening or footnoting certain terms might help target audiences grasp their socio-political resonance. Translators of historical documents or literature thus become gatekeepers of memory, shaping how new audiences perceive pivotal events and ideological movements (Venuti, 2017: 244).

10. THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY: ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS

As mentioned, machine translation tools like Google Translate or DeepL have become commonplace in academic settings (O'Brien *et al.*, 2018: 241). While these tools can serve as valuable references – especially for vocabulary checks or quick initial drafts – they can also perpetuate literal translations lacking cultural or pragmatic awareness. In some cases, the algorithms produce translations that are syntactically plausible but semantically off, leading students astray if they accept the output uncritically. However, instead of prohibiting machine translation (MT) tools, educators can leverage them for learning. In-class exercises can involve running idiomatic English phrases (e.g., “break a leg”) through tools like Google Translate or DeepL, then discussing the output’s shortcomings, if applicable. This fosters critical thinking and reinforces the importance of idiomatic accuracy. Apps such as Reverso Context and Linguee also allow students to observe idioms in authentic contexts, enhancing cultural literacy.

10.1. *Teaching Learners to Evaluate MT Outputs*

A constructive approach is to integrate MT into lessons where students evaluate and refine machine-generated translations. For instance, an instructor might provide an English paragraph rich in idiomatic expressions and ask students to run it through MT for an Italian translation. The class then collectively identifies errors, discussing why certain phrases ring false. Students learn to question the tool’s suggestions, seeking more idiomatic alternatives (Doherty *et al.*, 2018: 98). This fosters a habit of mindfulness, reminding learners that while MT can expedite certain tasks, human judgment remains indispensable.

10.2. *Emergent Tools and AI Innovations*

Neural network-based machine translation (MT) tools are now pervasive in language education, offering rapid first drafts or handling routine text but struggling with cultural subtleties and contextual cues (O'Brien *et al.*, 2018: 241). Relying too heavily on MT can mislead learners into accepting literal, word-for-word mappings that ignore pragmatic or idiomatic dimensions. However, instructors can transform MT into a learning asset by encouraging students to evaluate machine-generated outputs, spot errors or cultural omissions, and then propose more idiomatic alternatives. Through this process, learners refine their analytical skills and deepen their understanding of language features that remain beyond current MT capabilities (Tavares *et al.*, 2013: 1).

In practice, MT services like Google Translate are indispensable for second-language (L2) learners exploring complex linguistic structures. Yet their dependence on a learner’s first language (L1) often exacerbates existing hurdles in mastering a new language. According to Urlaub and Dessen, while these tools provide convenience, they also risk reinforcing word-for-word translation habits that impede true L2 proficiency (52). By prioritizing direct equivalencies over cultural and idiomatic context, AI-based translators frequently produce outputs that mirror L1 biases, neglecting the nuanced sociocultural aspects of the target language.

L1 influence is especially evident when learners rely on machine translation to navigate unfamiliar L2 structures. As Lobalsamo *et al.* (highlight: 51), these tools prioritize literal accuracy over contextual meaning, often producing translations that misrepresent idiomatic expressions or pragmatic intentions. For example, an English-speaking learner

using automated translators might translate “I’m excited” directly into Italian as *Sono eccitato*, a phrase that carries unintended connotations in Italian and diverges from the culturally appropriate *Sono entusiasta*. This reliance on L1 mappings can hinder learners from internalizing L2-specific conventions, such as variations in register, word order, or metaphorical language. While modern versions of Google Translate (as of April 2025) return *Sono emozionato*, the persistence of older or peer-shared translations still leads to confusion. Classroom comparison of MT outputs across time can help trace and correct these common misinterpretations.

Urlaub and Dessein (2022: 53-54) argue that addressing these issues requires a shift in how AI translators are integrated into language classrooms. Instead of treating them as stand-alone tools, educators should design exercises that encourage students to critically evaluate AI outputs. For instance, tasks could involve comparing AI translations with authentic L2 texts to identify discrepancies rooted in L1 interference. Such activities not only enhance linguistic awareness but also help learners understand the limitations of AI-driven translation.

Lobalsamo *et al.* (2024: 53) further advocate for using AI to illustrate the nuanced differences between L1 and L2, promoting metalinguistic awareness. By analyzing errors generated by AI, learners can uncover patterns of L1 influence and develop strategies to mitigate them. This approach underscores the value of human oversight in leveraging AI technologies. Rather than replacing traditional instruction, AI tools should serve as a complement, offering opportunities to deepen learners’ understanding of linguistic and cultural distinctions.

Ultimately, AI translators illuminate the profound impact of L1 on L2 acquisition. While these tools offer unprecedented accessibility, their utility depends on thoughtful integration and critical engagement. By recognizing the interplay between L1 and L2 in machine translation, educators can empower learners to move beyond literal equivalence and achieve more authentic language use.

11. BROADENING PERSPECTIVES: TRANSLATION AS CULTURAL MEDIATION

Given the complexities outlined, a more productive vision of translation emerges: one that regards translators as cultural mediators rather than mechanical “decoders”. This approach recognizes that language is deeply woven into a people’s worldview. By respecting the interplay of language and culture, translators (and L2 learners) not only convey information but foster cross-cultural dialogue (Katan, 2014: 337).

11.1. *Integration of Interdisciplinary Knowledge*

Translation often involves subject-matter expertise, be it in law, literature, medicine, or technology. Understanding these domains’ cultural and conceptual frameworks is crucial. For instance, translating a medical brochure for an Italian audience requires awareness of Italy’s healthcare system, medical terminology, and relevant public health practices. Literal translation might inadvertently misrepresent procedures or fail to address local concerns. Thus, translators function as intermediaries, bridging not only linguistic but also domain-specific gaps.

11.2. *Respecting Regional Diversity*

While we often speak of “Italian” as a unified language, Italy itself is home to a range of dialects and regional varieties that add layers of complexity. Similarly, the English “source” might reflect Canadian, British, Australian, American, or other variants, each bringing different idiomatic expressions and cultural references. Translators must decide whether to standardize to a more “neutral” form (if one can be said to exist) or to retain the regional color of the written text. For example, a Neapolitan phrase might be left intact with an explanatory note, preserving the cultural authenticity of the original text. Such decisions underscore a translator’s role in shaping the cultural dimension of the target text (Balboni, 2009: 25).

12. CONCLUSION

In examining the dangers of word-for-word language transfer in Italian L2 contexts, this paper reaffirms a central insight from translation studies: languages are intricate cultural ecosystems, not merely sets of interchangeable words (Baker, 2018: 97). A literal approach obscures the deep historical, social, and contextual elements that confer meaning, leading to costly misunderstandings in settings ranging from the classroom to the conference room and even in diplomatic negotiations (Venuti, 2017: 64). By contrast, cultural mediation offers a more comprehensive paradigm for translation (Katan 2014: 16): translators and L2 learners alike must weigh audience expectations, emotional tone, and the wealth of cultural allusions, instead of assuming each English term can be replaced tidily by an Italian equivalent.

To advance this perspective, instructors of Italian can expand on immersive, culturally informed methodologies, such as group tasks where students analyze authentic Italian media, devise culturally attuned role-plays, and collectively reflect on cross-linguistic differences (Balboni, 2009: 9, 15). These strategies promote the nuanced awareness necessary to avoid literal translation traps and foster deeper linguistic engagement.

Simultaneously, the rapid growth of machine translation continues to illuminate the irreplaceable value of human discernment (Way, 2018: 160). While technology can expedite early drafts and broaden students’ exposure to the target language, it cannot replicate the contextual and ethical judgment needed to render idiomatic expressions or delicate cultural references. Recognizing this limitation ultimately empowers L2 learners to move beyond rote memorization and instead cultivate an appreciation for the ways in which language encodes the histories, values, and lived experiences of its speakers.

Looking ahead, future research could explore even more targeted pedagogical interventions – such as workshops blending translation technology, intercultural pragmatics, and reflective practice – to sharpen learners’ abilities to navigate complex real-world conversations. By affirming translation as a meaningful bridge across divergent cultural perspectives rather than a mechanical act of lexical substitution, both teachers and learners can avert the pitfalls of overly literal approaches. In embracing the transformative capacity of genuine intercultural exchange, language study becomes more than an academic obligation: it becomes a journey into the shared human histories and experiences that unite us all.

REFERENCES

- Al-Shehari K., Almann A. (2022), “Collaborative translation of Wikipedia: With whom do trainee translators collaborate and for what purpose?”, in *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer*, 16, 4, 8, pp. 448-464:
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1750399x.2022.2036937>.
- Alpa G. (2019), “The Protection of Privacy in Italian Law: Case Law in a Codified Legal System”, in *Tulane European and Civil Law Forum*, 12 [1997], pp. 1-23:
<https://journals.tulane.edu/teclf/article/view/1524>.
- Baker M. (2018³), *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*, Routledge, New York-London.
- Balboni P. E. (2019), *Didattica Dell'Italiano Come Lingua Seconda E Straniera*, Loescher - Bonacci Editore, Torino.
- Beccaria G. L. (2004), *Dizionario di linguistica e di filologia, metrica, retorica*, Einaudi, Torino.
- Counihan C. (2021), “Food Activism and Language in a Slow Food Italy Restaurant Menu”, in *Gastronomica*, 21, 4, pp. 76-87: <https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2021.21.4.76>.
- Doherty S. et al. (2018), “On Education and Training in Translation Quality Assessment”, in *Translation Quality Assessment*, Springer International Publishing, pp. 95-106:
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91241-7_5.
- Ellis R. (2015²), *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Faudree P., Magnus Pharaoh H. (2014), “Language, society, and history towards a unified approach?”, in Enfield N.J., Kockelman P., Sidnell J. (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Linguistic Anthropology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 227-249.
- Fernández Amaya L. (2008), “Teaching Culture: Is It Possible to Avoid Pragmatic Failure?”, in *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses (Internet)*, 21, pp. 11-24:
<https://doi.org/10.14198/raei.2008.21.02>.
- Gough J. et al. (2023), “Concurrent translation on collaborative platforms”, in *Translation Spaces*, 12, 1, pp. 45-73: <https://doi.org/10.1075/ts.22027.gou>.
- House J. (2015), *Translation Quality Assessment: Past and Present*, Routledge, New York-London.
- Insai S., Poonlarp T. (2017), “More Heads Are Better than One: Peer Editing in a Translation Classroom of EFL Learners”, in *PASAA: Journal of Language Teaching and Learning in Thailand*, 54, pp. 82-107.
- Irujo S. (1986), “Don't Put Your Leg in Your Mouth: Transfer in the Acquisition of Idioms in a Second Language”, in *TESOL Quarterly*, 20, 2, pp. 287-304.
- Katan D. (2014²), *Translating Cultures: An Introduction for Translators, Interpreters and Mediators*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, New York-London.
- Le D. (2024), “Investigating how cultural differences influence the translation process and the strategies used by translators to Bridge Cultural Gaps”, in *Journal of Translation and Language Studies*, 5, 3, pp. 26-36: <https://doi.org/10.48185/jtls.v5i3.1268>.
- Lobalsamo T. et al. (2024), “The reality of Artificiality: The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Language and Culture Course Assessments and Rubrics”, in Pan F. (ed.), *AI in Language Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*, IGI Global, Hershey (PA), pp. 43-59: <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-0872-1.ch003>.
- Newmark P. (1988), *A Textbook of Translation*, Prentice Hall, Saddle River (NJ).
- O'Brien S. et al. (2018), “Machine translation and self-post-editing for academic writing support: Quality Explorations”, in *Machine Translation: Technologies and Applications*, pp. 237-262: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91241-7_11.
- Oussama El Bahri, Darir Hassane (2023), “Enhancing students' critical thinking through translation practice: A narrative review”, in *European Modern Studies Journal*, 7, 4, pp. 227-234: [https://doi.org/10.59573/emsj.7\(4\).2023.21](https://doi.org/10.59573/emsj.7(4).2023.21).

- Pierini P. (2015), “Translating English compound adjectives into Italian: Problems and Strategies”, in *The International Journal of Translation and Interpreting Research*, 7, 2: <https://doi.org/10.12807/ti.107202.2015.a02>.
- Sampedro Mella M. (2023), “An approach to the lexical ambiguity caused by false cognates in Spanish L2. A corpus-based exploratory study”, in *Studia Linguistica*, 78, 1, pp. 186-205: <https://doi.org/10.1111/stul.12225>.
- Tavares C., Tallone L., Oliveira L., Ribeiro S. (2023), “The Challenges of Teaching and Assessing Technical Translation in an Era of Neural Machine Translation”, in *Education Sciences*, 13, 6, 541: <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13060541>.
- Urlaub P., Dessein E. (2022), “From disrupted classrooms to human-machine collaboration? the pocket calculator, Google Translate, and the future of Language Education”, in *L2 Journal*, 14, 1, pp. 45-59: <https://doi.org/10.5070/l214151790>.
- Vâlcea C. S. (2020), “First Language Transfer in second language acquisition as a cause for error-making in translations”, in *Diacronia*, 11, pp. 1-10: https://web.archive.org/web/20200811130018id_/http://www.diacronia.ro/en/journal/issue/11/A161/en/pdf.
- Vandaele J. (2010), “Humor in Translation”, in Gambier Y., van Doorslaer L. (eds.), *Handbook of Translation Studies*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 147-152.
- Venuti L. (2017³), *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*, Routledge, New York-London.
- Way A. (2018), “Quality Expectations of machine translation”, in Moorkens J., Castilho S., Gaspari F., Doherty S. (eds), *Machine Translation: Technologies and Applications*, Springer, Cham, pp. 159-178.

