

# Italian opera between educational linguistics and intercultural education

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## Reference data:

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Although Japanese opera majors are usually capable of decoding the linguistic meaning of the Italian operatic librettos they deals with, they appear unable to translate beyond the semantic level of words. This tendency leads students to misinterpretations that compromise both the understanding and the aesthetic appreciation of the texts in their repertoires. In this paper I shall illustrate one typical example of misunderstanding triggered by cross-cultural pragmatic causes. The example excerpted from Mascagni's *Rustic Chivalry* features an instance of misunderstanding in which students were unable to properly assess the meaning of a kissing situation. In the discussion I shall point out that insights from Habermas' pragmatic theory of meaning may prove to be helpful in detecting/redressing students' misreading in such a way that clarification might be seen significant not only in terms of educational linguistics but also in terms of intercultural education.

ここ4年間名古屋芸術大学音楽学部・大学院でオペラ台本解釈の演習を担当している。本論では当該演習で収集したデータの中から一つの例を分析し、以下の項目について考察する。翻訳における文法的原因に基づいた間違いと違って、語用論的原因から生み出された誤解は漠然としているため、見逃されることが多い。しかし、これらの誤解を見分けることができなければ、異文化間コミュニケーションに関わる間違いが発生することがある。更に、美学的観点からオペラ歌詞を理解することが難しくなる。最後にハーバーマスによる語用論的意味論の「コンセンサス」という概念を踏まえ、オペラのイタリア語学習に関して語学力ばかりでなく異文化間理解を目指した総合的な教育を実施することが可能であることを指摘する。

## Research hypothesis and purpose of the study

In most cases teaching Italian at tertiary level in Japan means teaching at a university of Fine Arts and Music, and dealing with operatic texts. The pedagogical context I focus on here portrays one of these peculiar situations of less commonly taught language qualitative analysis of data collected in a one-semester translation class in operatic Italian (the literary variant of Italian used in opera). A group of twelve opera majors, all Japanese native speakers (NSs), attended the class at the School of Music of Nagoya University of Arts in 2008. The students' assignment was to translate the libretto of Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* (*Rustic Chivalry*) from Italian into Japanese.

Translation here means a rendition of the source text (ST) into a Japanese version capable of capturing the original's genuine meaning. This approach is grounded on an interpretative



model which focuses on understanding the linguistic component with reference to explicit and implicit meanings (Munday, 2008). The class in fact was not aimed at the production of a stylistically adequate Japanese version of the libretto, but at inducing students to reflect on both *encoded meanings*—the semantics of a language—and *non-encoded meanings*—the meanings traceable beyond merely semantic readings (see Kempson, 2004). Students were free to consult a number of Japanese editions of *Cavalleria Rusticana* available at the University library, a list of which is included in Appendix 1. The purpose of my class was to offer students support in parallel with the work they were carrying out under the supervision of their vocal coaches. The ultimate goal of the class was to stage a convincing performance of Mascagni's masterpiece which students had to perform as a requirement for graduation, and which they successfully staged in March 2008.

My inquiry stemmed from the following assumptions:

- In my classes I have noticed a large number of problems Japanese NSs opera singers face are of an inferential nature.
- Students show difficulties in understanding the real contents of the lyrics in their repertoires, regardless of their *linguistic competence* in the target language (i.e., the knowledge of the target language's grammar rules and the ability to apply them correctly).
- Students moreover have a tendency to approach the translation of the texts as a sort of decoding endeavor, presupposing a one-to-one correspondence of meanings.

Based on these premises, my investigation sought to address the following issue: Learners' development of a *meta-linguistic competence* is a salient aspect in the process of second language acquisition. However, in educational contexts such as the class taken into account here, the importance of linguistic and meta-linguistic competence should not be overemphasized at the expense of *cross-cultural pragmatic awareness*.

Meta-linguistic competence designates understanding how the target language works, consistent with phonological, graphemic, and morpho-syntactic rules. Conversely, pragmatic awareness indicates the ability to figure out the implicit import of words used in specific contexts, consistent with extra-textual information retrievable from the knowledge of the *life-world*, namely "the everyday world we share with others" (Finlayson, 2005, p. 53).

## Method

My reasoning will proceed along the following lines: After describing the pedagogical parameters defining the class under consideration, I shall examine one prototypical example selected among an array of similar occurrences that students produced while translating the libretto of *Cavalleria Rusticana*. It belongs to a larger compilation of data comprising similar instances of misunderstandings I have been collecting from the class under investigation (Zamborlin, 2010, 2010, July), and in other similar classes dealing with other operatic texts (see Zamborlin, in-press a, in-press b). As for data collection, I assembled my records through field notes enriched with additional responses and feedback elicited from students.

In the example under analysis the verbal action is framed into a kissing situation. It features a typical instance of misunderstanding grounded on cross-cultural pragmatic causes. Misunderstanding refers to any failure on the part of learners to comprehend segments of the ST due either to inter-linguistic factors or wrong inferences leading to incorrect interpretations. Here I focus only on the latter aspect, wrong inferences leading to incorrect interpretations. In the discussion I will point out that the notion of consensus, borrowed from Habermas' (1984) pragmatic theory of meaning, may help teachers redress student misunderstandings in such a way that clarification can be seen as rewarding not only from an educational linguistic point of view, but also from an intercultural educational stance.



## Research setting

### Students' level of proficiency

The degree of *communicative* competence in Italian that Japanese opera singers are able to achieve while at university rarely exceeds levels A1 or A2 in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001). The group of students considered in this study was no exception. They had previously taken only two one-term classes in Italian, with each term consisting of 15 weekly classes of 90 minutes each. In view of that, the question arises as to whether Japanese students with such a scarce acquaintance with standard Italian can read, understand, and perform oratorios, arias, and recitatives in operatic Italian. The answer (except as it applies to recitatives) is affirmative, as long as we keep in mind that opera singers do not primarily study foreign languages (FLs) for interactional purposes but for artistic ones.

### Motivation

For this type of learner, whose motivation for studying Italian may be primarily instrumental, the goal is to reach an excellent degree of contrastive phonetic awareness (see Zamborlin 2008a, 2008b). For opera singers, in fact, the ability to correctly reproduce the sounds of the FLs they sing in is as important as their vocal potential (Colorni, 1996). As for meta-linguistic competence, the grammatical items covered in the syllabi of three semesters are normally sufficient to provide students with the basic knowledge of Italian grammar required to roughly decipher the linguistic contents of many operatic texts. Having said so, we should not underestimate the importance of *understanding* the genuine meaning of the lyrics in their repertoire for singers, as the ability to convey the aesthetic meaning of a text is intimately linked to comprehension of what that text actually says.

## The libretto

*Cavalleria Rusticana* is an opera in one act set to a libretto by Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti and Guido Menasci, based on an adaptation of Giovanni Verga's (1880) homonymous play and short story (see Ricciardi, 2008). It is a classic of Italian *verismo* (realism). The following summary should help to provide a background upon which the example analyzed below should be considered.

The events related in this opera take place on an Easter morning in the square of a Sicilian village in the Iblei Mountains, during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The tenor plays the main character, Turiddu, a young and handsome villager who returned from military service to discover that while he was away his fiancée, the beautiful Lola (mezzo soprano) married the middle-aged Alfio (baritone), the rich and highly respected village teamster. To forget Lola, with whom he is desperately in love, Turiddu seduces Santuzza (soprano), a poor young woman in the village, promising to marry her. As the opera starts, Lola, consumed with jealousy over Santuzza, induces her former lover, Turiddu, to engage in an adulterous affair with her. Santuzza discovers the affair and begs Turiddu to stop it, but the young man underestimates her feelings and refuses to bring the affair to an end. In despair and seeking revenge, Santuzza tells Alfio, Lola's husband, that his wife has betrayed him with Turiddu. Alfio challenges Turiddu to a duel and kills him.

## Analysis

The example I focus on here highlights one typical case of misunderstanding in which students were able to decode the linguistic/semantic meaning of an utterance but failed to understand the pragmatic implications enclosed in the textual segment, due to a lack of culture-bound shared information. It pertains to the *Siciliana*, a song in Sicilian dialect that the tenor



playing the main male character, Turiddu, sings right after the prelude. In it he proclaims the beauty of his lover, Lola. In the example the English translation appears below the Italian and the Japanese texts with transcriptions. (The legend for the Japanese glosses reads as follows: DAT: dative, OBJ: direct object, TOP: topic). The example displays the translations the students produced based on the Japanese editions of *Cavalleria Rusticana* to which they decided to adhere. The captions in the parenthesis refer to these Japanese versions (see Appendix 1).

In the segment of text we are focusing on Turiddu is furtively leaving the house of the beautiful Lola just before dawn. Thinking of her beauty he utters the following words:

- a. Biato cui ti dà lu primu vasu! (ST)  
*lucky who to you gives the first kiss*  
*What happier man could be than he who gives you the first kiss!*  
 (EVS)
- b. Beato chi ti dà il primo bacio!  
*What happier man could be than he who gives you the first kiss!*  
 (EVS)
- c. Omae ni hajimete kisu wo shita yatsu koso shiawase mono da (ONG)  
*you DAT first kiss OBJ did guy indeed happy person is*  
*Happy indeed is the guy who kissed you first.*
- d. Omae ni hajimete kuchizuke wo shita mono wa saiwai da (SAWA)  
*you DAT first kiss OBJ did person TOP happy is*  
*Happy is the man who kissed you first.*
- e. Omae ni saishoni kuchizuke dekiru mono wa shiawase da (AM)  
*you DAT first kiss can person TOP happy is*  
*Happy is the man who can kiss you first!*

Remember that *Cavalleria Rusticana* is a masterpiece of *verismo*. The fact that the story begins with the main character perform-

ing a lyric in Sicilian, and continues with the characters singing in Italian, serves the dramatic function of casting the events in an atmosphere of realism. The problem with the Sicilian here was easily solved through inter-lingual translation by (a) converting the ST in Sicilian into (b) a target text in Italian. Given that the differences between Sicilian and Italian in this lyric are minimal and limited exclusively to lexicon, the conversion could be easily carried out through a word-for-word translation. Nevertheless, difficulty persisted at an interpretational level.

Among the above translations, only (e) is acceptable. In fact it allows a double interpretation: The action of kissing can be referred either to the present or the future, at the discretion of the interpreter. The verb in (a/b) is in the simple present, and in this particular context the verb in the simple present can only be interpreted as referring to a routine in the present. Translations in (c) and (d), which are the rendering students accepted as most accurate, are problematic because they are linguistically incorrect and inter-textually inaccurate, as they do not make any sense to one who knows the antecedents of the tale.

From *Cavalleria Rusticana*, the homonymous play and short story by Giovanni Verga (1880), which inspired the libretto of Mascagni's opera, we know that the first man who kissed Lola was her former fiancé, Turiddu himself. The beautiful Lola betrayed Turiddu's hopes by marrying the rich teamster Alfio. As the opera starts, Turiddu and Lola are having an illicit affair. They meet at Lola's house at night when Lola's husband, Alfio, is out of the village for work. Their encounters are rare, and extremely dangerous considering the society in which the events take place. This set of inter-textual, and intra-textual cues was within the students' grasp (they all knew Verga's story). Nonetheless, they misunderstood Turiddu's words.

The question I would like to address here is why students accepted (c/d) as accurate translations with the verb in the past tense. The only explanation I can find is that students did not at-



tach the proper *relevance* to the equation which a mainstream Italian NS audience would find perfectly reasonable, that of kiss as a token of salute. The only way to find a logical sense in Turiddu's words (*What happier man could be than he who gives you the first kiss!*) is interpreting *the first kiss* not as an experience in the past—the first kiss that was ever given to Lola by a man—but as a habit in the present. It's the first kiss the man who spends the night with Lola may give Lola to wish her a good day when they wake up in the morning. The utterance therefore entails the following meaning: *What happier man could be than he who is entitled to spend the night with you!* The referent in Turiddu's verse cannot possibly be Turiddu himself, but must be Lola's husband, Alfio. In terms of rhetorical force this interpretation is the only one that allows us to infer Turiddu's exclamation in (a) does not entail regret, as students assumed, but a strong feeling of jealousy instead.

## Discussion

### *Relevance and the search for meaning*

As Sperber and Wilson (1986) indicated, whatever we try to interpret raises expectations of relevance, because the search for relevance is a peculiar feature of human cognition. The greater the effort of inference required, the less rewarding the input will be to process, and hence the less relevant and deserving of attention. Intuitively, we may say that any input like a sight, a sound, a word, an utterance, or a passage in a text becomes relevant to someone when it connects with available background information to yield conclusions that matter to them (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). Input therefore becomes relevant to us when we perceive it as meaningful, namely, when it produces in us “a positive cognitive effect” (Wilson & Sperber, 2004, p. 608), or a worthwhile difference to our recognition of the world.

Compared to communication occurring at an intra-linguistic and intra-cultural level, in intercultural communication set-

tings such as the translation class considered here, the trade-off between cognitive effort and cognitive effect in the search for meaning becomes more complex as background information must be negotiated to a greater and greater extent. With respect to this point, Habermas' (1984) pragmatic theory of meaning may provide valuable insights for investigating this phenomenon more deeply.

### *Consensus*

In Habermas' (1984) terms meaning is intended as pragmatic meaning. His view does not focus on what language says but on the effects language has on speakers and hearers (Finlayson, 2005). If we apply this view to the case under investigation, we will be concerned not simply with what the text says, but also with the effects the texts has upon its interpreters, namely, with the way students understand and appreciate the libretto, or with their failure to understand it. Translating a text is in fact a matter of communication influenced by the same principles of verbal communication that govern the interpretation of utterances at the intra-linguistic and the inter-linguistic level (see Rosales Sequeiros, 2009).

In terms of intercultural communication, what I find in Habermas' (1984) theory to be particularly rich in implications is the idea that, provided that communication occurs between rational speakers, the meaning of an utterance is connected to the reasons for the utterance, and the view that language has the pragmatic function of bringing interlocutors to a *consensus* (a mutual understanding or “*Einverständnis*,” Habermas, 1984, p. 287). In these terms, the meaning of an utterance might be said to depend on its *validity*, that is, on reasons communicants are able to adduce for it. In short, shared meanings depend on shared reasons (Habermas, 1984).

On the basis of this assumption, I interpreted my task to be to guide the class towards an interpretation of the libretto that



could make equal sense (not only linguistically and textually, but also extra-linguistically and extra-textually) to both the students and me. For this we had to find a common ground for discussion, from which to validate the reasons upon which that meaningfulness was being constructed. Below I reconsider the example analyzed above, re-observing it from this *rationalistic* stance.

### Beyond commonsense

Competence at understanding what is being predicated aside, a text might gradually become inaccessible to readers as they find themselves short of information of an encyclopedic nature (Telve, 2009). What may often be consciously or unconsciously assumed to be an obvious part of people's common knowledge might in fact turn out to be considerably less than obvious and appear completely irrelevant to people coming from different cultural backgrounds.

The misunderstanding in *Biatu cui ti dà lu primu vasu!* (*What happier man could be than he who gives you the first kiss!*) arose from students' lack of information regarding the range of uses that the act of kissing can have in the source culture. Among people raised in Italy the fact that lovers or spouses might kiss each other in the morning as a form of salute (even in front of their children) may be common knowledge. In Japan, however, it is not common knowledge. I asked students if they had ever seen their father kissing their mother or vice-versa. My question produced a shout of hilarity; amused, everyone said categorically they hadn't.

As Danesi (2008) observed, the habit of kissing "is widespread, but not universal. It is not common in China or Japan, and is completely unknown in some African tribal societies" (p. 55). It is true that recently Japanese movies or TV melodramas may feature some kissing scenes between lovers, but on the

whole in Japan romantic kissing is considered a private issue which, when it occurs, takes place away from the eyes of others. While in cases of intra-cultural communication a certain amount of *life-world* knowledge is normally taken for granted by both author and readers (Eco, 2005), at the inter-cultural communication level the required portion of common knowledge crucial to a relevant interpretation often needs elicitation, or to be provided in toto.

### Concluding remarks

This short paper draws from data that was collected within a restricted context of FL education. In spite of its limited scope I believe the issues this paper addresses may be relevant to any pedagogic situation dealing with the interpretation of texts from other languages and cultures.

The above analysis indicates that there might be no direct connection between cross-cultural pragmatic misunderstanding and students' lack of linguistic and meta-linguistic competence in the target language. As the example shows, misunderstandings of a cross-cultural pragmatic kind are likely to arise even in circumstances where students do not show any difficulty in understanding the linguistic encodings of the propositions.

As for redress, while misunderstandings occurring at the inter-linguistic level can be amended through explicit linguistic explanations, misunderstandings generated at the cross-cultural pragmatic level are not transcribable into a set of codified rules, as they are also not always easily discernible. Teachers with native competence in the target language/culture, for instance, may take for granted pragmatic knowledge crucial to correct interpretation that is in fact missing from their students' perspective.

From an intercultural educational perspective, a way to trace possible causes of cross-cultural misunderstandings in trans-



lation classes may be to engage students in critical thinking, encouraging them to not submissively accept all content at the literal level. Systematically eliciting students' responses enabled me to recognize many parts in the text that at first I thought were culturally neutral but upon reconsideration I realized their contents were outside the students' experience. Drawing from this I have come to think that my role as a teacher is not only to offer auto-referential explanations, of both a linguistic and a cultural nature, but also to provide a track toward interpretations that can make sense to both the students and me in a negotiated, consensual way. To achieve this, different feelings, dissimilar forms of cultural imagery, and varying amounts of knowledge from differing encyclopedic assets have to be constantly negotiated and renegotiated.

## Bio data

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## Appendix I

### *Japanese editions of Cavalleria Rusticana to which students referred\**

- ONG  
*Cavalleria Rusticana. Meisaku opera bukkusu* 27 (1987). Tokyo: Ongaku-no-tomo-sha.
- AM  
*Cavalleria Rusticana. Itaria opera taishaku sousho* 9 (2008). Tokyo: Aula Magna.
- SAWA  
*Cavalleria Rusticana* (This was a set of photocopies brought to class by some students. I was unable to trace the full reference.)

\*All editions include the Source Text (ST) and a right-hand page Japanese translation.

- EVS (English Vocal Score)  
*Cavalleria Rusticana* (1981). London: Chappell Music.

