

(Mis)understanding Italian Opera

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(Mis) understanding Italian Opera
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Introduction

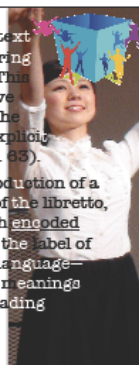
In many situations, **teaching Italian** in Japan means **dealing with operatic texts**. The pedagogical context I focus on here portrays one of these peculiar situations.

This presentation aims at recapitulating the conclusions that I have drawn in a previous study (Zamborlin, 2010a; 2010b), based on the qualitative analysis of data that I collected in a **translation class in operatic Italian**.

A group of fourth year opera majors, all Japanese native speakers, attended the class at the Faculty of Music of Nagoya University of Arts in 2008. Students' assignment was to translate the **libretto of Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*** (Rustic Chivalry) from Italian into Japanese.

Translation → A rendition of the source text into a Japanese version capable of capturing the genuine meaning of the source text. This approach is grounded on an interpretative model, which focuses on understanding the linguistic component with reference to explicit and implicit meanings (Munday, 2008, p. 63).

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**—that is, what is studied under the label of “semantics” as part of the grammar of a language—and **non-encoded meanings**—namely, the meanings traceable beyond the merely semantic reading (Kempson, 2004, p. 396).



Research hypothesis

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

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. In educational contexts such as the class taken into account, **however, the importance of (meta)linguistic competence should not be overemphasized, at the expense of cross-cultural pragmatic awareness.**



Meta-linguistic competence→The understanding of how the target language works, consistent with phonological, graphemic, and morpho-syntactic rules.



Pragmatic awareness→ 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, that is to say “the everyday world we share with others” (Finlayson, 2006, p. 63).

Based on these premises, my reasoning will proceed along the following lines.

• After describing in brief the pedagogical parameters defining the class under consideration, I shall examine one typical example of misunderstanding that students produced while interpreting a segment in the text.

In this example the verbal action is framed into a kissing situation.

• In conclusion I will point out that the notion of “consensus” borrowed from Habermas’ pragmatic theory of meaning may help teachers redress students misunderstandings in such a way that clarification can be seen rewarding in terms of **intercultural education**.

Misunderstanding→Any failure on the part of learners to comprehend segments of the source text due to either inter-linguistic factors or to inferences that led to wrong interpretations.

Here I shall focus only on the second aspect.



Research setting

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 (2001).



Question. 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 a FL for **interactional purposes** but for **artistic ones**.


Motivation. For this particular type of learners, whose instrumental motivation for studying Italian might be quite high, the primary goal is to reach an excellent degree of contrastive phonetic awareness (see Zamborini 2008a, 2008b, 2008c).

Having said so, we should not underestimate the importance that **understanding** the genuine meaning of the lyrics in their repertoire plays for opera singers, because the ability to convey the aesthetic meaning of a text is intimately linked to competence in comprehending what that text actually says (Colorni, 1998, pp. 2-3).

Analysis

The example I focus on here features one typical case of misunderstanding in which students were able to decode the linguistic/semantic meaning of the utterance, but failed to understand the pragmatic implications, due to a **lack of culture-bound shared information**.

The example



The example pertains to the 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. The verse we are focusing on reads as follows:

a. Biato cui ti dà lu primu vasu! (ST)
 b. Beato chi ti dà il primo bacio! (It)

Lucky who to you gives the first kiss
 What happier man could be than he
 who gives you the first kiss!



o. *お前に 初めて キッスを した 奴こそ 幸せ 者だ!
 Omae ni hajimete kisu wo shita yatsu koso shiawase mono da
 you DAT first kiss OBJ did guy indeed happy thing is
 Happy indeed is the guy who kissed you first.

d. *お前に 初めて ロづけ を した 者は 幸い だ!
 Omae ni hajimete kuohizuke wo shita mono wa saiwai da
 you DAT first kiss OBJ did thing TOP happy is
 Happy is the man who kissed you first.

e. お前に 最初に ロづけ できる もの は 幸せ だ!
 Omae ni saishoni kuohizuke dekiru mono wa shiawase da
 you DAT first kiss can thing TOP happy is
 Happy is the man who can kiss you first!

Why in most Japanese translations we find the verb in the past tense?

The only way to find sense in those words ("What happier man could be than he who gives you the first kiss!") is by 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.

Relevance → equation kiss = salute

This kiss is the first kiss the man who spends the night with Lola gives her when she wakes up in the morning.

The referent in Turiddu's verse cannot possibly be Turiddu himself, but must be Lola's husband, Alfio. In terms of rhetoric force only this interpretation allows us to infer that Turiddu's exclamation does not entail regret, as students assumed, but an intense feeling of jealousy instead.

Jealousy here is the force that triggers the tragic events which escalate in a dramatic crescendo.

Discussion

Search for meaning

As Sperber and Wilson (1986) indicated, whatever we try to interpret raises expectation of **relevance**, because the search for relevance is a peculiar feature of human cognition.



An input 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 settings the trade-off between cognitive efforts and cognitive effects in the search for relevant meaning becomes obviously more complex as background information must be negotiated to a greater extent.

With respect to this point, Habermas' (1984) **pragmatic theory of meaning** may provide valuable insights for investigating the phenomenon more deeply.

In terms of intercultural communication, what I find in Habermas' theory to be particularly rich in implications is the idea that—in communication 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 (viz., a mutual understanding or 'Einverständnis,' cf. Habermas, 1984, p. 287).

On the bases of this assumption, I discovered that my task was to guide the class towards an interpretation of the libretto that could make equally 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 where to validate the reasons upon which that meaningfulness was being constructed.

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.

This statement is a self-evident truism, but the fact of it is very often forgotten.

The misunderstanding here arose from students' lack of information regarding the range of uses that the act of kissing can have in the target culture.

Among people raised in Italy the fact that lovers or spouses might kiss each other in the morning as a form of salute may be seen simply as part of people's commonsense.

In Japan however it is not.

As Danesi (2008, p. 55) observed, kissing is a very important semiotic activity. However, the habit of kissing "is widespread, but not universal." For instance "it is not common in China or Japan, and is completely unknown in some African tribal societies."

I asked students if they had ever seen their father kissing their mother or vice-versa. My question produced a shout of hilarity everyone, amused, said categorically that they hadn't!

While in cases of intra-cultural communication a certain amount of life-world knowledge is normally taken for granted by both the author and the readers for whom the text is meant (Eco, 2005), at an inter-cultural communication level the required portion of knowledge crucial to a relevant interpretation often needs to be elicited, or provided in toto.

Conclusion

★ As the example indicated, misunderstanding 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 inscribable into a set of codified rules.

★ They are also not always easily discernable.



Teachers with native competence in the target language/culture, for instance, may **take for granted** amounts of pragmatic knowledge crucial to correct interpretation yet in fact missing, as young learners from different cultural backgrounds often do not share the same portion of knowledge to the same extent.

From an **intercultural educational perspective**, a way to trace possible causes of cross-cultural misunderstandings might be one of engaging students in critical thinking, encouraging them not to submissively accept all content at the mere literal level.

Systematically eliciting students' responses enabled me to recognize many parts in the text that at first I thought were absolutely neutral, but upon reconsideration was able to realize that their contents were **far beyond the students' grasp**.

Drawing from this experience 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 an invisible track toward interpretations that can make **consensually sense**.

To achieve this, different feelings, dissimilar forms of cultural imagery, and varying amounts of knowledge from differing encyclopedic assets have to be constantly negotiated.

Here I focused on a restricted context of FL education (i.e., the teaching of operatic Italian in Japan).

In spite of this however I believe that the problem this study addressed can be considered significant to any pedagogical context dealing with the interpretation of texts from other languages and cultures.



Thank you for your attention!