Multilingual Messages in Public Transport: a Case for Translation Studies

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1. Introduction

The study of words and images displayed in public spaces has been mainly investigated during the last decade under the umbrella of a new field called Linguistic Landscapes (LL), connecting discourse with space, particularly urban and open spaces¹. As Elana Shohamy and Durk Gorler point out (2009: 1), “LL touches various fields and attracts scholars from a variety of different and tangent disciplines: from linguistics to geography, education, sociology, politics, environmental studies, semiotics, communication, architecture, urban planning, literacy, applied linguistics, and economics”, but I think that Translation Studies also play a relevant role in LL, as we shall discuss in this contribution².

The idea of opening a new field of investigation on LL is due to the importance of effective communication in open spaces where a large number of subjects who do not share the same language and culture are circulating. These are no longer limited to bilingual regions or to those areas devoted to international exchanges or concentrations of tourists, like airports, congress halls, hotels, museums, historical centres, etc.³ An explosion of multilingualism has emerged in many other contexts as an expression of ethnicity, especially in urban centres where new migrants tend to settle and live. Besides this, some countries (like China) are currently opening to a completely new international mobility, that obliges them to introduce at least bilingual public signs. Unfortunately, translations are sometimes inadequate,

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³ On translation of notices and tourism see Dann 1996; Dann 2003; Palusci & Francesconi 2006; Dann & Johanson 2009.
either from a linguistic or pragmatic point of view. The aim of this paper is to present the case of multilingual messages in public transport (trains, ships, buses, metros, airplanes), i.e. oral, iconic and written texts anonymously produced to reach the widest range of individuals, that have in common only the fact of temporarily using the same transport facilities. These text typologies have not been adequately investigated in the scientific literature (not even in the field of LL), in spite of their social impact, and considering the consequences of misunderstandings or emotional reaction of addressees in the case of poor translation.

2. Communication in Public Transport.
In public transport passengers are generally addressed by means of written or oral messages. The choice of a visual or aural channel depends on the kind of message, on the location and on the number of addressees to be reached. The repeated sounds or the typical verbal communication of an anonymous voice coming from a loudspeaker are well known components of the background noise to which passengers are exposed in a train, in an airplane, on the deck of a boat, in an airport or in a bus station. Here is an example or oral announcement produced in four languages on the ferry that connects Piombino to Portoferaio and the island of Elba (2007) (the text has been audiorecorded and literally transcribed):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Italian</th>
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<tr>
<td>Signore e signori il comandante ed il suo equipaggio desiderano darvi il benvenuto a bordo della motonave “Moby Baby”. Vi raccomandiamo di prendere visione delle norme di sicurezza esposte nei vari punti della nave e di non manomettere le dotazioni di emergenza.</td>
<td>Ladies and Gentleman, the captain and his crew would like to welcome you on board of the ship “Moby Baby”. We recommend to look over the safety rules exposed around the ship and to not tamper the emergency equipment.</td>
<td>Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren, liebe Kinder! Der Kapitän und seine Crew höflich, willkommen an Bord der Fähre „Moby Baby“. Bitte beachten Sie die auf der Fähre ausgehängten Sicherheitsvorschriften. Unbefugten ist die Bedienung der Rettungsmittel untersagt.</td>
<td>Mesdames et messieurs le commandant et son équipage vous souhaitent le bienvenu à bord du navire « Moby Baby ». Nous vous informons les passagers de prendre connaissance des dispositions de sûreté exposées au bord du navire et de ne pas endommager les dotations d’occurrence.</td>
</tr>
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Written messages reach passengers from a certain distance or at eye level, appearing and disappearing on huge screens in airports or railway stations, or on static signs on windows, interior walls and sliding doors, often accompanied by an image that may integrate or faithfully represent the verbal content.
The main purposes of these messages that the local authorities consider necessary to convey to the public in a given time and space, are:

- to inform (about schedules, arrival and departure times, temporary or permanent location of public areas, etc.);

- to give instructions on procedures to follow (how to deplane in the case of an accident, how to use the emergency handle, how to reach the exit, etc.),

- to prohibit dangerous or inappropriate behaviour (smoking, leaning on an entrance/exit door, opening the window, spitting on the floor, etc.). Each message (either oral or written) may be expressed by means of a verbal and/or iconic/symbolic code: images and sounds with a codified meaning are often associated with their verbal components, reaching their target together, and thereby creating a network of multimodal communication.

As for the verbal code, the choice of language(s) to be used is generally dependent on national rules and practical considerations. German and Italian, for example, are the languages that we find in railway stations in the Alto Adige, as an expression of local bilingualism guaranteed by the Italian government. German, French, Italian and English are commonly used in Swiss trains, the first three being official languages and the fourth being the lingua franca. On the other hand, the languages used on international airlines normally include the national language of the company and the language(s) of the flight destination. Additional considerations may define linguistic choice in other contexts. In most Anglophone countries, for example, English is the only language used in transport, as it is presumed to be used and known by the majority of passengers. Elsewhere the languages of minority groups (like settled migrants) may also be present, especially in bus or railway stations, probably as a consequence of misunderstanding or abuse (e.g. at ticket offices, toilets, waiting rooms, as shown in Fig. 6, where the use of Spanish is probably due to the large presence of migrants from South America in Italy).

Here we shall not discuss in detail why one or more languages are relevant in the contexts that we have decided to examine. Our focus will be on multilingual texts (both oral and written) discussed from the point of view of the translation strategies adopted and of the effect that such messages may have on addressees, especially tourists, i.e. one of the most represented categories of passengers.
3. Translation Issues.

The social impact of notices and oral messages in public transport justifies our interest in their implementation and in the translation strategies being applied, as a consequence of the increasing mobility of people with different languages and cultures. The risk of misunderstanding is certainly to be avoided (see Fig. 1, where the message translated from Korean into Chinese and English results clear only due to the image to which it is related), but it is also important to offer adequate translations in order to give a sense of reliability and harmony, that is particularly relevant for foreign passengers when travelling as tourists. As a matter of fact the quality of services in transport (as in other contexts like streets, offices, hotels and restaurants) certainly also include multilingual communication.

3.1. External factors

The channel and purpose of a message are two of the external factors to analyse before translating a text, according to the functional approach - or Skopos theory (Reiss / Vermeer 1984; Vermeer 2000; Nord 1988, 1991, 1997a, 1997b, 2005, 2010a, 2010b) - together with the identity of the initiator, the identity of addressees, the initiator’s intention, as well as the place, time and occasion of the message itself.

In the case of public transport a central role is played by the initiator and addressees: the former corresponds to the highest transport authority, responsible for the smooth functioning of both stations and means of transport, the latter to any passenger who happens to use their facilities.

The initiator’s intention is to prevent accidents, avoid difficulties, offer help through any possible communication means that may relieve the pressure on staff or on information desks. To do this it is necessary first of all to attract passengers’ attention and to produce a clear and unambiguous message, but also to adopt a pragmatically adequate style, according to each specific cultural conventions. Especially when it is necessary to give instructions or prohibitions, courtesy norms are crucial to persuade the addressees to follow them. In particular, politeness is culture specific, as culture specific are the norms that regulate text types, like public signage or public announcements in the field of transport. This pragmatic aspect is deeply rooted also in the production of multilingual texts addressed to multilingual passengers, as a typical example of inter-linguistic and intercultural communication. Generally the initiator is not the same person who produces the text: the text producer is generally an officer, with no specific linguistic expertise in the national language or the other languages.
involved. In other cases translations are carried out by a translation agency, while the final product is entrusted to a printing house (in case of written notices), which is probably one of the causes of frequent spelling mistakes that occur in such texts (see Figs. 6 and 7).

Place is a crucial element, as the message is not only conveyed via words and images, but also through the context where it reaches its addressees: the prohibition to use an emergency handle in a train, e.g., refers to the handle itself and can only be understood if the reader is in the right place, just in front of it. Similar considerations can apply to instructions on how to use ticket machines or how to reach the information desk in a station or in an airport (see Figs. 2, 3 and 4).

Time is also relevant: society changes in time, and so do the messages that appear on public transport according to social and linguistic variations. Italian trains in the early 50s, for example, had certain seats reserved for the “war disabled” and introduced English, German and French in public notices, due to the increasing presence of European and American tourists (the warning shown on Fig. 2 still dates back to that period). Residual notices of the same period show the use of old-fashioned expressions like “ritirata” (in Italian) and “Abort” (in German) - literally a place of withdrawal or retreat - for “toilet/WC”: see Fig. 3. Recently, the languages used in written and oral communication in railway and bus stations tend to become bilingual (see Fig. 4) or to introduce migrant languages (see Fig. 6). This is particularly true in contemporary China. Due to the increasing number of visitors, Chinese signage is changing, adding English translations and promoting a large debate on this subject (see Ning & Yu 2008; Dann & Dann 2009; Ko 2010; Ma 2012; Minghe 2012).

The communicative event influences the style of this kind of anonymous message addressed to anonymous subjects who by chance pass by or temporarily stand or sit in a given means of transport. Impersonality is the typical feature, but each culture adopts specific conventions that cannot be easily transferred into another language. This is the case of the highly bureaucratic and directive style of Italian notices, compared with the indirect style of Japanese and Chinese notices, or with the formal politeness of English signage.

3.2. Internal factors.

Pragmatic, intercultural and inter-linguistic issues are crucial in multilingual messages in transport communication. These aspects are deeply connected to text-internal factors, which are also relevant for quality translations (Nord, 1988: 90-148): subject, content, supposed knowledge of addressees, non verbal elements, vocabulary, syntax and (in the case of oral communication) prosody and pronunciation.
The first pragmatic choice for both text producer and translator is the register to adopt, especially in the case of instructional and coercive texts: the English formula “Passengers are kindly requested to ...” can be transferred to other languages (e.g. in Italian “I passeggeri sono pregati di ...”), but more frequently there is a continuum of linguistic options to give instructions or orders, from the most direct and potentially rude (e.g. the use of the verb in the infinitive in Italian), to politeness markers (“please” in English) or to subtle psychological references (e.g. “thank you for not smoking” in English, “merci de ne pas fumer” in French). Register choices are responsible for the greater or smaller distance felt by the addressees who read or listen to a message while travelling. Certain languages may avoid choice when addressing an indistinct public (as we see in the use of you in English, of voi in Italian, that both apply to informal and formal relationship between the speakers). Others may not, like the German and French, that are more often oriented towards a formal relationship, by using Sie and Vous. There are also communicative conventions that apply differently in time and space: the rhetorical public speech style used in Italy or Germany during the first half of the last century was widely represented also in notices dating back to that period. This characteristic slowly faded away, but certain features have survived. In Italian, for example, instructions, prohibitions and orders are generally associated with a highly bureaucratic, impersonal, distant and strict style. The very use of technicisms like “oblitereare” (cancel or stamp) to express the act of printing the ticket in a bus, a metro or railway station is an example of this unfriendly way of addressing passengers. The idea is probably to create a feeling of reverence towards an invisible transport authority that will induce to follow the rules and avoid transgressions even in the absence of a physical inspector. The use of expressions like “è severamente proibito” that can often be seen on Italian notices may also be due to this “minatory” style.

Irony and humour are also pragmatic elements that can be associated with notices in certain countries or in certain contexts. In Australia, for example, one can find orders starting with “We understand that you would like to ..., but ...”, with a sort of wink of the eye that induces correct behaviour following a peer’s indirect reproach mixed with understanding. On certain low cost airlines or ferries, orders may take the form of adverts, with rhymes and puns (see Fig. 3), attempting to create a positive emotion in the addressees who will be

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4 The recent tendency to use the informal tu in Italian communication is reflected in the following bilingual warning collected at the railway station of Siena in 2012: “Ricordati di convalidare il biglietto!! Prima di salire sul treno - Remember!! You must stamp the ticket in the yellow box, before starting your journey”.
presumably more willing to respect the instruction contained in the message. A new international trend is the use of ethics, which is changing orders into suggestions based on a common respect for others (e.g. in toilets) or for the environment (e.g. for the sea, as shown in Fig. 5).

The use of transport facilities by an increasing number of passengers coming from different cultural areas is creating new challenges for transport communication, especially from the point of view of what has to be left implicit and what needs explanation or prohibition. The recent restrictions on smoking in public spaces that have been progressively introduced in most European countries are reflected in public transport where “smoking areas” are now indicated without any further explanation (which implies that the rest is a “non smoking area”). What is clear for passengers used to such a restriction may not be easily understood by others coming from a country where smoking is allowed everywhere. The same thing applies to the cases of other habits that are generalised - though not allowed in public spaces - in certain cultures (e.g. spitting), or that do not need a reminder because they rarely appear in public (e.g. putting ones’ feet on the seat).

Whenever a translation refers to culture specific habits or ratio, the challenge is to offer a text that is as clear and easy to understand as possible, taking all possible information gaps into consideration.

The brevity of messages, the space contiguity of translations (in written notices) or their immediate sequence (in oral announcements) may cause a tendency to literal translation. Inter-linguistic issues may also be due to the contact of typologically distant languages (like Chinese and English) or specificity in the use of capital letters (which is relevant in German, as shown in Fig. 6). Poor translations are also due to human error (Fig. 7) and, increasingly, to the use of automatic translation software. Here are some more examples, collected on trains, ferries, underground and buses in Italy in 2013 (and literally transcribed):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Italian</th>
<th>German</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PUNTO DI RINUNZIONE</td>
<td>SAMMELPLATZ</td>
<td>POINT DE RENUNZION</td>
<td>MUSTER STATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aviso di viaggiatori</td>
<td>Hinweis für die reisenden</td>
<td>Avis pour voyageurs</td>
<td>Travel advisory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIETATO L’ACCESSO AL GARAGE DURANTE LA NAVIGAZIONE</td>
<td>WAHREN DER UBERFAHR IST DES ZUGANG ZU DEN GARAGE NICHT GESTATTET</td>
<td>NO ENTRY TO CAR DECKS DURING SEA PASSAGE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PORTA MUNITA DI ALLARME</td>
<td>NUR OEFFNE TÜR MIT EINER ALARMANLAGE IM NOTFALL</td>
<td>SEULE PORTE OUVERTE A UNE ALARME EN CAS D’URGENCE</td>
<td>OPEN DOOR ALARM ONLY IN CASE OF EMERGENCY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Conclusion.
Public transport has an incredibly rich multilingual context, where several messages interact involving passengers and staff through various channels and codes, reaching them quasi-simultaneously through sight and hearing. The importance of effective communication in order to avoid accidents and misbehaviour is evident. Indeed, the task is even more important when the crowd circulating in railway, metro and bus stations, in harbours and airports, or sitting in trains, buses, ferries or airplanes, is composed not only of locals, but also of foreigners, who may not understand the national language and may not be familiar with local customs.

The suppositions on who might be the final addressee of such oral and written messages are reflected in the languages that appear in multilingual notices and oral announcements in such contexts. Apart from bilingual areas, where the presence of two or more local varieties are ruled by national norms, most international airports and stations show a variety of combinations of languages, that (try to) reflect the various potential competences of the international passengers, while a tendency to bilingualism (with English as the unique lingua franca for non locals) is emerging.

Although notices and oral announcements in public transport are produced by the staff responsible for such matters, under the supervision of the transport authorities, multilingualism is not synonymous with providing adequate translations, since these also show evident difficulties in terms of pragmatic, cultural and linguistic adaptation. Translating notices and announcements in public transport is a serious issue, involving not only the comprehension of messages, but also the quality image of a country, in terms of tourist services. On the other hand, such translations offer exceptional research possibilities in the field of Translation Studies - like the use of the *Skopostheory* that we suggested in this paper – or in the field of Linguistic Landscapes, that so far has paid little attention to multilingual translation in signage and public communication.

The few examples that we have collected and provided for reflection should give some idea of how deep and multidisciplinary analysis can
be carried out on notices and announcements in public transport. I also tried to share with the reader a new experience of travelling as a form of action research, where sociology, language, translation and tourism studies, both separately and in combination, seem to embrace a wider examination of the facts and products of human thought and daily living that too often lie unnoticed around us.

Figure 1. Korean sign, translated into Chinese and English

Figure 2. Train department in Italy, 2013

Figure 3. Train corridor in Italy, 2013

*This sign was illustrated by Christiane Nord during her presentation at the Università per Stranieri di Siena in 2009. The Korean transliteration is: ①møiri ②mach‘i ③j-antarok ④chosim-baseyŏ, which means: ①head ②bit ③not to ④pay attention.
Figure 4. Railway station in Italy, 2013

Figure 5. Ferry from Italy to Corsica, 2011

Figure 6. Bus station in Italy, 2013

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6 The invitation to use the bin is based on a rhyme in French (literally “Everything in the bin for a nicer sea”). The Italian version keeps the slogan using an alliteration instead of the rhyme (literally “The sea refuses garbage, the bin don’t”), adapting the message to a different content with the same function.

7 The correct sentence in German is “Bezahlung für die Toilette”
Figure 7. De Gaulle Airport, Paris (2009)\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{8} In Italian the correct sentence is „Tutti i treni vanno a Parigi”.
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