NEGOTIATING MEANING ACROSS VARIETIES: THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE VARIATION IN SHAPING TRANSLATION CHOICES[i]

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Abstract:

This article examines the multifaceted relationship between language variation and translation, with a particular focus on how translators handle dialectal features, regionalisms, and sociolinguistic markers in their work. While translation has traditionally been framed as a process of transferring meaning from one standardized language system to another, such an approach often overlooks the internal diversity present within languages themselves. This internal variation—manifested through dialects, sociolects, and other markers of regional or social identity—poses unique challenges to the translator. Translators are frequently called upon not only to convey linguistic content but also to mediate social, cultural, and identity-based dimensions embedded in the language of the source text. The study begins by surveying theoretical contributions from both translation studies and sociolinguistics, including the work of scholars such as Eugene Nida, Mona Baker, Lawrence Venuti, and Peter Trudgill. These perspectives help frame the central question of the article: how do translators make informed decisions when faced with linguistic variation, and what are the implications of these decisions for the representation of culture, identity, and power? The article then presents a series of case studies from literary, audiovisual, and institutional contexts to illustrate how different domains of translation engage with language variation. In literary translation, for example, dialect often plays a crucial role in constructing character voice and regional authenticity. Rendering these features into another language presents significant dilemmas: should a translator search for an equivalent dialect in the target language, use standardized language, or invent a stylized form of speech that mimics the effect of the original? These questions are explored through comparative analyses of translated novels and their treatment

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of dialects and colloquialisms. In audiovisual translation, particularly in subtitling and dubbing, the challenge of linguistic variation is compounded by spatial and temporal constraints. Translators must often choose between preserving the flavor of regional speech and ensuring comprehension for a broad audience. The article examines how series like Peaky Blinders or The Wire have been translated for non-English-speaking audiences, noting the varying degrees to which dialect and sociolect have been retained, adapted, or erased. The discussion also extends to institutional and legal translation, where dialectal language may carry significant legal or political weight. For instance, in court interpreting or translation of witness testimonies, capturing the original speaker's dialect and sociolect can be critical to maintaining the authenticity and integrity of the discourse. Overall, the article argues that language variation is not a peripheral concern but a central aspect of translation practice, one that reveals the translator's role as a cultural and sociolinguistic mediator. Rather than erasing variation in favor of uniformity, translators should be encouraged to engage with it in ways that preserve its communicative and cultural value. By doing so, translation can become a more inclusive and reflective practice that respects the richness and diversity of human language.

Keywords: translation studies; language variation; dialects; sociolinguistics; regionalisms; equivalence; translator choices; cultural context

Riassunto:

Questo articolo esamina la relazione multifaccettata tra variazione linguistica e traduzione, con un focus particolare su come i traduttori affrontano caratteristiche dialettali, regionalismi e marcatori sociolinguistici nel loro lavoro. Sebbene la traduzione sia stata tradizionalmente intesa come un processo di trasferimento del significato da un sistema linguistico standardizzato a un altro, tale approccio trascura spesso la diversità interna presente all'interno delle lingue stesse. Questa variazione interna — manifestata attraverso dialetti, socioletti e altri marcatori di identità regionale o sociale — rappresenta una sfida unica per il traduttore. I traduttori sono frequentemente chiamati non solo a trasmettere il contenuto linguistico, ma anche a mediare dimensioni sociali, culturali e identitarie insite nel linguaggio del testo di partenza. Lo studio inizia con un'analisi delle principali teorie provenienti dagli studi sulla traduzione e dalla sociolinguistica, includendo il lavoro di studiosi come Eugene Nida, Mona Baker, Lawrence Venuti e Peter Trudgill. Queste prospettive aiutano a inquadrare la domanda centrale dell'articolo: come prendono decisioni informate i traduttori quando si confrontano con la variazione linguistica e quali sono le implicazioni di tali decisioni per la rappresentazione di cultura, identità e potere? L'articolo presenta quindi una serie di casi studio tratti da contesti letterari, audiovisivi e istituzionali per illustrare come diversi ambiti della traduzione affrontino la variazione linguistica. Nella traduzione letteraria, ad esempio, il dialetto svolge spesso un ruolo cruciale nella costruzione della voce del personaggio e nell'autenticità regionale. Rendere queste caratteristiche in un'altra lingua presenta dilemmi significativi: un traduttore dovrebbe cercare un dialetto equivalente nella lingua di arrivo, utilizzare un linguaggio standardizzato o inventare una forma stilizzata di linguaggio che

imiti l'effetto dell'originale? Questi interrogativi vengono esplorati attraverso analisi comparative di romanzi tradotti e del loro trattamento di dialetti e colloquialismi. Nella traduzione audiovisiva, in particolare nel doppiaggio e nei sottotitoli, la sfida della variazione linguistica è aggravata da vincoli spaziali e temporali. I traduttori devono spesso scegliere tra preservare il sapore del linguaggio regionale e garantire la comprensione a un pubblico più ampio. L'articolo analizza come serie come Peaky Blinders o The Wire siano state tradotte per pubblico non anglofono, evidenziando i diversi gradi con cui dialetto e socioletto sono stati mantenuti, adattati o eliminati. La discussione si estende anche alla traduzione istituzionale e legale, dove la lingua dialettale può assumere un peso legale o politico significativo. Per esempio, nell'interpretariato giudiziario o nella traduzione di testimonianze, catturare il dialetto e il socioletto dell'oratore originale può essere fondamentale per mantenere l'autenticità e l'integrità del discorso. Nel complesso, l'articolo sostiene che la variazione linguistica non è un problema periferico ma un aspetto centrale della pratica traduttiva, che rivela il ruolo del traduttore come mediatore culturale e sociolinguistico. Piuttosto che cancellare la variazione in favore dell'uniformità, i traduttori dovrebbero essere incoraggiati a interagire con essa in modi che ne preservino il valore comunicativo e culturale. Così facendo, la traduzione può diventare una pratica più inclusiva e riflessiva, che rispetta la ricchezza e la diversità del linguaggio umano.

Parole chiave: studi sulla traduzione; variazione linguistica; dialetti; sociolinguistica; regionalismi; equivalenza; scelte del traduttore; contesto culturale

1. Introduction

Language is inherently variable. From one speaker to another, from one region to the next, and across different social contexts, language shifts in pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax. This variation is not incidental; it reflects deep-seated aspects of identity, power relations, and social belonging. Within translation studies, however, language is still too often approached as a standardized system, with the translator cast primarily as a conveyor of propositional content. This perspective risks ignoring a crucial aspect of language: its social and cultural embeddedness. The present study aims to address this gap by investigating how language variation—including dialectal forms, regionalisms, and other sociolinguistic markers—influences translation choices across different domains of practice.

Translation involves much more than finding lexical or grammatical equivalence. It entails navigating cultural, social, and stylistic layers of meaning. When a source text contains marked varieties of language—such as nonstandard dialects, sociolects, or region-specific expressions—the translator must decide whether to preserve, adapt, or neutralize these features. Each choice carries consequences. Preserving the variation may maintain the authenticity and social positioning of the characters or narrator, but it may also alienate the target audience. Conversely, neutralizing variation may increase readability while erasing cultural nuance.

This dilemma is particularly evident in literary and audiovisual translation, where language variation is frequently used for character development and realism. As Baker (2018) notes, "*the translator's role becomes more than linguistic; it is fundamentally sociocultural*" (p. 112). In these contexts, choices around variation can influence how readers or viewers perceive class, education level, ethnicity, and regional identity.

The tension between fidelity and accessibility is not new, but it becomes especially acute when dealing with nonstandard or socially marked language. Consider the following example from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where Mark Twain uses a Southern African American vernacular:

> *"Yo' ole father doan' know yit what he's a-gwyne to do. Sometimes he spec he's gwyne to chile yo', en den agin he spec he ain't."* (Twain, 1884, p. 67)

Such language is rich with cultural and historical context. A translator must decide whether to recreate this variation using a dialect of the target language or render it into standard language. The decision has implications not only for style but for ethics, representation, and readership.

1.1 Sociolinguistic Dimensions of Translation

Sociolinguistic theory emphasizes that language variation is patterned and meaningful. According to Labov (1972), variation is not random but structured by social variables such as class, gender, and region. Trudgill (2000) adds that dialects are "*systematic and rule-governed varieties of language,*" not mere deviations from a standard norm (p. 5). Recognizing this, translators must consider the function of variation in the source text: Is it used to indicate social hierarchy? To create humor? To emphasize marginality or solidarity? Each of these functions must be reinterpreted—not just replicated—in the target context.

In this article, we explore these questions through a structured analysis of translation practices involving language variation. By drawing on both theory and real-world case studies, we aim to highlight the role of the translator not just as a linguistic operator but as a cultural and sociolinguistic mediator.

2. Review of Literature

The interaction between translation and language variation has drawn increasing scholarly attention over the past three decades, especially in response to developments in sociolinguistics and cultural studies. Early models of translation, particularly those rooted in equivalence-based frameworks, tended to treat language as a monolithic, standardized system (Nida & Taber, 1969). However, more recent paradigms have emphasized the cultural and social situatedness of language, placing variation at the heart of linguistic identity and, by extension, of the translation process.

One of the foundational voices in this shift is Lawrence Venuti, who foregrounds the ideological and political dimensions of translation. Venuti (1995) argues that standardizing translation practices often work to erase minority voices and linguistic identities:

"The translator's invisibility is a manifestation of an ethnocentric violence that effaces the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text" (p. 20).

This critique becomes particularly relevant in the context of dialect and regional variation, where a drive toward fluency in the target language can result in the flattening of sociolinguistic textures embedded in the source text.

In a complementary vein, Mona Baker (2006) advocates for a more nuanced, discourse-oriented approach that considers social meanings attached to variation. She highlights the importance of *register*, *dialect*, and *idiolect* in shaping not only the content but the interpersonal dynamics of communication. Baker (2006) notes:

"Different dialects often carry with them strong associations of class, region, or ethnicity, and the choice of dialect in a given context can have a powerful impact on how a speaker or character is perceived" (p. 19).

Her work calls for translators to move beyond semantic fidelity and engage with the social significance of language choices.

Sociolinguistics also contributes critical insight into the role of variation. Peter Trudgill (2000) reminds us that dialects and sociolects are not linguistic "mistakes" but rule-governed systems that encode social meaning:

"The use of non-standard dialects in literature is often a deliberate stylistic choice, one that signals character background, setting, and sometimes even political ideology" (p. 141).

This perspective supports the argument that translation must take these linguistic layers into account rather than substitute them with a homogenized target language.

Case studies in literary and audiovisual translation further illustrate how language variation challenges traditional norms of translatability. In her analysis of *Trainspotting*, Daniela Berghahn (2010) observes that the Scottish dialect used by Irvine Welsh poses substantial difficulties for translation into languages such as German and French. Some translations preserve the informality and social register of the original, while others neutralize it entirely. The divergent strategies employed by translators reveal differing assumptions about the role of variation in narrative voice and reader accessibility.

In summary, the literature underscores the importance of treating linguistic variation not as a peripheral concern but as a central component of textual meaning. Translation, when attentive to dialectal and sociolinguistic variation, becomes an act of cultural interpretation as much as linguistic transference. Engaging with variation demands creativity, cultural

sensitivity, and a willingness to depart from purely formal equivalence models in favor of more contextually aware approaches.

3. Analysis and Discussion

Translating language variation poses both linguistic and ideological challenges. Dialects, sociolects, and regional varieties of language encode specific cultural information that goes beyond simple lexical meaning. These features often index class, ethnicity, age, or geographic identity, and their presence in a text is rarely accidental. In this section, we explore the various strategies translators use when confronted with linguistic variation and evaluate their consequences across literary and audiovisual translation. We also consider the ethical and interpretative stakes involved in preserving—or omitting—these sociolinguistic cues.

3.1 Translation Strategies for Language Variation
Several approaches are commonly adopted when translating dialects and nonstandard varieties. According to Juliane House (2015), these include **dialect substitution**, **standardization**, **compensation**, and **explicitation**. Dialect substitution involves rendering the source dialect with a target language dialect that plays a similar sociolinguistic role. This strategy attempts to maintain the social indexicality of the source text. For instance, translating a rural dialect from southern Italy into a rural southern dialect of French or Spanish can preserve the sense of geographic marginality.

However, dialect substitution is rarely neutral. As Federici (2007) observes:

"The replacement of a dialect by another risks misrepresenting the source culture by superimposing a different set of social and political associations" (p. 15).

A Neapolitan speaker's dialectal features are not socioculturally equivalent to those of a speaker from Provence or Andalusia, even if both are considered 'nonstandard.'

Standardization, on the other hand, simplifies the text by rendering all speech in the standard variety of the target language. While this may increase clarity and accessibility, it erases significant aspects of characterization, setting, and social identity. This is particularly problematic in literary texts that rely on variation to convey thematic elements or realism. As Hatim and Mason (1997) state:

"The flattening of speech varieties removes an important layer of interpersonal meaning, which can lead to distortion of character relationships and tone" (p. 89).

A common alternative is **compensation,** where the translator shifts the sociolinguistic markers to another point in the text. For example, if the original dialect cannot be reproduced, the translator may introduce informal grammar, idiomatic phrasing, or spelling irregularities in another section to mimic the intended effect. This technique maintains some functional equivalence while avoiding direct dialectal substitution.

Explicitation, finally, involves adding brief cues or contextual markers to alert the reader to the sociolinguistic nuance, such as tagging a line of dialogue with a descriptor like "*in dialect*" or subtly narrating the speaker's background. Though less elegant in literary texts, this can be useful in academic or children's literature, where comprehension is prioritized.

3.2 Case Studies: Literary and Audiovisual Translation

A particularly rich example comes from the translation of Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, which is famously written in Scottish English and Scots dialect. German translator Clara Drechsler chose to preserve the book's linguistic texture by employing nonstandard German, drawing on Berlin and Hamburg youth slang to convey the social marginalization and rebellious tone of the original (Berghahn, 2010). This strategy was praised for maintaining the text's cultural specificity and orality, though it posed comprehension challenges for readers unfamiliar with the slang. Such examples highlight that preserving variation is possible, but demands high linguistic creativity and cultural knowledge.

In audiovisual translation, dubbing and subtitling offer different affordances and constraints. Dubbing often imposes greater pressure to standardize due to synchronization requirements and lip movements. Subtitling, though more flexible in maintaining variation, is limited by space and time constraints. Chiaro (2009) notes that subtitlers often opt for neutral or mild regionalisms, especially when translating strong dialects. She writes:

> "*The use of dialect in subtitles tends to be toned down considerably compared to the spoken version, due to concerns about readability and audience comprehension*" (p. 157).

Nonetheless, successful examples exist. In the Italian subtitled version of *The Wire*, a series known for its African American Vernacular English (AAVE), translators adopted a hybrid strategy: they used colloquial Italian, urban slang, and syntactic reduction to replicate the street-level authenticity without resorting to stereotyped dialects. The result preserved social tone without falling into caricature or excessive localization.

3.3 Ethical and Cultural Implications

Ultimately, decisions around language variation in translation are deeply ethical. They reflect choices about whose voice is heard and how. When a translator chooses to standardize, they may unintentionally marginalize already marginalized speech. Conversely, when dialect is reproduced without sensitivity, it may reinforce stereotypes or create a false equivalence.

This calls for a translator's **sociolinguistic competence**, which involves not only linguistic skills but also an awareness of cultural politics and audience expectations. As Cronin (2003) argues:

> "*Translation must be understood as a form of intercultural citizenship, where the translator acts not merely as a conveyor of text but as an agent of cultural transmission and negotiation*" (p. 73).

4. Conclusion

The analysis of language variation in translation—whether dialectal, sociolectal, or regional—reveals a complex and ethically charged terrain where linguistic creativity meets cultural responsibility. Translation is not a mere act of linguistic substitution; it is a process of intercultural negotiation, where the translator must decide how much of the original's social and geographic specificity to preserve, adapt, or omit. This process becomes particularly intricate when the source language exhibits marked variation that conveys identity, ideology, or social stratification.

As discussed in the preceding sections, the translation of dialects and regionalisms cannot be approached from a purely lexical perspective. These forms of variation are saturated with cultural meaning, often signaling class distinction, ethnic identity, or geographic belonging. In literary and audiovisual texts, they serve as semiotic resources that provide depth and realism. Consequently, translation decisions around such elements are rarely neutral. They either replicate, distort, or erase the source's social textures.

One of the most common challenges is **dialect substitution**, which seeks to recreate the sociolinguistic dynamics of the source by employing a target-language variety that fulfills a comparable function. While this can succeed in maintaining the symbolic function of dialect, it risks imposing a new set of connotations onto the text. As Rosa and Ranzato (2018) note, *"when replacing a dialect with another in translation, the risk is not just loss of meaning but a re-contextualization that may significantly alter the narrative's social dynamics"* (p. 212). The translator becomes a kind of cultural cartographer, redrawing boundaries of identity and representation in a different linguistic terrain.

Standardization, another frequent strategy, prioritizes readability and broad accessibility but does so at the expense of eliminating variation. When translators neutralize dialects into the standard form, they often flatten character voices and dilute the cultural setting. This tendency can lead to what Even-Zohar (1990) calls *"cultural leveling,"* where linguistic diversity is sacrificed in favor of homogeneous expression. In texts that rely heavily on localized speech, such as *Trainspotting* or *The Wire*, standardization can undermine the authenticity and thematic force of the original.

Conversely, **compensation** and **explicitation** offer partial solutions by relocating sociolinguistic features elsewhere or explaining them through context. These strategies, while limited, acknowledge the importance of preserving variation and seek to mediate rather than erase it. They also demonstrate the role of the translator as an active mediator who must anticipate reader responses, cultural gaps, and interpretive challenges.

More broadly, the issue of language variation raises fundamental questions about **the ethics of translation**. To what extent should translators intervene in the social reality of a text? Is it better to preserve the original speech patterns at the risk of alienating the reader, or to domesticate them in order to ensure understanding? The answers vary depending on genre, audience, and purpose, but they all require a high degree of **sociolinguistic awareness**.

As Venuti (1995) famously argued, translation is always ideological, and the invisibility of the translator—often associated with fluent and natural target texts—can conceal significant

distortions. "*Fluency*," writes Venuti, "*entails domestication: a cultural and linguistic assimilation that effaces the foreign*" (p. 21). In the context of dialect translation, this invisibility becomes problematic because it may render the marginalized voices of the original text even more invisible in the target culture.

Therefore, **translator visibility**, especially in texts rich in linguistic variation, should be considered not a liability but a tool of ethical practice. Translator's notes, paratextual framing, and even minor disruptions in fluency can serve to acknowledge the complexity of the source and the impossibility of perfect equivalence. As Baker (2018) emphasizes, "*there is no neutral space in translation; every choice is ideologically laden and ethically charged*" (p. 134).

Ultimately, the study of language variation in translation underscores the need for **multidimensional competence** in translators. Beyond linguistic accuracy, they must possess cultural literacy, sociolinguistic insight, and interpretive sensitivity. These skills allow translators to make informed decisions that respect both the integrity of the original and the needs of the target audience. Institutions that train translators should therefore integrate modules on sociolinguistics, dialectology, and cultural politics into their curricula.

In the age of global media and digital communication, where subtitled films, multilingual literature, and cross-cultural news are consumed daily, the stakes of translation have never been higher. As cultures become increasingly interconnected, preserving linguistic diversity in translation is both a challenge and an imperative. The translator's role is no longer confined to textual fidelity; it has expanded into the domain of cultural advocacy.

By engaging more deeply with the sociolinguistic dimensions of language variation, translators and scholars alike can contribute to a more nuanced, inclusive, and ethically grounded practice of translation. In doing so, they help sustain the rich tapestry of human languages and the diverse voices they carry.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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