

Connecting Languages and Cultures. The TIES Trial

Abstract: This paper revolves around three main axes: the first one regards the connection among languages and cultures which translation always performs, building a bridge of mutual understanding at a deep cognitive level by way of the complex transfer taking place among the agents involved in the process, from one code to another and from one linguacultural universe to a different one: this aspect is supported by theoretical tenets, evoked in the paper, which inspire and forge Translation Studies stances in the present scenario, shaped also by linguistic variables and varieties; the second level is represented by the distinctive case of Jhumpa Lahiri who adopted the Italian language as a chosen alternative form of expression in her authorial production, to the enrichment and completion of her own multifaceted identity; the third view is finally provided by a close textual analysis, from a translational point of view, of selected passages taken from Lahiri's version of Starnone's fiction *Lacci (Ties)*, with an envisaged outcome of pedagogical potential and translational application even in the classroom.

Keywords: *translation studies, ELF, literary translation, intercultural dialogue, translation workshop, pedagogical application*

1. Introduction

The present paper unfolds in a triple direction combining the three vantage points suggested by the acronym of the TIES Conference during which this study was first presented: Translation, Inclusivity and Educational Settings. More precisely, the first section is devoted to the translational background supporting, from a theoretical standpoint, the vision of translation which inspires the paper, that is, the assumption that translation is considered both as a fundamental part of Applied Linguistics – with evident advantages in terms of pedagogical approach and cultural inclusivity mirrored in the educational system – and also as an area of scientific investigation *per se*, useful for teachers' professional development; on a different note, the second section of the paper verges on a more circumscribed aspect, focusing on the rare and somehow “reverse” case of US author Jhumpa Lahiri, who, as a scholar, after being deeply immersed in the Italian cultural world due to her academic research, ultimately decided to switch from English to Italian, adopting it as a form of expression even for her authorial production, showing a form of cultural assimilation which enriched her linguistic options and personal identity; thirdly, the final section of the paper will be devoted to the close textual analysis of three key passages drawn from Domenico Starnone's novel *Lacci* (2014) (the whole novel was translated into English by Lahiri, with the title of *Ties*, and published by Europa Editions in 2016): in this final part of the paper, translational reflections on the facing-page version will provide ground for a brief discussion leading to a pedagogical application envisaged to take place at higher level education.

2. About the Title: *Connecting Languages and Cultures*

The title of the paper, “Connecting Languages and Cultures: The *TIES* Trial”, aims to address, as a starting point, the crucial concept expressed in Juliane House's book *Translation as Communication*

across Languages and Cultures (2016)¹, where translation clearly emerges as a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural form of communication in which various ideological, political, and educational issues become interlaced. In subscribing to House's view of translation as occasion for intercultural communication, we particularly share three of her central concepts, that is: - translation as fundamental part of Applied Linguistics (which, as House herself points out in her Introduction to the book, is quite different from "linguistics applied"); - the role of translation in multicultural societies (and nowadays we are no doubt experiencing a multicultural scenario in our societal and educational environment); - translation as recontextualization from the perspective of English as a global *lingua franca* (if the target language is English, in present times of WE- and ELF-options within English itself, we must beforehand attune our translatorial action being aware of a specific variety of English – and its corresponding linguacultural peculiarities).

Particularly, in this context, we would like to emphasize the transdisciplinary nature of translation which House well clarifies, identifying "neighbouring disciplines such as intercultural communication, cross-cultural research, contrastive pragmatics, second language acquisition and discourse analysis"², as strictly interlaced and coming into play when considering any translational event or didactic action set within an educational frame that aims at enhancing the process of language learning via translation. In addition to this, House suggests we review our previous concept of culture, in connection with translation, deconstructing the old thinking about culture being based on national characters, mentalities and stereotypes,³ in favour of a renewed approach where also small cultures, communities of practice and superdiversity are taken into account.⁴ Such stance seems to re-echo in Sarah Maitland's *What is Cultural Translation?*⁵, where the author argues for "the relevance of translation thinking to our understanding of how we live and work in globalized societies"⁶, especially when this is "confronted increasingly with the presence of difference in all its forms – different ideologies, different modes of being, and different modes of living and acting in the world".⁷ With a similar view in mind, House advocates for a "new research avenue in translation studies"⁸, incorporating a renewed bilingual cognition orientation and investigating the validity of introspective and retrospective translation process studies. Finally, House highlights the role of English as a global *lingua franca* for translation⁹ and its challenges and problems in a multilingual scenario.¹⁰ House does not avoid approaching the ideological issues strictly connected to the question of the power of languages within the frame of reference of Translation Studies, and her stance clearly emerges when she mentions the "ideological influence that certain languages have upon others, for instance the current growing influence of English as a global, 'hegemonic' *lingua franca* on other languages".¹¹ In House's view, the translator is a mediator inhabiting a "third space".¹² Nor does House miss the crucial point of highlighting the political space that translation might occupy – the so called "alternative space for political action", to put it in a nutshell *après* Mona Baker's words.¹³ House claims that there is no

¹ Juliane House, *Translation as Communication across Languages and Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

² *Ibid.*, x.

³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵ Sarah Maitland, *What Is Cultural Translation?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ House, *Translation as Communication across Languages and Cultures*, 88.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 112

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹² As for this concept of "third space", obviously the reference to Homi Bhabha's notion is evident, and House hints at it in "Beyond Intervention. Universals in Translation?", *trans-kom* 1 (2008), 6-19.

¹³ Mona Baker, "Translation as an Alternative Space for Political Action", *Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest*, 12.1 (2013), 23-47.

“neutrality of mediation to be taken for granted”¹⁴ in the function of translation, and emphasizes the role of non-governmental institutions, also mentioning “activist groups of translation such as Translators without Borders”¹⁵ who propose “ways of reframing and resisting mainstream discourse”.¹⁶

As for the role of English as a global *lingua franca* for translation, House devotes focused attention to this issue in the entire 11th chapter of her book already mentioned, that section is specifically titled “Globalization and Translation”.¹⁷ In these pages House deals with the impact of globalization processes on translation theory and practice: “Globalization and translation are closely intertwined: linguistic superdiversity across the globe is part of globalization and of the growing necessity to translate”.¹⁸ Furthermore, House looks at the function of English in the globalized world as pivotal, since we witness an increasing demand for translations, the medium and target of which is English. She reports data from the European Commission showing how 72.5 % of source texts translated by the Directorate-General for Translation were drafted in English.¹⁹ Furthermore, she specifies that “the English texts were frequently written by speakers who are not native speakers of English but by speakers of English as a *lingua franca* (ELF). What this surge in ELF texts may mean for translation ... is a field of inquiry that is as yet largely uncharted”.²⁰

According to House, since the priority of any *lingua franca* is “intelligibility in efficient and easy processes of communication”²¹, correctness is not the major goal, nor are idioms, “routinized phrases full of insider cultural-historical and national references”²², or other culturally connotative elements, apt to mark the national belonging to a given territory.

Far from being a threat to translational practice, the interconnectedness between ELF and translation becomes even more prominent because the “very same phenomena that have caused the use of ELF to grow have also influenced translation; globalization processes that boosted ELF use have also led to a continuing massive increase in translations worldwide”.²³

2.1 *About the Subtitle: The TIES Trial*

So far we have illustrated the rationale behind the choice of the first three words in the title of this paper, that is “Connecting Languages and Cultures” (drawing on House’s pivotal work). As for the following word “Trial” inserted in the title, that is obviously taken from Antoine Berman’s *Translation and the Trials of the Foreign* (1984),²⁴ where the author says:

The general theme of my essay will be *translation as the trial of the foreign (comme épreuve de l'étranger)* ... ‘Trial of the foreign’ is the expression that Heidegger uses to define one pole of poetic experience in Hölderlin. Now, in the poet, this trial is essentially enacted by translation ... Translation is the ‘trial of the foreign.’ But in a double sense. In the first place, it establishes a relationship between the Self-Same (*Propre*) and the Foreign by aiming to open up the foreign work to us in its utter foreignness ... In the second place, translation is a trial *for the Foreign as well*, since the foreign work is uprooted from

¹⁴ House, *Translation as Communication across Languages and Cultures*, 28.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 109-117.

¹⁸ Ibid., 110.

¹⁹ Ibid., 112.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Antoine Berman, *L'Épreuve de l'étranger. Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). The quotation which follows is taken from the English translation, by Lawrence Venuti, see footnote 25.

its own *language-ground* (*sol-de-langue*). And this trial, often an exile, can also exhibit the most singular power of the translating act: to reveal the foreign work's most original kernel, its most deeply buried, most self-same, but equally most 'distant' from itself.²⁵

It is interesting to note how Berman anticipates some of the issues connected to the experience of translation as enhancement of the potential energy included in the (literary) text, and of the “most self-same” of the author, as Lahiri herself can subscribe to when resorting to Italian. We will deal with such specific topic in the following section. But here, most of all, we would like to specify that the expression “TIES Trial” included in the title of the paper, far from being a reference to a forensic procedure, means to attribute to the term ‘trial’ the sense of an authorial confrontation projected in a translational environment: Jhumpa Lahiri translating Domenico Starnone’s text – in our case – offers specifically a meeting ground for two cultures and two languages coming into close contact by way of a facing-page translation, which, in turn, derives from an empathic form of collaboration and mutual appreciation between the two writers.

Finally, the reference to the word “Ties” is a terminological (lucky and unforeseen) coincidence, in which both the acronym of the TIES Conference held at L’Orientale University, Naples, and the translated title of Starnone’s work *Lacci* (*Ties*, into English) find their own formulation. Actually, “ties” can also be considered the term that represents Starnone’ and Lahiri’s “sodality”, being the two authors “tied” in a strong bond of comradeship and cooperation as writers, exchanging public manifestations of mutual involvement with each other’s work within their own respective linguacultural systems. The social media coverage of their popularity, in this sense, is surprisingly huge for both authors in both countries, as a quick search on the internet can instantly prove.²⁶

The rare case of Lahiri – switching to Italian even as a writer – shows the deep sense of affiliation to the language of the culture that she deeply loves – and also explains the profound influence in terms of personal identity that translation can perform, showing how her devotion to translation into Italian²⁷ becomes and builds on a new identity. *Ties*²⁸ is the first of Starnone’s novels Lahiri translates into English, soon to be followed by *Trick*, and the constant contact between the two writers makes us guess that probably there will be other collaborations also in the future.

As we well know, the fortune of a book is largely constructed by the collaboration of critics, publishers, editors and translators, committed to bringing a foreign text to the attention of a specific national audience. The task of the translator, more precisely, is to enhance the cultural potential of a text, and transfer it authentically, respectfully, into the target culture; Venuti’s foreignization *vs* domestication polarity – a frame of reference which has a great following among Translation Studies scholars – in this case can be easily by-passed since the binary stances are assimilated in one, with the strict relationship existing between the two authors and their mutual involvement in each other’s work, as pointed out above. The interchangeability of languages for Lahiri, who is the translator in this case, is a guarantee of a total lack of cultural and linguistic clash between the original and the translated version. Lahiri inhabits Italian as her third language. In Lahiri’s version, more specifically, her English

²⁵ Antoine Berman, 1984, cit. in Lawrence Venuti, ed., *The Translation Studies Reader*, Second Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 276.

²⁶ Just to quote a few: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXkc95TpFNk&t=46s>;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXkc95TpFNk>;

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7OF_Kb8Lz3U;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWhcDuoopRS>;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIOhBECbcK4>.

²⁷ As for this aspect, it is noteworthy the publication of J. Lahiri’s collection of Italian short stories: *The Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories*, ed. by J. Lahiri (London: Penguin, 2019).

²⁸ Domenico Starnone, *Lacci* (Torino: Einaudi, 2014), translated into English by Jhumpa Lahiri, *Ties* (New York: Europa Editions, 2016). Also the following novel by Domenico Starnone, *Scherzetto* (Torino: Einaudi, 2016) was translated by Jhumpa Lahiri with the title of *Trick* (New York: Europa Editions, 2018).

translation of the Italian novel *Lacci (Ties)* may be viewed simultaneously as the linguistic expression of a WE representative member by birth, an ENL speaker by growth and education, and an Italian ‘cultural immigrant’ by conscious and determinate choice. The strange and reverse case of Jhumpa Lahiri, as a writer, makes her a quite intriguing translator. In this paper some excerpts in parallel versions will show some of her choices and solutions as translator: we trust that the personality, style, and cultural background of the two authors will also impact favourably in classroom settings as an example of cross-fertilization between languages and cultures via translation.

2.2 Theoretical and Translational Background

As a backdrop to this paper from the point of view of Translation Studies, we acknowledge the fundamental role played by Susan Bassnett’s work, *Translation*,²⁹ remarkable for its notions of translation as: rewriting, construction of an image of culture, instrument of power and empowerment of the female presence, among others, which are all concepts that come into play in our chosen topic. Bassnett postulates a form of reappraisal of translation also as an alternative way to convey originality and cultural specificity in a global age, and attributes to translation the potential to create unprecedented meanings which originate from the encounter of different cultures, also keeping in mind what Tymoczko and Gentzler state:

translations are inevitably partial: meaning in a text is always overdetermined, and the information in a source text is therefore always more extensive than translation can convey. Conversely, the receptor language and culture entail obligatory features that shape the possible interpretations of the translation, as well extending the meanings of the translation in directions other than those inherent in the source text.³⁰

Another frame of reference inspiring the analysis of our case – in which translation is also meant as a vehicle of inclusiveness in a language learning context - is represented by Sara Laviosa’s seminal text³¹, *Translation and Language Education: Pedagogic Approaches Explored*. More in detail, we consider Laviosa’s contribution for the notions of: - the role played by translation as a means of learning and teaching a foreign language and as a skill in its own right; - a translation-based pedagogy grounded in theory and applied in real educational contexts; - the convergence between the view of language and translation embraced by ecologically-oriented educationalists and the theoretical underpinnings of the holistic approach to translating culture. As a matter of fact, following her stance, it is possible to open up to a sort of holistic pedagogy that harmonizes the teaching of language and translation in the same learning environment. In the process of adopting Laviosa’s suggestions, we acknowledge the importance of a multilingual approach in translation, and the place and role of translation in educational contexts worldwide: such posture enlarges and diversifies the amplitude of scope of the discipline, creating the occasion for strict interdisciplinary cooperation between Translation Studies and Educational Linguistics: examples of new pedagogies integrate translation into the curriculum, modifying also teaching methods, design, procedure as well as assessment, as Sara Laviosa thoroughly explores in her *Routledge Handbook of Translation and Education*, edited in 2020 with Maria González-Davies.³²

²⁹ Susan Bassnett, *Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

³⁰ Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler, *Translation and Power* (Amherst: Massachusetts U.P., 2002), xviii, in Bassnett, 2014, 169-70.

³¹ Sara Laviosa, *Translation and Language Education. Pedagogic Approaches Explored* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

³² Sara Laviosa and Maria González-Davies, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Education* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

Finally, as an additional perspective assumed in our translational stance, we are indebted to Kirsten Malmkjær who, in her recent book titled *Translation and Creativity*,³³ deeply investigates the notion of creativity in translation, first taking into account definitions of creativity *per se*, and then applying them in the context of translation. The description and arguments that Malmkjær provides accounting for the translational process as highly and intimately creative are extremely convincing and pave the way for a new reappraisal of translation as original and “artistic” enterprise. Asking the two fundamental questions: “What is creativity?” and “Can creativity be taught?”, Malmkjær implicitly approaches the query in psychological and pedagogical terms, which directly involves us as teachers, too.

The aforementioned translational views are the theoretical framework in which the “inclusivity” set of pedagogical and didactic choices can take place projected in educational settings. To put it in Maria González-Davies’s words, “translation pervades most academic fields and everyday communication practices. Therefore, it seems reasonable to inquire into its learning potential for other fields besides translator training to achieve interdisciplinary networking”.³⁴ In this line, we will consider the use of translation in learning contexts other than translators’ training, identifying a specific branch that González-Davies reports as TOLC (Translation for Other Learning Contexts). As a matter of fact, according to González-Davies “TOLC works on a continuum that spans elementary language learning and advanced language services ... many of its features may also cover language learning and intercultural mediation”.³⁵ In the ELT classroom typically translation has most often been viewed as a tool of reinforcement of the so-called grammar-translation method, but in more recent times, translation considered as a didactic linguistic resource has evolved into an informed integrated plurilingual approach (IPA). Through translation “the students’ linguistic repertoire can be integrated in the language learning process”.³⁶

3. The Strange and Reverse Case of Jhumpa Lahiri

In this section we will introduce the case of Jhumpa Lahiri who, against the mainstream literary trends in our globalized era, decided to switch to Italian as her language of authorship.

Nilanjana Sudeshna “Jhumpa” Lahiri is an American author who has recently become quite popular in Italy in the circle of intellectuals, and, in the international scenario, particularly for her choice to adopt Italian as the language to write her novels and essays. In truth, the story of Lahiri with the Italian language shows a slow and gradual process of affiliation and growth, of which she provides full account in her works, noticeably *In altre parole*,³⁷ a book that she wrote directly in Italian, in 2015, published by Guanda Editore in 2016, and now at its 4th edition. The only part of this text which is in English is the “Author’s Note” to the English version, a version which was published in 2016, translated by Ann Goldstein.

By deliberate choice of the author, Lahiri explains why she decided not to translate her own work herself. In the passage “The Hairy Adolescent” contained in this volume Lahiri says that Italian for her is still like a teen-ager, and that her first language - English - would have destroyed the young and feeble texture of her second (third?) language. So, the inspiring metaphor of a “hairy adolescent” creates a parallel between the age of a person - adolescence – and the growth and inclusion of a writer, not yet “mature” in the language of choice. In the epigraph to the book we find an excerpt of Antonio

³³ Kirsten Malmkjær, *Translation and Creativity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

³⁴ Maria González-Davies, “Developing Mediation Competence through Translation”, in Laviosa and González-Davies, eds, *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Education*, 434-450, 434.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Jhumpa Lahiri, *In altre parole* (Parma: Guanda, 2016).

Tabucchi's pronouncement reported by Lahiri: "I needed a different language: a language that was a place of affection and reflection".

As a PhD student of Renaissance Studies, in Florence, Lahiri learns how to plunge into the Italian cultural system, and desperately wants to fit in. *In altre parole / In Other Words* is the diary of this autobiographical choice. If Lahiri started her career as recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction with her debut collection of short-stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and then achieved worldwide fame with her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003) (which was also adapted into the popular film of the same name by Indian director Mira Nair in 2007), it is probably for her decision to switch to Italian that paradoxically she acquired an international reputation. In her first and second collection of stories in English (*Interpreter of Maladies*, 1999, as above, and *Unaccustomed Earth*, 2008), and her second novel (*The Lowland*, 2013), Lahiri explored the Indian-immigrant experience in America.

In these works she was still wrestling with the two opposite identities: English-American by birth and Indian-Bengali by background. These two opposites never fully harmonized. In an editorial in *Newsweek*, Lahiri claimed that she has "felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new".³⁸ Much of her experiences growing up as a child were marked by these two sides tugging away at one another. Significantly, it is only with Italian that the intimate sense of not belonging, of implacable diversity, of never fully fitting in any scheme is eliminated, and how? Simply plunging into a completely different system which welcomes her without clashes, mismatches or urgent demands.

In 2011 Lahiri moved to Rome for a longish period and has since then published two books of essays (*In altre parole*, in 2016, already mentioned, and *Il vestito dei libri*, in 2017) and also a novel (*Dove mi trovo*, 2018), all written in Italian and published by Guanda. Interestingly enough, in December 2015 *The New Yorker* had published Lahiri's non-fiction essay titled "Teach Yourself Italian",³⁹ describing her experience of learning Italian. In the essay she declared that she was now writing only in Italian, and the essay itself was translated from Italian into English.

3.1 *Teach Yourself Italian*

In this pivotal article Lahiri, as mentioned above, tracks down analytically the process that led her to render Italian her chosen language as a writer. She moves from the guiding metaphor of exile, up to the concepts of acceptance and hospitality, the latter also a good figurative image for translation:

My relationship with Italian takes place in exile, in a state of separation ... Every language belongs to a specific place. It can migrate, it can spread. But usually it's tied to a geographical territory, a country. Italian belongs mainly to Italy, and I live on another continent, where one does not readily encounter it ... I think of Ovid, exiled from Rome to a remote place. To a linguistic outpost, surrounded by alien sounds ... I think of my mother, who writes poems in Bengali, in America. Almost fifty years after moving there, she can't find a book written in her language...In a sense I'm used to a kind of linguistic exile. My mother tongue, Bengali, is foreign in America. When you live in a country where your own language is considered foreign, you can feel a continuous sense of estrangement. You speak a secret, unknown language, lacking any correspondence to the environment. An absence that creates a distance within you.⁴⁰

³⁸ Jhumpa Lahiri, "My Two Lives", *Newsweek*, 5 March 2006, n. p. <https://www.newsweek.com/my-two-lives-106355>.

³⁹ Jhumpa Lahiri, "Teach Yourself Italian", *The New Yorker*, 7 December 2015, n. p. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/12/07/teach-yourself-italian>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

This sense of being split in two, which creates a “distance within you”, pushes the writer to look for another space, a space where she can be born anew, and forget about the painful sense of not belonging caused by her lack of authority in a land of immigration. The question of mother tongue becomes crucial in terms of cultural identity. She continues in the same interview: “In my case there is another distance ... I don’t know Bengali perfectly. I don’t know how to write it, or even read it ... I speak without authority, and so I’ve always perceived a disjunction between it and me ... I consider my mother tongue, paradoxically, a foreign language”.⁴¹ Lahiri unravels her story of linguistic affiliation in complete openness, and reveals the paradoxical truth of fusion, even in a distant land: “As for Italian, the exile has a different aspect. Almost as soon as we met, Italian and I were separated. My yearning seems foolish. And yet I feel it”.⁴² In the same interview she continues:

In graduate school, I decide to write my doctoral thesis on how Italian architecture influenced English playwrights of the seventeenth century. I wonder why certain playwrights decided to set their tragedies, written in English, in Italian palaces. The thesis will discuss another schism between language and environment. The subject gives me a second reason to study Italian.⁴³

In short, this account describes the incipient steps of Lahiri’s entrancing love-bond with the language of her studies, which also becomes the language of her self-expression, freedom and inclusivity. She feels included even though not quite still belonging. In an interview in *The Guardian* she confesses: “I’m, in Italian, a tougher, freer writer”.⁴⁴ In the caption we can read: “The author’s new book, written in Italian and accompanied by English translation, is the result of an infatuation with Italy that began with her first visit in 1994”: the book here referred to is actually *In altre parole*, an expression often used for translation, too.⁴⁵

Lahiri envisages Italian as a form of metamorphosis and flight, in search of freedom: “I think that my writing in Italian is a flight. Dissecting my linguistic metamorphosis, I realize that I’m trying to get away from something, to free myself. I’ve been writing in Italian for almost two years, and I feel that I’ve been transformed, almost reborn”.⁴⁶ She then introduces the similitude with Daphne as expression of metamorphosis, a topic that she will further develop in her piece “The Metamorphosis” in her previously quoted book *In Other Words* (needless to remark that the book was written in Italian). Lahiri shares with the reader that sense of confinement and restriction, and yet of liberation, too, that she experienced, moving from English into Italian:

the change, this new opening, is costly; like Daphne, I, too, find myself confined. I can’t move as I did before, the way I was used to moving in English. A new language, Italian, covers me like a kind of bark. I remain inside: renewed, trapped, relieved, uncomfortable.⁴⁷

And finally Lahiri asks herself: “Why am I fleeing? What is pursuing me? Who wants to restrain me? The most obvious answer is the English language”⁴⁸, but she also specifies:

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Jhumpa Lahiri, “I am, in Italian, a tougher, freer writer”, *The Guardian*, 31 January 2016, n. p., <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/31/jhumpa-lahiri-in-other-words-italian-language>.

⁴⁵ We cannot but think of the famous textbook for translation courses titled *In Other Words, A Coursebook on Translation* by Mona Baker (London and New York: Routledge, 1992/2011).

⁴⁶ Lahiri, “Teach Yourself Italian”, n.p.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

I think it's not so much English in itself as everything the language has symbolized for me. For practically my whole life, English has represented a consuming struggle, a wrenching conflict, a continuous sense of failure that is the source of almost all my anxiety. It has represented a culture that had to be mastered, interpreted. I was afraid that it meant a break between me and my parents. English denotes a heavy, burdensome aspect of my past. I'm tired of it.⁴⁹

And the story is yet to be continued ... We can only add that in Italy she is now a real celebrity, invited to important cultural events as special guest, from the “Biennale di Venezia” (2014), to “Mantova Letteratura” (2018), from book launching at the Centro Studi Americani to the LUISS *Lectio Magistralis* for the opening of the academic year, in 2019, and so on. On June 6th, 2019 Lahiri was received in full splendour at the Quirinale by President Sergio Mattarella, and Jhumpa donated a copy of her *The Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories* (Lahiri 2019), a collection of 40 Italian short stories, already mentioned, at that time just off the press – that Lahiri selected, edited and partly translated. On June 13, 2019, Lahiri was featured at the “Normale di Pisa”⁵⁰ conversing about her literary and translational choices. She had already manifested her ideas on translation also on the occasion of the above mentioned LUISS *Lectio Magistralis*:⁵¹ translating is like creating an “echo” – the reference to the myth of Narcissus and Echo is obviously explicit – and language knows no boundaries, it propagates freely spreading knowledge and experiences. From this perspective, to cross symbolically a border for Lahiri means welcoming a new language, a new culture, new places, it means making them your own land and identifying yourself with them. Translation allows the profitable experience of getting rid of what could be seen as a sort of solipsistic attitude and opens you up to diversity (including you in it). “Only by confronting with each other,” underlines Lahiri, “will you avoid being trapped, like Narcissus, in an everlasting reflection on yourself”.⁵² In this *Lectio Magistralis* Lahiri invited the students to reflect on the edifying power of dialogue as a way to enrich and grow. Just as a translator must reflect on the meaning that an author wanted to express with her/his own words, opening “entire kingdoms of possibilities, unexpected paths that lead him in new directions and inspire the world of the writer”⁵³, future professionals, in this complex moment in time, must open to new ways of thinking and understanding, with empathy and resilience: “The richest moments of literary history were those in which the identities of writers and translators melted away, where one activity strengthened and revitalized the other”,⁵⁴ added Lahiri in her *Lectio Magistralis*.

4. *Lacci & Ties*: When Translation Unites

The fourth section of this paper is devoted to the textual analysis of three crucial passages drawn from Domenico Starnone's novel *Lacci*, translated into English by Jhumpa Lahiri, as already specified. In accordance with what we remarked earlier, the comradeship and collaboration of the two writers is mutually acknowledged and cherished. Jhumpa Lahiri, in the chapter titled “The Metamorphosis” (original title “La metamorfosi”) of the quoted *In altre parole*, mentions the important role played by Starnone, as an Italian writer, to help her as a would-be Italian writer:

Shortly before I began to write these reflections, I received an email from a friend of mine in Rome, the writer Domenico Starnone. Referring to my desire to appropriate Italian, he wrote, “A new language is

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Lahiri (2019), <https://normalenews.sns.it/il-premio-pulitzer-jhumpa-lahiri-alla-normale>.

⁵¹ Lahiri (2019), <https://isl.luiss.it/event/2019/02/21/cerimonia-di-inaugurazione-dell%E2%80%99anno-accademico-luiss>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

almost a new life, grammar and syntax recast you, you slip into another logic and another sensibility”. How much these words reassured me. They seemed to echo my state of mind after I came to Rome and started to write in Italian. They contained all my yearning, all my disorientation. Reading this message, I understood better the impulse to express myself in a new language: to subject myself, as writer, to a metamorphosis.⁵⁵

Therefore, it is not surprising that Lahiri decides to translate his novel, and this event too has stirred a lot of interest from the media and professionals belonging to the cultural *coté* of the authors, both in Italy and US. The translation that Lahiri provided is what we would define a quite ‘faithful’ version of the original text; we realize that Lahiri wants to respect the choice of the author as much as the two different linguistic systems allow, and she changes words only when absolutely necessary; in general, we are rarely in front of dissimilarities in lexicon and syntax. This is probably due to the fact the Starnone’s style is characterized by a cultured form of standard Italian (“uncontaminated Italian” Lahiri defines his language), which Lahiri was familiar to for her previous studies. At the same time, Lahiri is able to gather, interpret and render the level of sophisticated irony which pervades Starnone’s texts. The *double-entendres*, the subtle puns, the polysemic elements, the rhetorical devices, the discursive rhythm and poetic prose that Starnone profuses, are all well captured and rendered by Lahiri. The empathic bias which leads the American author to a sort of devoted attitude of admiration and fidelity in translating the Italian colleague and friend is evident.

In her Introduction to the English version, Lahiri begins with an etymological digression, which is revelatory of her approach to the text at hand, in this specific case, and also more in general. Lahiri considers:

The need to contain and the need to set free: these are the contradictory impulses, the positive and negative charges that interact in Domenico Starnone’s novel, *Ties*. To contain, in Italian, is *contenere*, from the Latin verb *continere*. It means to hold, but it also means to hold back, repress, limit, control. In English, too, we strive to contain our anger, our amusement, our curiosity.⁵⁶

The lexicographer’s mindset continues to unravel in her “Introduction” and the reference to the dictionary as a necessary tool for capturing the intimate essence of our experience of the world, via language – an element which is also present in *In Altre parole* and runs through all of Lahiri’s works – is constantly reiterated. More particularly, Lahiri devotes the second half of her introductory notes to the novel to the task of the translator:

As the translator of *Ties* into English, I too have had to break open a formidable container: the container of Italian. For many years I have searched within that box, trying to piece together a new sense of myself. My relationship to Italian incubates and evolves in a sacred vessel I hold dear. My impulse has been to guard it, to not contaminate it.⁵⁷

In the following paragraph she narrates her encounter with the specific text at hand:

Then I read *Ties* when it was published in Italy, in the autumn of 2014, and I fell in love with it. I had not yet translated anything from Italian to English. In fact, I was resistant to the idea. I was immersed in Italian, in a joyous state of self-exile from the language (English) and the country (the United States) that

⁵⁵ Lahiri, *In altre parole*, 161.

⁵⁶ Lahiri, “Introduction”, 11.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

have marked me most significantly. But the impact of this novel overwhelmed me and my desire, as soon as I read it, to translate it someday.⁵⁸

As it clearly appears, we are in front of a proper *coup-de-foudre* for the text and the language, but we also witness a sort of initiation process for the writer who, becoming a translator, turns into re-writer (as Levefere and Bassnett would put it). The theoretical translational stances that we referred to in the previous section are now re-echoing in the words of Lahiri as translator. Language is home. Language is inclusive for those who inhabit it. Translation entitles you to be an active and constructive member of that community and culture whose language you admire, worship and respect.

4.1 Close-up on Textual Translation

As announced, in this section we mean to have a closer look at the actual translation of three chosen excerpts from the original work by Domenico Starnone, *Lacci*, translated into English by Jhumpa Lahiri. The passages that have been selected for close translational juxtaposition are also the ones which give reasons for the title, here again a double meaning of the word, both in Italian and English: “lacci” can be literally “shoelaces,” but also metaphorically “bonds”, “ties”:

But *Lacci* in Italian are also a means of bridling, of capturing something. They connote both an amorous link and restraining device. “Ties” in English straddles these plural meanings “Laces” would not have. Having made this choice, I am struck by the relationship in English, too, between *untie* and *unite*, two opposite actions counterpoised in this novel.⁵⁹

The episodes selected are from Book Two, Chapter 8: the narrator is the father (Aldo) who left his wife and now meets his children (Anna and Sandro), after two years. He is anxious to cut a good figure with them, but the seriousness and gravity of the scene is softened by the pervading sense of humor running through the narration.

Here follow the chosen excerpts in parallel versions:

<p><i>Li portai al bar, affollai il tavolo di cose buone da mangiare e da bere. Cercai di conversare con loro, finii per parlare sempre di me. Non mi chiamarono mai papà; io invece, in ansia, pronunciavo mille volte i loro nomi. Poiché temevo che mi ricordassero solo per il terremoto che avevo causato nelle loro vite, per come li avevo fatti soffrire, cercai in modo disordinato di presentarmi come una persona rispettabile, di carattere bonario, che faceva un lavoro di cui potevano vantarsi coi compagni di scuola. Mi sembrò dai loro sguardi attenti, da qualche sorriso, perfino da una risata lieta di Anna, che li avessi convinti. Sperai che mi facessero domande</i></p>	<p>I took them to a café, I filled the table with good things to eat and drink. I tried to converse with them, but I ended up talking about myself. They never called me Dad. I on the other hand, anxious, said their names a thousand times. Since I feared that they remembered me only for the earthquake I'd caused in their lives, for how I'd made them suffer, I tried in a muddled way to present myself as a respectable person, mild-mannered, with a job that they could brag about to their classmates. It seemed to me, from their attentive gazes, from an occasional smile, even from Anna's cheerful laughter, that I'd convinced them. I hoped that they would want to know, for</p>
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⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Lahiri, *Ties*, 17.

<p><i>per sapere, ad esempio, cosa dovevano fare per seguire da grandi le mie orme. Ma Sandro non disse niente e Anna mi chiese, accennando al fratello: «E' vero che gli hai insegnato tu ad allacciarsi le scarpe?»</i></p> <p>(Domenico Starnone, <i>Lacci</i>. (Torino: Einaudi, 2014) 79</p>	<p>example, what they would have to do in order to follow in my footsteps as adults. But Sandro didn't say anything, and Anna asked, nodding to her brother:</p> <p>Is it true that it was you who taught him how to tie his shoes?</p> <p>Jhumpa Lahiri (trans.) <i>Ties</i>. (New York: Europa Editions, 2016) 96-7</p>
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Excerpt 1.

Whereas the protagonist, in his faked father-like guise, was expecting to be forced to play a solemn role, the one of an educator and model for the siblings to imitate, it turns out that the eager curiosity of the children is concentrated only on how he ties his shoes, because, the boy claims, it was Father who taught him (and the girl is jealous because she didn't get such privilege):

<p><i>Mi imbarazzai. Avevo insegnato a Sandro ad allacciarsi le scarpe? Non me lo ricordavo. E a quel punto senza una ragione immediata, non mi meravigliai più che mi fossero estranei, il senso di estraneità era implicito nel nostro rapporto originario. Finché ero vissuto con loro ero stato un padre distratto che per riconoscerli non sentiva il bisogno di conoscerli. Ora che per fare una buona figura volevo assorbire tutto di loro, li guardavo con un'attenzione eccessiva – come degli estranei appunto – divorando dettagli per la smania di saperne tutto in pochi minuti. Risposi mentendo: sì credo di sì, gli ho insegnato tante cose, a Sandro, forse anche ad allacciarsi le scarpe. E Sandro borbottò: nessuno si allaccia le scarpe come me le allaccio io. Mentre Anna mi disse: se le allaccia in un modo ridicolo, non ci credo che anche tu te le allacci così. [...]</i></p> <p><i>Anna mi guardò diritto negli occhi. [...] Disse: mostraci come fai [...] Chiesi: volete che adesso, qui vi faccia vedere come mi allaccio le scarpe? Sì, disse Anna.</i></p> <p>Domenico Starnone, <i>Lacci</i>. (Torino: Einaudi, 2014) 80</p>	<p>I felt embarrassed. Had I taught Sandro to tie his shoes? I didn't remember. And at that point, for no precise reason, I no longer marveled that they were strangers to me; the sense of estrangement was intrinsic to our original bond. All the time I had lived with them I'd been a distracted father who didn't feel the need to know them in order to recognize them. Now, in order to make a good impression, wanting to absorb everything about them, observed my children with excessive attention – that, precisely, of strangers – devouring details, yearning to know them fully in a few minutes. I replied, lying: Yes, I think so, I taught Sandro a lot of things, maybe also how to tie his shoes. And Sandro muttered: no one ties their shoes the way I do. Meanwhile Anna told me:</p> <p>It's ridiculous how he ties them, I don't believe you tie them like that, too. [...]</p> <p>Anna looked me straight in the eyes. [...] Show us how you do it. [...] I asked: Do you want me to show you now, here, how I tie my shoes?</p> <p>Jhumpa Lahiri (trans.) <i>Ties</i>. (New York: Europa Editions, 2016) 98</p>
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Excerpt 2.

Rather than in the deep complexity of the feelings represented (from sense of guilt to real nostalgia), the climax of the scene reaches its apex in a sequence of physical actions, meticulously described in all details, and the lack of explicit reference to the children' and father's emotional state makes the readers imagine them on their own. By not saying, the author tells a lot, perhaps much more, and the translator sticks to the same strategy of communication:

<p><i>Mi slacciai una scarpa, poi la riallacciai. Tirai i due capi della stringa, li incrociai, passai un capo sotto l'altro, strinsi energicamente. Li guardai, tenevano entrambi lo sguardo sulla mia scarpa, a bocche socchiuse. Con un po' di nervosismo tornai a incrociare i capi, tornai a passarne uno sotto l'altro, strinsi di nuovo, formai un occhiello. Feci una pausa, incerto. Gli occhi di Sandro cominciarono a ridere di soddisfazione. Anna mormorò: e poi? Afferrai l'occhiello, lo chiusi stringendolo tra le dita, ci passai sotto il capo che mi era rimasto, formai un nuovo occhiello e tirai. Ecco, dissi a Sandro, tu fai così? Sì, lui rispose. E Anna disse: è vero, solo voi due ve le allacciate così, voglio imparare anch'io.</i></p> <p><i>Passammo il resto del tempo ad allacciare e slacciare i miei lacci e quelli di Sandro finché Anna, inginocchiata davanti a noi due, non imparò per bene a riallacciarli a entrambi nella nostra maniera.</i></p> <p>Domenico Starnone, <i>Lacci</i> (Torino: Einaudi, 2014), 81</p>	<p>I unlaced a shoe, then I laced it again. I pulled the two ends of the string, I crossed them, I passed one end under the other, I pulled tight. I looked at them. They both had their eyes trained on my shoe, their mouths half-open. Somewhat nervous, I went back to crossing the ends, again I passed one under the other, I pulled once more, I made a loop. I paused, uncertain. Sandro's eyes started to light up with satisfaction. Anna said softly: And then? I grasped the loop, I closed by pulling it between my fingers, I passed it under the end that remained, I formed another hole and pulled. There, I said to Sandro, is that how you do it? Yes, he replied. And Anna said, it's true, only the two of you tie your shoes like that, I want to learn, too.</p> <p>Sandro and I spent the rest of the time tying and untying our laces until Anna, kneeling in front of the two of us, learned properly how to tie them this way.</p> <p>Jhumpa Lahiri (trans.), <i>Ties</i> (New York: Europa Editions, 2016) 98</p>
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Excerpt 3.

The tension of the encounter between the two broken ends of the family becomes heroically diminished in the reduced dimension of a mere physical and banal action: tying one's shoes. And yet, this peculiar fashion of performing a routine gesture becomes the link which *ties* the two discarded poles of the family group, presently dismantled and far apart. The reiteration of the simple gesture provides the opening key into an initiatory therefore inclusive ritual: it is by repeatedly tying her/his own shoes in the same way as (missed) (patriarchal) Father does, that Anna and Sandro reconstitute the family. Tie/untie, a binary opposition, but "untie" is anagram of "unite", as Lahiri perceptively highlighted in her "Introduction". Here lies the paradox: in an opposition of terms, even if only in a linguistic game, a play with words, we can find real fusion and human compenetration.

The function of translation is also the one of revealing the hidden meaning, the most intimate layer of signification that not always a native user of a given language immediately perceives. The attention that the translator devotes to each single word and expression in order to render it in the target

language in the most effective way makes, of such virtuous exercise, a powerful means of understanding and way of inclusivity.

As we said above, the type of translation that Lahiri produces is totally respectful of the lexical choices and stylistic cypher of the author; the register of irony, self-sabotage, self-derision and crude description of facts (through which he reveals important hidden truths) are all reproduced in the target language. The rhythm of the syntax mainly structured in short sentences is replicated in the parallel version in English.

Starnone's style, primarily based on the accurate description of the inner feelings of the characters, without indulging in a plethora of words, gets its corresponding reproduction in Lahiri's translation. It's as if the two authors are perfectly attuned in the way of perceiving the world and therefore in the choice of the linguistic elements apt to represent it. What the learner of English at Higher Education level may appreciate from Lahiri's version is the effective rendering in the target language of some adjectives such as "muddled" for "disordinato", or "mild-mannered" for "bonario", and "occasional" for "qualche" in Excerpt 1, for instance. These are translational choices that, in our opinion, would not occur as first option to the students who are involved in the process: they would probably opt for adjectives more similar to the source text. In this way, indirectly, the learner would enrich their lexical repertoire. Similarly, the rendering of "in ansia" as "anxious" – again in Excerpt 1 – applying a typical process of transposition (according to Vinay' and Darbelnet's shift scheme), would be an additional element in the refinement of the learners' lexicon. Another case of transposition could be detected in the rendering of the source word "smania" (in Excerpt 2) as "yearning" in the target text. Particularly interesting is the choice of "bond" for "rapporto", in the same Excerpt 2, in which we see Lahiri creating a stronger relationship of the word chosen by the author, qualifying it almost in a synonymic fashion with the word of the titles, "tie-s", belonging to the same semantic sphere of "bond". In this way Lahiri creates an even stronger form of textual cohesion. These and other translational remarks that the instructor can point out to the students might make them more responsive to the literary ability of the writers, and more involved in the process of translation as a way of improving their language competence.

We have in mind Juliane House's words when she talks about using the narrative approach in translation: "Translation is then seen as a form of (re)narration which constructs rather than represents events, states of affairs and human beings renarrated in another language".⁶⁰ We totally subscribe to such view, and also share the following assumption: "This means that a translator participates actively in configuring intercultural encounters which are embedded in the existent narratives and also contributes to changes and dissemination of these narratives through the translations".⁶¹ The narrative approach to translation is extremely empowering, and Baker distinguishes four types of narratives to take into consideration: "personal narratives, public narratives, conceptual narratives and meta-narratives".⁶²

Here, with *Ties*, we are in front of a specific form of literary narrative, where the above mentioned distinctions can be fused together, but we find appropriate for our case at hand what House adds: "For an application of the narrative approach to translation another set of categories is also important: selective appropriation, relationality, temporality and causal emplotment".⁶³ These are all elements that the instructor can point out to the attention of the learners performing the translation task.

⁶⁰ House, *Translation as Communication across Languages and Cultures*, 28.

⁶¹ Ibid. See also Baker, "Translation as an Alternative Space for Political Action".

⁶² Ibid., 29.

⁶³ Ibid.

5. Conclusions

In this paper we wanted to highlight the importance of translation as an empowering tool for the improvement of the linguistic competence of the learners of English. In part one we started from House's stance that sees translation as a form of communication across language and cultures; in part two we then considered other theoretical translational assumptions such as Berman's "trial of the foreigner", Bassnett' and Lefevere's notion of translation as "re-writing" and Laviosa's and González-Davies's view of translation as a pedagogical and educational resource.

In the second part of the paper we wanted to draw the readers' attention to the strange case of Jhumpa Lahiri who opted for Italian as language of her authorial expression, meanwhile being a successful translator of the relevant Italian writer Domenico Starnone whose novel *Lacci*, Lahiri translated with the title of *Ties*. We analyzed some of the cultural, professional and also personal reasons why Lahiri decided to plunge into Italian. In her case we found a desire, if not an urge, of being included in the cultural system of the language she selected. Like Lahiri, many other authors might have switched to a different language than their own in order to fully express their true (or desired) identity. In a multicultural world the case of Lahiri is particularly appealing and significant. Presenting it to our audience of students at university level can be extremely beneficial in order to make them aware of the necessity of acknowledging a process of inclusiveness essential in a superdiverse world. Translation, an activity that Lahiri herself exercised, can be one of the ways to appreciate cultural and linguistic differences and superdiversity in the sense attributed to the term by Blommaert.⁶⁴

Finally, in the third section, we took into consideration three excerpts chosen from *Ties*, in parallel versions. We pointed out the potential inherent in the chosen texts in terms of form and content. The story of the father who rejoins with his children via the simple action of tying his shoelaces is an example of possibility of inclusiveness – to become part again of the broken family. He is accepted anew because he is still present in a banal but necessary gesture that the boy performs daily. This habit recreates a community (of practice!), and as Lahiri wants to be part of the Italian literary system, the fictitious father in *Lacci* wants to be recognized as a parent by his daughter and son. Paradoxically enough, this comes true by way of literal and literary TIES.

⁶⁴ Jan Blommaert, *Ethnography, Superdiversity and Linguistic Landscaping* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2013).