



Translating and rewriting Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* at the National Theatre

Enza De Francisci

To cite this article: Enza De Francisci (2022): Translating and rewriting Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* at the National Theatre, *The Translator*, DOI: [10.1080/13556509.2022.2073015](https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2022.2073015)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2022.2073015>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 06 Sep 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Translating and rewriting Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* at the National Theatre

Enza De Francisci

School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

ABSTRACT

This article interrogates the translation strategies involved when transposing Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels into a play – the first produced in the UK. *My Brilliant Friend*, adapted by April De Angelis and directed by Melly Still, was based on the translation of the novels by Ann Goldstein and first staged at the National Theatre (London) in 2019/2020 following its success at the Rose Theatre, Kingston in 2017. In investigating the 'making' of the play, particularly through a series of interviews with De Angelis, the article examines how Ferrante's works have been altered to suit the taste of its Anglophone audiences and what message the National Theatre is sending about the way in which the play and the use of non-standard languages in southern Italian drama have been translated on British stages. The article calls for stronger collaboration between the National Theatre, theatre practitioners, and translation scholars to foster greater cross-cultural understanding and help raise the general low status of translated theatre.

KEYWORDS

Theatre translation; Elena Ferrante; Ann Goldstein; *My Brilliant Friend*; National Theatre (London)

Introduction

While much has been written about the rising popularity of Elena Ferrante (De Rogatis, Milkova, and Wehling-Giorgi 2021), until now no scholarship has been devoted to the way in which the Italian author has been transposed to the stage in the UK. The first theatrical version of *My Brilliant Friend* produced in Britain was written by April De Angelis and directed by Melly Still. The play was based on the translation of Ferrante's Neapolitan novels by Ann Goldstein and opened at the National Theatre (London) in 2019–20 following its success at the Rose Theatre, Kingston in the spring of 2017.

Engaging with recent academic interest in theatre translation (Brodie 2017; Laera 2019; Stock 2020), and the emerging field of adaptation studies (Hutcheon 2006; Leitch 2007; Krebs 2014), this article offers a new perspective into the strategies involved when transposing Ferrante's Neapolitan novels to the stage. In line with current trends encouraging greater focus on practice-led research, including the recent 'Out-of-the-Wings' initiative (2008-ongoing), a trend which has been moving away from viewing a translated play as a self-contained finished product and moving towards a view of translation which prioritises the network of agents (producers, translators, editors) that have shaped the translation of foreign drama (Marinetti 2013), this article will examine the distinct role played by De Angelis in influencing the reception of Ferrante's work among

CONTACT Enza De Francisci  enza.defrancisci@glasgow.ac.uk  University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Anglophone audiences through my interviews with the playwright. In highlighting how Ferrante's Neapolitan novels have been shifted from the narrative genre to the theatrical, this article interrogates what kind of message playwrights at the National Theatre are sending about the way in which Ferrante's narratives have been modified on stage, and what can be done more generally to raise the status of translated drama, specifically southern Italian drama in the UK.

The reworking joins the discouragingly low percentage of translated plays commissioned in the UK. Despite the fact that a number of Nobel Prize winners for literature were Italian (most recently Dario Fo), no Italian writer features in UNESCO's Index Translationum of the Top 50 most translated authors to date. Perhaps this is the result of the general low status of translated literature in the UK. According to Bradley (2011, 191–2), among the 250 plays put on stage at the National Theatre between 1995 and 2006, only 41, or 16.4% were translations. Moreover, as Marinetti (2013, 30) has pointed out, the very plays the National Theatre has tended to stage in translation comes from a canonical (mostly Eurocentric) repertoire:

While Greek, Russian, German, Norwegian and French plays appear at first sight to be well represented, different productions of *Oresteia* and *Oedipus* count for over 70% of the Greek plays, the Russian titles are mostly Chekhov, the German Brecht and the Norwegian Ibsen, the French contribution is made up entirely of Marivaux and Molière, while the Swedish and Italian correspond to Strindberg and Eduardo respectively. So not only do mainstream British theatres not invest in translations, but when they do they do not go for new or lesser known authors, they retranslate the classics.

Adding to the list of Italian 'classics' produced at the National Theatre is Pirandello. According to Taviano and Lorch, Pirandello's plays in the UK have been performed 230 times over the past century (2000, 18). The Royal Shakespeare Company has never staged a Pirandello play, while the National Theatre has staged a variety of his plays, including his last unfinished surrealist play *I giganti della montagna* [*The Mountain Giants*] (1937), *Il giuoco delle parti* [*The Rules of the Game*] (1918), *L'uomo, la bestia e la virtù* [*Man, Beast and Virtue*] (1919), and *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* [*Six Characters in Search of an Author*] (1921). Sharon Wood has called this latter play 'one of the most performed and constantly retranslated plays of European theatre' (2013, 146).

Recently, however, there has been a notable 'shift' in the National Theatre's repertoire, at least as far as southern Italian drama is concerned. Instead of producing one of Pirandello's canonical plays, listed above, in 2013 the National Theatre staged one of his early Sicilian plays, *Liolà* in a new version by Tanya Ronder, directed by Richard Eyre, which opened among a cast employing an Irish accent to infer the use of dialect. This arguably indicated an implicit nod to staging 'minority' performances cultures in a non-standard language/accents. Tying in with this 'shift' in the National Theatre's repertoire was De Angelis's dramatisation of *My Brilliant Friend*, based in Naples. As with Sicilian, UNESCO classifies southern Italian, including Neapolitan, as a vulnerable language. The recent choice of Italian plays at the National Theatre therefore speaks to the broader sustainable development goals as set out by UNESCO with the upcoming decade (2020–2032) to focus on indigenous languages. Just as *Liolà*, *My Brilliant Friend* was also produced using a number of Anglophone dialects or regional accents to infer the 'Neapolitan-ness' of the original novels. This raised a series of questions about cultural associations underpinning

performances. For instance, why would the play be multi-accented if the source text is written entirely in standard Italian? And what does this say to Anglophone audiences about the way in which Italian drama is being portrayed on stage?

In order to address these questions, the article will illustrate the role of translation in the process of shifting Ferrante's *œuvre* from page to stage, exploring the representational, sociocultural, political, and ethical dynamics that have shaped the translation of her work in recent years. It will be argued here that closer relationships and clearer communications between the National Theatre and theatre practitioners are crucial not just to producing high-quality translated plays but to ensuring greater cross-cultural understanding between audiences from both source and target cultures.

The novels

Ferrante wrote her Neapolitan novels in standard Italian. The quartet of novels includes *L'amica geniale* (2011); *Storia del nuovo cognome* [*The Story of a New Name*] (2012); *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* [*Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*] (2013); and *Storia della bambina perduta* [*The Story of the Lost Child*] (2014). When asked about her choice to avoid the use of dialect in her narratives in a 2015 interview for *Corriere della sera*, Ferrante spoke about her preference to adopt standard Italian, as though the dialect represented some kind of a threat to her: 'As a child, as a teenager, the dialect employed in my city scared me. I prefer that it resonates for a moment in the Italian language, but as if the dialect threatened it' (Di Stefano 2015). This viewpoint was later reinforced in a 2019 interview in *La Repubblica*:

Our dialect is wonderful, but in my experience it is linked to degradation and violence. Of course there is the dialect of good sentiments too, but to my ears, it sounds false, especially when it is over-sweet and deliberately Italianised. I prefer to just quote it, turn it into an inflection that implies disarray (Fiori 2019).

The narrative in the quartet is told from the point of view of the storyteller, Elena Greco, who details all instances of code-switching. She indicates which exchanges take place in dialect, usually with members of her local community, and which in Italian, such as with characters she later meets at university, including her husband Pietro, and during her career as an author. As a result, though this gives the impression that the novels switch in-and-out of dialect, the novels are, in fact, monolingual. The entire series is produced in standard Italian, not Neapolitan. Whether the use of dialect is inferred in direct speech ('She said calmly, in dialect, "Touch her again and I'll show you what happens"' (Goldstein 2012, 135)), indirect speech ('she spoke in dialect like the rest of us but, when necessary, came out with a bookish Italian' (Goldstein 2012, 48)), or free-indirect speech (a mixture of the two), the narrative remains in the standard language, as illustrated by the examples from Goldstein's *My Brilliant Friend* which mimic Ferrante's implied instances of code-switching:

The Solaras' 1100 pulled up beside us, Michele was driving, next to him was Marcello, who began to joke with us. With both of us, not just me. He would sing softly, in dialect, phrases like: what lovely young ladies, aren't you tired of going back and forth, look how big Naples is (Goldstein 2012, 134).

These patterns of code-switching were in no small part rooted in Italy's sociolinguistic makeup. Italian as we know it was codified at the beginning of the sixteenth century, based on the fourteenth-century Tuscan used in particular by Petrarch for poetry and Boccaccio for prose. It remained for centuries above all a literary language, beyond the reach of many, as it needed to be studied and acquired from books. In everyday life people used their local vernacular, the so-called Italian 'dialects'. It must be noted that, in the Italian context, the term 'dialect' refers to cognate languages, all derived from Latin. These are Italo-Romance idioms in their own right, and not variants of Italian as such (Richardson 2001). At the time of political unification, in 1861, according to the calculations by De Mauro (1995, 41), only 2.5% of the population knew Italian, the majority being monolingual dialect speakers.

Following Unification, Italy came to acquire a state of *diglossia*, which has been defined by Ferguson (1996, 25) as '[o]ne particular kind of standardization where two varieties of a language exist side by side throughout the community, with each having a definite role to play'. This meant that the High variety (the Italian language used predominantly in public spheres) coincided with the Low variety (the regional dialect used instinctively in informal occasions). Owing to the gradual dissemination of Italian as a common ordinary language in Italy and the corresponding decline of dialect, this led to the concept of *dilalia*, coined by Gaetano Berruto: *dilalia* captures the cases in which a clear functional differentiation exists (with a High variety and a Low variety), as in *diglossia*, however, different from *diglossia*, there is a functional overlap in spoken domains, with both High and Low varieties used in ordinary conversation and primary socialisation (Berruto 1987).

These *dilalic* speech patterns are retained in the eight-episode television series produced by HBO, directed by Saverio Costanzo in collaboration with Italy's television service RAI in 2018 (a year after the opening of the play at the Rose Theatre Kingston). The choice to introduce this degree of code-switching in the television series suggests that the producers felt it was only right to bring the novels back to their linguistic roots on screen. As the director confirms in *The Hollywood Reporter*:

"One of the first questions HBO asked me was to make sure that the series would be spoken in a strong Neapolitan dialect," recalls Costanzo. "That really struck me: I asked why an American network should care about the accuracy of a language if their audiences would be watching the series with subtitles. They replied that they wanted the series to be authentic" (Roxborough 2018).

Interestingly, Ferrante was involved in the production of the Italian screenplay, which she helped to translate into dialect. Recalling her experience with the dialect during an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* about the television adaptation, Ferrante continues to associate it with violence:

"You could record the voices of all Naples, area by area, with their intertwining from the periphery to the center, and build a purely sonorous map of the economic, social and cultural differences", she says. "The only unifying point is the violent, irrational link with the city, a link that is strong within whoever is born there, even in those who abandoned it" (Anderson 2018).

Though the television series retained spoken Neapolitan to make the episodes sound more ‘authentic’, the use of dialect is not reflected in the English subtitles, which are also based on Goldstein’s translation. When asked about the programme’s use of dialect, Goldstein reacted like most non-Neapolitans:

I wouldn’t be able to understand it. Many Italians don’t understand it. The HBO series, which is subtitled, was shot in Neapolitan when the kids are little, with their families and in the neighborhood. When they showed the first two episodes in Italian movie theaters, they had subtitles in Italian (Schweich Handler 2019).

Significantly, the fact that Goldstein does not understand Neapolitan has not impinged on her translation of Ferrante’s novels. When interviewed about the difficulties she faced translating dialect, Goldstein revealed that it did not entail any since allusions to Neapolitan take place in standard Italian (Goldstein and Reynolds 2015). As she maintained in an interview for *The Literary Hub* in 2016:

No, she [Ferrante] doesn’t write in dialect, and of course I’m grateful. But I think a lot of Italians are grateful, too. I think this was one of her reasons — I don’t know for sure, I’ve never discussed it in any way with her — but people wouldn’t understand it (Harvey 2016).

Though Ferrante never admitted to whether she avoided writing in dialect to increase her readership, Goldstein acknowledges here that the use of standard Italian nonetheless helped her to produce her translation. In an interview in 2016 for *The Observer*, Goldstein stated:

I prefer to stay close to the text when I’m translating. Of course it should read well in English. But I’m not a novelist. I don’t feel like I’m rewriting, or creating something new. I don’t feel it’s my job to do that. For the third or fourth draft, I might work without the text. But in the end, I go back to it, to make sure I haven’t gotten too far away from it (Cooke 2016).

Though Goldstein claims to not have rewritten anything, close readings of her translation suggest that she does, in fact, domesticate her text (*‘chillu strunz’* becomes ‘that piece of shit’ and *scuola media* becomes ‘middle school’) (Segnini 2018; Segnini and Sulis 2021). Indeed, different from her views expressed above, a year later, Goldstein admitted in *Il Librario* to intervening in Ferrante’s idiosyncratic text:

One of the most difficult aspects to translate is dialect: there is no one way of translating it. If we try to find what is called an equivalent, we run the risk of producing artificial sounds. As a dialect is an intimate language, used in families and in informal conversations, when we translate it, we try to shade the dialogues differently in order to convey the same effect of the regional expressions that the original language conveys. Ferrante’s language is characterized with long and complex phrases: for me it has been a challenge trying to convey the text in the best way without running the risk of “shocking” the Anglophone reader (Milani 2017).

By intervening in the translation, Goldstein essentially rewrites Ferrante’s work, tailoring the narrative to suit her readership. According to the scholars Bassnett and Lefevere (1990, vii) ‘rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power’, and this is a prime example of a translator manipulating the source text in order to disseminate the cultural context of the novels to a wider audience.

Subsequently, it could be argued that Ferrante has become a best-selling author *because* of translation. The success of Ferrante’s *L’amica geniale* seems to have emerged at approximately the same time as Goldstein’s translation. Ferrante herself acknowledged

this when she recalled the fact that, before the publication of *L'amica geniale* (only a year prior to the publication of Goldstein's translation), the success of her previous fiction had been overlooked. In an open letter to *La Repubblica* addressed to the Italian writer Roberto Saviano, who nominated her *Storia della bambina perduta* for the Premio Strega, Ferrante reminded readers that they had almost forgotten that her *L'amore molesto* had been shortlisted for the same prize two decades earlier (Ferrante 2016).

Indeed, according to Damrosch (2003, 289), world literature gains in translation, and this perspective could well be applied to Ferrante's popularity which appears to have grown *after* the success of Goldstein's translation:

[L]iterature stays within its national or regional tradition when it usually loses in translation, whereas works become world literature when they gain on balance in translation, stylistic losses offset by an expansion in depth as they increase their range.

The expansion in depth, provided by Goldstein's translation, has manifested itself in a variety of ways, above all, through the translator's capacity to enable Ferrante to cut across languages, contexts, and genres.

Firstly, in terms of language, Goldstein's translation has reached her immediate Anglophone readers and readers around the globe given that English is a powerful lingua franca. In fact, it has been estimated that, since the publication of Goldstein's *My Brilliant Friend*, Ferrante's Neapolitan novels have sold 10 million copies in 40 countries and the television production has sold its broadcasting rights to over 56 countries (Anderson 2018).

In addition, Goldstein's translation has shifted Ferrante's fame from a local to a global context. As journalist Falkoff (2016) has recently put it,

[Ferrante] had a considerable readership in Italy and beyond, but it wasn't until the 2012 publication of the first of the Neapolitan novels [in translation], *My Brilliant Friend*, and James Wood's glowing 2013 *New Yorker* article, that we could really speak of the "Ferrante phenomenon" or "Ferrante fever".

Goldstein's influence, perhaps resulting from her position as senior editor at *The New Yorker*, has helped further to place Ferrante in the social context of American mass media. The HBO television series is based on Goldstein's translation, and the recent docu-film, *Ferrante Fever* (2017), directed by Giacomo Durzi and produced by another US-based studio, Greenwich Entertainment, features interviews of Goldstein herself. Such initiatives have therefore been able to ensure even greater circulation of Ferrante's work among large-scale audiences, particularly via the means of popular television and cinema industries.

As for genres, Goldstein's *My Brilliant Friend* has become the basis of subsequent intermedial translations of Ferrante, including not just the English subtitles of the aforementioned television series but also De Angelis's stage play and the BBC radio production, to which we turn next.

To return to Damrosch's argument, if world literature gains in translation, what has emerged here is the impact Goldstein's translation has had not just in disseminating Ferrante to new audiences but in elucidating new perspectives of her work when translated through different media.

The play

This brings us to De Angelis's two-part play, centred on all four of Ferrante's Neapolitan novels. The play was based on Goldstein's translations of each book so a case could be made that the play represented an indirect translation. 'Indirect', 'relay', 'compilative', 'second-hand', and 'retranslation' are terms to explain the strategy of translating via a mediating third-party language (see Dollerup 2000). Though the play does not employ a third-party *language*, it nonetheless employs a third-party *process*: 1) from Ferrante's original novels; to 2) Goldstein's translations; to 3) De Angelis's dramatic version. The indirect translation process here, then, corresponds with Alexandra Assis Rosa, Hanna Pięta, and Rita Bueno Maia's understanding that an indirect translation is 'a translation of a translation' (2017, 113) – in this case, a dramatic translation of Goldstein's translations. The play therefore offers a new perspective on indirect translations and moves away from existing definitions that stipulate a shift across three languages. These include definitions by Mark Shuttleworth and Moira Cowie who have argued that an indirect translation is achieved 'via an intermediate translation in another language' (2014, 76), and by Harald Kittel and Armin Paul Frank who have stated that an indirect translation is centred on a source text 'which is itself a translation into a language other than the language of the original, or the target language' (1991, 3). Moreover, the play breaks away from common translation strategies employed in London mainstream theatres. While London theatres have tended to rely on literal translations when translating foreign drama, as Geraldine Brodie has recently shown (2017, 2018), a literal translation was not employed in this instance: the script was produced from Goldstein's translations.

In terms of adapting the script, De Angelis had to make a series of '*adjustment[s]*', to use the words of Leitch (2007, 98), in order to make Ferrante's four novels suitable for a two-part play. Firstly, the playwright drew inspiration from the story of two female protagonists, a relatively new area in current fiction. De Angelis explained that, in the passage from novel to play, she kept Lenu and Lila's friendship centre-stage and therefore prioritised the essential by producing what was urgent in the present. Cuts were subsequently made to emphasise the two women's friendship, in line with what Linda Hutcheon calls 'subtraction or contraction' (2006, 19). One episode that was removed was Lenù's relationship with the pharmacist's son. De Angelis felt that this episode would have interrupted the action and diverted the audience's attention away from the protagonists. She argued that spectators do not necessarily need to see episodes unrelated to the main drama as they might impinge on the central concepts.

Key episodes were thus prioritised, resulting in forms of '*expansion*' (Leitch 2007, 99). De Angelis gave the example of the two girls going to the sea, an extract given importance because of its symbolism. The scene for the writer represented life and conflict, and the gap between those who could see the sea and those who could not. More importantly, it was the first marker to reveal how they were prepared to betray each other, as the following passage demonstrates depicting the reaction of Lenù's mother on the girls' return home:

IMMACOLATA: Lenù! Lenùuu! SEES LENÙ. BEGINS HITTING HER WITH HER UMBRELLA. Where were you? You should have been at school. I went to collect you because of the rain and you hadn't even turned up. If you do something like that again I'll kill you! Your father's going to give you a real beating.

LILA: Will you stop her learning Latin though?

IMMACOLATA: A beating. That's enough.

LENÙ: Is that why we were going to the sea? So they'd stop me going to school?

LILA: I made you turn back didn't I? We're still friends?

IMMACOLATA: Home now.

LILA WATCHES AS SHE IS DRAGGED OFF (Part 1, 23).

A further example which was given importance was the competition at school. This scene is the first to reveal Lila's intellect, which is why it was prioritised. While in the novel this extract came to life via the voice of the narrator, on stage this was animated through dialogue. De Angelis said she did not want to include a narrator in her play, in line with the philosophy *show, don't tell*:

MAESTRA: Scanno, brainbox, it's you and Cerullo – sudden death.

CLASS LAUGHS

MAESTRA: One thousand doubled, divided by 5, multiplied by the square of four

LILA AND ENZO 6,400.

MAESTRA: The square of 30 divided by the fraction expressed as $\frac{3}{4}$.

LILA AND ENZO: 1200.

MAESTRA: The cube of 7 minus the square of 7.

LILA: 294.

ENZO: She thinks she's better than us.

LILA: Is it my fault your mother gave birth to a blockhead? (Part 1, 16).

De Angelis also favoured the technique of conflating scenes, similar to what Leitch has referred to as 'compression' (2007: 99). An illustration of this emerged in the episode choosing Lila's wedding dress. Here, De Angelis conflated or compressed the bath scene in the novel, where Lila voices her concerns about her imminent wedding, with the scene of her buying the wedding dress. In fragmenting the narrative in order to connect these two events, De Angelis was able to 'think in scenes', tying each together in order to keep hold of 'the spine of the story'. The play, in her words, is about a friendship between two women and the reasons why it disappears and ultimately fails. It was therefore important for the playwright to prioritise these questions over other events, which could potentially distract audiences or interrupt the focus on the women, and to allow audiences to make links and associations between different episodes. As a result, De Angelis introduced a series of what Hutcheon has called structural additions in performance adaptation, 'with a clear beginning, middle, and end' (2009, 36). Indeed, De Angelis wanted to 'write elements in' so that one scene was able to move onto the next. In making the episode 'verbal' by including additional dialogue between the characters, De Angelis was able to 'tie the scene up' at the end in order to move on to the next, as the following passage demonstrates set in the wedding dress showroom:

LILA: My sister-in-law is driving me crazy. We'll never agree.

LENÙ: Which one do you like? LILA POINTS TO ONE. I'll point to it pretending it's Pinu's choice, make up the kind of shit she would say – I do it all the time at school – it's called rhetoric.

LILA: The rich people's school is teaching you how to con people? Maybe it's not true that Stefano loves me.

LENÙ: He does everything you tell him to. And he's rich.

LILA: He wanted to invite Marcello Solara to our wedding. I made him swear Marcello would never set foot there. But why would he even think it? Do you think I'm making a mistake? Getting married [. . .]

PINU: ENTERS

PINU: So have you decided yet?

PAUSE

LENÙ: This (SHE POINTS) because as you said, Pinu, we want to avoid the meringue, the slut and the nun's nightie.

PINU: I knew I was right. That's perfect. That's the one (Part 1, 54–55).

As for the actual speech, De Angelis produced the dialogue directly from Goldstein's translated novels, without consulting the original Italian text, and this raises questions as to whether playwrights who adapt foreign drama ought at least to know something about the source language. In terms of the (implied) use of Neapolitan, Goldstein kept her translation close to the original, and therefore De Angelis's treatment of dialect is not dissimilar. Just as the original novels and English translations, the play also refers to the use of dialect. Overall, the use of dialect is inferred twice in the play, the first instance being after Lenù loses her virginity to the older Donato in Part One of the play:

DONATO: Where can we meet tomorrow?

LENÙ: I'm afraid that's not possible. If you try this again, like I said, I'll cut your fucking balls off. *She spoke to him in the dialect of her childhood – it conveyed the threat she intended most effectively* (Part 1, 92).

What is striking about this passage is how the dialect is inferred in a threatening way, adhering to the discussion earlier about how dialect is used in Ferrante as a sort of language of threat. Furthermore, Lenù here reports the impact the expression has in dialect directly to the audience, as a kind of meta-theatrical stage direction: *She spoke to him in the dialect of her childhood – it conveyed the threat she intended most effectively*. In this instance, she comes out of character (in a sort of Pirandellian manner), stepping away from the action with her lover, to explain to the audience why it is that she has reverted to her mother-tongue. Just like in Ferrante's novels and Goldstein's translations, Lenù explains this instance of code-switching in (standard) English, giving the audience the impression that, in the original version, she would have said these very lines in dialect.

The second instance whereby the use of dialect is inferred is in Part 2 of the play, again in an episode involving Lenù but this time with her husband Pietro, the university professor. Frustrated by the fact that she is unable to devote herself to her writing because of her new family, she addresses Pietro in the following manner:

LENÙ: For fuck's sake – you care more about your sodding work than your own bloody daughters!

PIETRO: You're using dialect again, Elena.

LENÙ: I haven't grafted since I was a child just to be this mother/wife thing (Part 2, 25).

What continues to emerge here is the threatening tone associated with the dialect. It would be natural for Lenù to revert to dialect here because of Italy's *dilalic* nature and, in order to reveal to the spectators this instance of code-switching, it is Pietro who indicates the change of language. It is noteworthy that the script requires a character to comment on the code-switching in order to alert the audience to the use of a different kind of language, unlike in the novels where the narrator herself indicates when and where such instances occur. These instances of code-switching enable the author to convey the sense of employing Neapolitan without having to actually use it – a technique which is mirrored in this stage adaptation, and which leaves both foreign readers of the books, together with the spectators of the play, the impression that the original novels incorporate dialect even though they do not.

As well as alluding to the dialogues which would have taken place in Neapolitan, De Angelis's production used a mixture of English accents to continue to infer the dialect, a decision made by the director who may also not have been aware of the implied use of Neapolitan. Melly Still wanted the actors to rely on their 'own natural accents' as opposed to Received Pronunciation (henceforth RP) in order to reflect the working-class community and make the language sound 'earthier', even 'crude'. The actors therefore did not perform the different accents, they were relying on their 'own voices': the lead actresses Niamh Cusack (Lenu) had an Irish accent, Catherine MacCormac (Lila) was from Surrey, and the cast included Geordies, Scousers and Mancunians. De Angelis called the inclusion of accents a 'political' act, rebelling against the use of standard English on British stages. The production team had workshopped some ideas about setting the play in an 'equivalent' British working-class community, taking Manchester as their example, however, as the essence of the play is Neapolitan, the idea to change the location was rejected but the use of accents to mimic the working-classes was retained.

The use of accents gained a mixed response from critics. Pollard (2019) from *The Independent* felt it was a 'wise decision [...] Not once do I doubt that they all grew up in the same scrappy neighbourhood'. Russel (2020), reviewing the play for *The New Yorker*, found the stylistic choice 'unsettling' at first but admits that 'it did have the effect of broadening the story'. This sense of inclusivity has been praised by further reviewers, such as Foulger (2019), who commended the multi-cultural and multi-aged cast ('The rest of the

multi-character-juggling cast is strong; the colour and age blind casting is laudable'), and McCormack (2019): 'We are left in no doubt that the travails of Lenu and Lila are those that resonate way beyond Southern Italy'.

Others responded differently. Phillips (2019) identified a kind of clash of cultures: 'But it's hard, initially, getting one's head around being transported by an accent to, say, working-class Liverpool when someone is talking about the local madwoman, Melina, "eating soap like pecorino"'. Some were left wondering who is related to whom: 'If Lenù (Niamh Cusack) has an Irish accent, her mother Immacolata (performed by Mary Jo Randel) a standard non-RP English accent, then why should her little sister Elisa (interpreted by Kezrena James) adopt a Welsh accent?' (De Francisci 2020). Levy (2019) summarises his reservations as follows:

What's wrong is the dialogue. Not the words, but the accents. Two or three other critics have noted that the cast has been directed not to attempt a cod-Southern Italian accent. Instead, the large cast who have speaking parts have been told to say their lines using the accents of their (mostly British) birthplaces.

Perhaps the above reviewer's concerns about why an Italian accent was not adopted among the cast relates to questions of cultural stereotypes. This longstanding stereotype can be associated with the boom years of Italian cinema of the Hollywood variety that made some Italian actors and actresses household names in the Anglophone world, such as Marcello Mastroianni and Sophia Loren, together with their use of Italian accents to signify exoticism: sensuality and passion (Gundle 2007; O'Rawe 2014). Admittedly, this stereotype was avoided in the stage production. In fact, De Angelis stated directly that she did not want actors to mimic an Italian accent on stage for fear of being 'offensive'.

The strategy to adopt regional accents in the production resonated with a BBC Radio 4 adaptation of *My Brilliant Friend* last broadcast in 2020 (a programme which De Angelis had not wanted to listen to). This version was also based on Goldstein's translations, dramatised by Timberlake Wertenbaker and directed by Celia De Wolf. Here the actors used Northern English accents to infer the 'Neapolitan-ness' of the work, once more, defeating the fact that the original is written in standard Italian.

Using accents to infer non-standard languages is not an uncommon strategy when transposing (implied) dialects to the stage. The scholar Perteghella (2002, 50) has defined this strategy as a parallel dialect translation:

To translate a dialect or slang into that of another specific target language, usually one that has similar connotations and occupies an analogous position in the target linguistic system. Proper names are kept as in the original, as are topical jokes, places, and other source-language cultural references. Use of actors with (specified) regional accents [...]. This strategy will achieve the desired reception effect only if the translator works closely with the director and actors. There is always the danger of mis-reception (i.e., a play perceived to be born within the audience cultural system).

The 'danger of mis-reception' in the stage version of *My Brilliant Friend* can be said to be rooted in the use of accents. The accents give the impression that the original text is written in a non-standard language when, in reality, it was not – something that seemed to largely go unnoticed by reviewers. While Levy, cited above, strongly states that: 'What's wrong is the dialogue. Not the words, but the accents', he overlooks the fact that the mix of accents conveys the 'wrong' impression about Ferrante's use of language.

The translation strategy to include accents therefore throws up a series of intriguing questions about what constitutes theatrical realism. If critics were able to accept the inclusion of a multi-cultural and multi-aged cast (none expressed any reservations), thus being 'colour-blind' and 'age-blind', then it is curious to note how reactions differ when it comes to accepting a multi-accented cast, with critics ultimately unable to be 'accent-blind' (or 'accent-deaf').

Over the years, a variety of methods have been adopted when transposing international accents and dialects in theatres (Laera 2019). In the case of southern Italian dialects on UK stages, they seemed to have been replaced by a variety of British accents, especially the Neapolitan works of Eduardo De Filippo. Mike Stott's adaptation of *Natale in casa Cupiello* [*Christmas at the Cupiello's*] (1931), which premièred on 9 November 1982 at the Greenwich Theatre, under the direction of Mike Ockrent with Warren Mitchell and Gillian Barge in the lead roles, was transposed to Lancashire, with the title *Ducking Out* (De Martino Cappuccio 2011, 59). Another example includes Peter Tinniswood's 1991 adaptation of De Filippo's dialect *Napoli Milionaria!* (1945), which was commissioned by the National Theatre and opened at the Lyttelton Theatre with Ian McKellen and Clare Higgins in the lead roles (De Martino Cappuccio 2013). This version, directed by Richard Eyre, was performed in Liverpool Scouse. Similarly, Jude Kelly's production of *Sabato, domenica e lunedì* (1959) [*Saturday, Sunday, and Monday*], first performed in May 1998 as part of the Chichester Festival Theatre, starring Dearbhla Molloy and David Suchet in a translation by Jeremy Sams, adopted the use of cockney English, incorporating Jewish and Irish idioms (Anderman 2005, 215).

Interestingly, there seems to have been a 'shift' developing in the opposite direction in a BBC Radio 4 production in 2007 of *Saturday, Sunday, and Monday* where the actors employed a heavy Italian accent. In an early article by Susan Bassnett, the inclusion of Italian accents in theatre translation would adhere to the strategy of using the source language cultural context as frame text: 'It involves the utilisation of TL stereotypical images of the SL culture to provide a comic frame' (Bassnett-McGuire 1985, 90). Though Ferrante is not particularly comical, the (somewhat caricature-esque) effect of the non-Italian actors performing Italian-sounding accents would ultimately risk resulting in a kind of stereotyped 'Anglo-Italian jargon' (Bassnett-McGuire 1985, 90), something that De Angelis deliberately wanted to avoid. But while it is understandable that the above-mentioned directors of these productions would want to replace or even replicate Neapolitan in English translations of De Filippo, who does write in dialect, the case remains more problematic in terms of Ferrante who writes in Italian.

The National Theatre has continued to employ a variety of methods for transposing Italian regional accents to the stage in a recent version of Pirandello's *Liola* (1916). Prior to *My Brilliant Friend*, as mentioned, Tanya Ronder and Richard Eyre in 2013 staged the Sicilian dialect play with a cast employing a mix of Irish accents, taking into account the regional variations in Ireland. In employing a cast with Irish accents, what was being translated was not just Pirandello's play from one language to another, but the concept of 'Sicilian-ness' as a kind of 'Irish-ness'. From a sociolinguistic point of view, the parallel between the two islands suggested that, instead of being written in the standard language, the original script used a kind of sublanguage, as was the case with *Liola*. By introducing this element, the production gave the impression that the country-folk were from a marginalised community and a territory detached from the mainland, without

having to involve the Sicilian dialect itself. The translation was therefore able to preserve the genetic code of the original script as well as to ‘speak to’ British audiences. From a more historical and cultural perspective, the artistic choice continued to resonate even more. Both Sicily and Ireland have had a somewhat difficult history with their ‘major’ counterparts, with Sicily often characterised as the *Africa of Italy* following political unification (Moe 2002) and Ireland (excluding Northern Ireland) gaining independence in 1921 (Knirck 2006). However, as Perteghella points out above, ‘[t]here is always the danger of mis-reception’. In this version of *Liolà*, the danger emerged, admittedly, when the use of Irish accents was coupled with the actors’ use of Sicilian gestures. Eyre had invited a Sicilian director to lead workshops on how to gesticulate in Sicilian and therefore, the mis-reception can be said to be rooted in this mix between the Irish and Sicilian worlds (De Francisci 2014).

Whether the choices made in this production were successful or not, Ronder and Eyre, like the above productions of De Filippo, nevertheless attempted to transfer the use of dialect on stage through the different accents. What is more ambivalent about the case of *My Brilliant Friend* is the fact that Ferrante’s standard Italian vanishes in a heavily accented stage version. It thus remains puzzling as to why the UK production included non-standard languages and accents when transposing Ferrante’s works.

Conclusion

As I have suggested here, Goldstein’s translations have played a key role in facilitating Ferrante’s movement across languages, contexts, and genres, including the recent ‘move’ to the stage in *My Brilliant Friend* at the National Theatre. Close analysis of the indirect translation processes involved when adapting the script and dialogue, together with my interviews with the playwright, has shown how Ferrante has been recast to suit an Anglophone theatre audience, particularly through the multi-cultural, multi-aged, and, above all, multi-accented cast. As this article has asked, if we, as audiences, are expected to accept different nationalities and ages on stage, then it is unclear why certain critics responded differently to the various accents employed at the National Theatre, and why there was little reaction to the fact that the ‘wrong’ impression had been conveyed about Ferrante’s (implied) code-switching.

A question which emerges here is to what extent our research can help shape the future of translating foreign drama in Britain. One answer could be simply that of increasing understanding among wider audiences of the paradoxical message the National Theatre is sending at the moment. Was the director even aware that Ferrante does not employ dialect and should there be an ethical obligation for writers, translators, playwrights to be familiar with the source text culture? If there really has been a ‘shift’ towards paying attention to ‘minority’ groups and languages at the National Theatre, at least as far as southern Italian drama is concerned, then surely this ‘shift’ needs to be accompanied by greater awareness of the ethics involved in cultural transmissions, specifically when portraying cultural difference on stage.

It is hoped here that, in drawing attention to current practices at the National Theatre, this will work towards affirming the capacity of theatre translation to foster cultural transfer and collaboration, and ultimately raise the status of the theatre translator. It is my belief that closer relationships and clearer communications between the National

Theatre, theatre practitioners and translation scholars are crucial not just to productivity and ensuring a high quality of translated plays, but also to creating and maintaining good relations with wider audiences, even just by ensuring that both source and target cultures are effectively ‘on the same page’.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Susan Bassnett and Geraldine Brodie for looking at earlier drafts of this article. Special thanks to April De Angelis for her interview and to the National Theatre for sharing the script of the play, both cited in the main text. Finally, I would like to thank the students who attended my public lecture, ‘Making *My Brilliant Friend*’, at the National Theatre in January 2020 for inspiring me to write this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Enza De Francisci is Lecturer in Translation Studies at the University of Glasgow and Programme Director of the Glasgow-Nankai (China) Translation Studies double-degree. She has published in a range of peer-reviewed journals, including *Forum Italicum*, *Italian Studies*, *The Italianist*, *Modern Language Review*, and *Pirandello Studies*, for which she edits theatre reviews. Recent publications include her monograph, *A ‘New’ Woman in Verga and Pirandello: From Page to Stage* (Legenda, 2018); her co-edited volume *Shakespeare and Italy: Transnational Exchange from the Early Modern Period to the Present* (Routledge, 2017); and her co-edited special edition, “Six Characters as World Literature” in the *PSA: The Journal of the Pirandello Society of America* (2020).

References

- Anderman, G. 2005. *Europe on Stage: Translation and Theatre*. London: Oberon.
- Anderson, A. 2018. “Reclusive Author Elena Ferrante Talks *My Brilliant Friend* HBO Adaptation.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 16. Accessed 30 January 2021. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/elena-ferrante-interview-my-brilliant-friend-hbo-show-women-artists-1152626>
- Assis Rosa, A., H. Pięta, and R. B. Maia. 2017. “Theoretical, Methodological and Terminological Issues regarding Indirect Translation: An Overview.” *Translation Studies* 10 (2): 113–132. doi:10.1080/14781700.2017.1285247.
- Bassnett-McGuire, S. 1985. “Ways through the Labyrinth: Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Texts.” In *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation*, edited by T. Hermans, 87–102. London: Croom Helm.
- Bassnett, S., and A. Lefevere, eds. 1990. *Translation, History and Culture*. London: Pinter.
- Berruto, G. 1987. *Sociolinguistica dell’italiano contemporaneo*. Rome: La Nuova Italia Scientifica.
- Bradley, J. 2011. “Not Lost in Translation.” In *Staging and Performing Translation: Text and Theatre Practice*, edited by R. Baines, C. Marinetti, and M. Perteghella, 187–199. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brodie, G. 2017. *The Translator on Stage*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Brodie, G. 2018. “Indirect Translation on the London Stage: Terminology and (In)visibility.” *Translation Studies* 11 (3): 333–348. doi:10.1080/14781700.2018.1447990.

- Cooke, R. 2016. "The Subtle Art of Translating Foreign Fiction." *The Observer*, July 24. Accessed 24 January 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/24/subtle-art-of-translating-foreign-fiction-ferrante-knausgaard>
- Damrosch, D. 2003. *What Is World Literature?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- De Francisci, E. 2014. "Review of *Liola* in a New Version by Tanya Ronder, Directed by Richard Eyre, the National Theatre London, Wednesday 7 August 2013." *Pirandello Studies* 34: 100–102.
- De Francisci, E. 2017. "Translating Pirandello's *Liola*: From Page to Play to Performance." In *Adapting Translation for the Stage*, edited by G. Brodie and E. Cole, 223–235. New York, London: Routledge.
- De Francisci, E. 2020. "My Brilliant Friend (*L'amica geniale*)." *Plays to See*, January 13. Accessed 27 January 2021. <https://playstosee.com/my-brilliant-friend-lamica-geniale/>
- De Martino Cappuccio, A. 2011. "Translating Neapolitan Dialect in Theatre: Problems of Cultural Transfer." *Translation Studies* 3 (1): 47–63.
- De Martino Cappuccio, A. 2013. "Characters in an English Adaptation of *Napoli Millionaria!*." In *The Tradition of the Actor-Author in Italian Theatre*, edited by D. Fischer, 110–127. Oxford: Legenda.
- De Mauro, T. 1995. *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita*. Bari: Laterza.
- De Rogatis, T., S. Milkova, and K. Wehling-Giorgi, eds. 2021. "Modern Language Notes." *Special Issue: Elena Ferrante in a Global Context* 136: 1.
- Di Stefano, P. 2015. "Ferrante: Felice di non esserci." *Corriere Della Sera*, April 12. Accessed 24 January 2021. <http://lettura.corriere.it/news/ferrante-felice-di-non-esserci/>
- Dollerup, C. 2000. "Relay and Support Translations." In *Translation in Context*, edited by A. Chesterman, N. Gallardo San Salvador, and Y. Gambier, 17–26. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Falkoff, R. 2016. "To Translate Is to Betray: The Elena Ferrante Phenomenon in Italy and the US." *The Guardian*, October 5. Accessed 30 January 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/05/to-translate-is-to-betray-the-elena-ferrante-phenomenon-in-italy-and-the-us>
- Ferguson, C. A. 1996. *Socio-linguistic Perspectives, Papers on Language in Society 1959-1994*. Edited by T. Huebner. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ferrante, E. 2016. "Elena Ferrante: 'Accetto la candidatura allo Strega'." *La Repubblica*, February 24. Accessed 28 January 2021. https://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2015/02/24/news/elena_ferrante_accetto_la_candidatura_allo_strega-108043390
- Fiori, S. 2019. "Elena Ferrante's Interview: 'I Have to Lie to Tell the Truth'." *La Repubblica*, December 2. Accessed 29 January 2021. https://www.repubblica.it/robinson/2019/12/02/news/_i_have_to_lie_to_tell_the_truth_-242458739/?ref=search
- Foulger, L. 2019. "My Brilliant Friend at the National Theatre." *The Upcoming*, November 27. Accessed 27 January 2021. <https://www.theupcoming.co.uk/2019/11/27/my-brilliant-friend-at-the-national-theatre-theatre-review/>
- Goldstein, A. 2012. *My Brilliant Friend*. Translated by E. Ferrante. New York: Europa Editions.
- Goldstein, A., and M. Reynolds. 2015. "Two Voices Salon with Michael Reynolds and Ann Goldstein on Elena Ferrante." *25 Years of Twolines*, March. 9. <https://www.catranslation.org/event/two-voices-salon-translator-ann-goldstein-and-publisher-michael-reynolds-on-elena-ferrante/>
- Gundle, S. 2007. *Bellissima: Feminine Beauty and the Idea of Italy*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Harvey, M. 2016. "Ann Goldstein on Translating Elena Ferrante and the Inner Workings of the New Yorker." *The Literary Hub*. Accessed 29 January 2021. <https://lithub.com/ann-goldstein-on-translating-elena-ferrante-and-the-inner-workings-of-the-new-yorker/>
- Hutcheon, L. 2006. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York, London, Routledge.
- Kittel, H., and A. P. Frank. 1991. "Introduction. Indirect Translation in Eighteenth-Century Germany". In *Interculturality and the Historical Study of Literary Translations*, edited by H. Kittel and A. P. Frank, 3–4. Berlin: Erich Schmidt.
- Knirck, J. K. 2006. *Imagining Ireland's Independence: The Debates over the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921*. Lanhan, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Krebs, K., ed. 2014. *Translation and Adaptation in Theatre and Film*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Laera, M. 2019. *Theatre and Translation*. London: Red Globe Press, Macmillan.

- Leitch, T. 2007. *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From 'Gone with the Wind' to 'The Passion of the Christ'*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Levy, P. 2019. "How Brilliant Are My Friends, After All?." *The Arts Journal*, November 27. Accessed 27 January 2021. <https://www.artsjournal.com/plainenglish/2019/11/how-brilliant-are-my-friends-after-all.html>
- Marinetti, C. 2013. "Transnational, Multilingual and Post-Dramatic: Rethinking the Location of Translation in Contemporary Theatre." In *Theatre Translation in Performance*, edited by S. Bigliuzzi, P. Kofler, and P. Ambrosi, 27–37. New York, London: Routledge.
- McCormack, A. 2019. "My Brilliant Friend Parts I and II." *Theatre Bubble*, November 27. Accessed 27 January 2021. <https://www.theatrebubble.com/2019/11/my-brilliant-friend-parts-i-and-ii/>
- Milani, N. 2017. "Una vita al New Yorker, le traduzioni dei bestseller di Elena Ferrante: Ann Goldstein si racconta". *Il Librario*, June 19. Accessed 29 January 2021. <https://www.illibraio.it/intervista-ann-goldstein-549250/>
- Moe, N. 2002. *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question*. Berkeley, LA: University of California Press.
- O'Rawe, C. 2014. *Impersonating Men: History, Biopics, and Performance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Perteghella, M. 2002. "Language and Politics on Stage: Strategies for Translating Dialect and Slang with References to Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Bond's *Saved*." *Translation Review* 64 (1): 45–53. doi:10.1080/07374836.2002.10523826.
- Phillips, C. 2019. "Review: *My Brilliant Friend* at the National Theatre." *Country and Town House*, November. Accessed 27 January 2021. <https://www.countryandtownhouse.co.uk/culture/review-my-brilliant-friend-at-the-national-theatre/>
- Pollard, A. 2019. "My Brilliant Friend Review, National Theatre: A Lively, Generous Tale of Femininity and Violence." *The Roxent*, November 27. Accessed 27 January 2021. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/my-brilliant-friend-review-play-national-theatre-elena-ferrante-catherine-mccormack-niamh-cusack-a9220656.html>
- Richardson, B. 2001. "Questions of Language." In *The Cambridge Companion in Modern Italian Culture*, edited by Z. Baranski and R. West, 63–79. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Roxborough, S. 2018. "HBO's Big Italian Bet with *My Brilliant Friend*." *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 3. Accessed 29 January 2021. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/hbos-first-move-foreign-language-series-my-brilliant-friend-1139303>
- Russel, A. 2020. "Putting Elena Ferrante on the Stage." *The New Yorker*, February 5. Accessed 27 January 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/putting-elena-ferrante-on-the-stage>
- Schweich Handler, C. 2019. "Meet Ann Goldstein, the Brilliant Translator behind the HBO Series *My Brilliant Friend*." *North Jersey*, December 16. Accessed 29 January 2021. <https://eu.northjersey.com/story/entertainment/2018/11/18/meet-translator-behind-hbos-my-brilliant-friend-ann-goldstein/2037589002/>
- Segnini, E. 2018. "Andrea Camilleri's Montalbano and Elena Ferrante's *L'amica geniale*: The Afterlife of Two 'Glocal' Series." *The Translator* 20 (1): 1–17.
- Segnini, E., and G. Sulis. 2021. "Local, Regional, and Transnational Identities in Translation: The Italian Case." *The Translator* 27 (3): 247–253. doi:10.1080/13556509.2021.2015909.
- Shuttleworth, M., and M. Cowie. 2014. *Dictionary of Translation Studies*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Stock, R. 2020. *Celebrity Translation in British Theatre: Relevance and Reception, Voice and Visibility*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Taviano, S., and J. Lorch. 2000. "Producing Pirandello in England." *Pirandello Studies* 20: 18–30.
- Wood, S. 2013. "The Pirandellian mise-en-scène and the Vanishing Translation." In *Theatre Translation in Performance*, edited by S. Bigliuzzi, P. Kofler, and P. Ambrosi, 140–149. New York, London: Routledge.