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Saving the Unsavable or Self-Translating to Exist?

An Investigation into Self-Translation in Sicilian Context

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Abstract

This article investigates whether self-translation can be a tool of cultural legitimization and contribute to the vitality of minority languages broadly understood, using the example of 21st-century Sicilian poetry. Building on research in biocultural diversity, language maintenance and revitalization, and (self-)translation, the article briefly outlines the issue of language maintenance and the ambivalent role of self-translation in minority-language settings. It then considers the status of Sicilian and its vitality, and analyzes examples of self-translation from Sicilian into Italian in mainstream publishing and social media. The analysis underscores the dynamics of literary production and dissemination, as well as the associated publication practices. The Sicilian context shows that self-translation may be a tool for linguistic sustainability through publication formats that give prominence to minority languages. Bilingual editions and social media, in particular, may offer new opportunities for language maintenance.

Keywords

self-translation – Sicilian – linguistic sustainability – bilingual editions – social media

Introduction

Over the past few years, there has been an ever-growing concern over the loss of the planet's biodiversity, with international communities acknowledging the inherent value of such diversity and taking action to protect it for the future of life on Earth. Biocultural research has highlighted the interconnectedness of biological, linguistic, and cultural phenomena at multiple scales and an extinction crisis of the diversity of life in all its forms (Maffi). The loss of biodiversity is paralleled by the loss of the world's linguistic diversity, with a decline of about 30% in global linguistic diversity and biodiversity between 1970 and 2009 (Loh and Harmon). The rapid loss of biocultural diversity is a consequence of unsustainable economic and sociopolitical systems and the spread of dominant languages and a global monoculture. While diversity is a fundamental and indispensable condition deriving from evolutionary processes, we are moving toward a kind of homogeneity that erodes the health and vitality of ecosystems, languages, and cultures.

Languages encode and express knowledge about the environment and human societies, worldviews, values, and actions, and are essential parts of our identities. As such, they are one of the most basic human resources underpinning our global cultural ecosystem, that is, an interconnected system between different domains of cultural practice and (non)profit creative industries. Examining historically marginalized languages as part of global biocultural diversity is crucial for preventing the reduction of our collective knowledge and heritage and for ensuring intergenerational continuity. Like species, languages need to be protected and safeguarded by policymakers, speaker communities, and the general public. (Self-)translation has the potential to play an important role in sustaining minority languages, although its role in language maintenance and revitalization activities is hardly acknowledged.¹ Michael Cronin has argued that translation should lie at the heart of debates about linguistic diversity, global monocultures and the demands of biocultural diversity. He has advanced the concept of eco-translation—"all forms of translation thinking and practice that knowingly engage with the challenges of human-induced environmental change" (Cronin *Eco-Translation* 2), proposing thus a perspective of translation as an ecosystem, translation in ecosystems and translation of ecosystems. He has recognized that translation is central to the interconnectedness of the different components of biocultural diversity and to the ways in which diversity is portrayed and restored.

1 The document *Language Vitality and Endangerment* by a UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group mentions translation only in connection with language documentation, and findings of the project European Language Diversity for All (Laakso et al.) refer to translation sporadically.

Research on self-translation has drawn attention to this practice as a site of power struggles and an expression of multilingual identities (Castro et al.). Investigation of minority-language contexts has mainly focused on Spain (e.g., Dasilva “Autotraducirse”; Manterola Agirrezabalaga); however, important research has been conducted also in other contexts, such as Indigenous languages in Latin America (e.g., Bujaldón de Esteves et al.; *Mutatis Mutandis*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2022), Scottish Gaelic (e.g., Krause), Indigenous languages in Canada and Yiddish (*Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 59, no. 4, 2022). Nonetheless, the discussion of the relevance of self-translation to language vitality is not exhaustive. Under-researched contexts of minorization can provide useful insights into the role played by self-translation in linguistic sustainability. Along with Spain, Italy has actively contributed to self-translation scholarship and is characterized by high linguistic diversity (Grutman “Introduction”). However, scholarship on Italian self-translation has concentrated mainly on émigré writers and Italian diaspora, neglecting dialect self-translation (Grutman “Introduction”). Italy is an ideal case for examining self-translation in situations of minorization due to a lack of official recognition of its multilingualism and thus different dynamics of power asymmetries when compared to the Spanish context.

In this article, I will focus on the 21st-century Sicilian context, where Sicilian occupies a minority position, to investigate whether self-translation can serve as a tool of cultural legitimization through specific publication formats and whether it can contribute to the vitality of a minority language.² The article is intended as an introduction to this broad area of study, which has not yet been examined in its full scope. I will first define the notion of minority language and briefly outline the issues of language maintenance, focusing on written forms, new media, and translation. Drawing on previous self-translation research, I stress the ambiguous role that self-translation can play in minority-language contexts. I then contextualize contemporary Sicilian self-translation, considering the status and vigorosity of Sicilian, and analyze examples of poetry self-translation from Sicilian into Italian in mainstream publishing and social media. As research is ongoing, the examples addressed represent only a small corpus; however, they make it possible to present a variety of practices. I investigate “the zero self-translation pact” (Ferraro 2016)—that is, the lack of indication that a text is a self-translation—as well as the works’ publishing formats, and the ways in which the two languages are presented. Ultimately, I seek to raise relevant questions about self-translation in minority-language contexts and its pertinence to linguistic sustainability.

2 “Sicilian” refers to a linguistic variety defined by common phonetic, morphologic, syntactic, and lexical features, although there are many varieties depending on the area (Matranga 1387). Sicilian has the status of a dialect. My use of the term “language” denotes a means of communication, considering distinct language functions and organization.

Minority Languages and Language Maintenance

To shed light on the role of self-translation in minority contexts such as Sicilian, it is first necessary to consider key questions concerning minority languages and their maintenance, including the important role played by written language, social media, and translation. The very notion of minority language is contextual and dynamic, depending on a specific space and moment in history and shaped by political, economic, and sociocultural factors (Cronin “Altered States” 86–87). The minority status is defined in relation to another language that holds a dominant position within a given society; it does not represent an *essence* of the “minor” language (Branchadell 6–7). In the context of this article, a minority language is understood to be any language that is in a subordinate position relative to another language in the sociocultural and linguistic context in which the writer is creatively active (Dagnino).

Minorization of a language is a condition that oftentimes leads to increasing the vulnerability of that language and accelerating its risk of endangerment. Most minority languages struggle with language maintenance, which consists of ensuring intergenerational transmission and learning opportunities, increasing the number of speakers, and expanding the domains of language use, including new media (Pauwels). Speakers often do not consider their language to be “real” (Laakso et al. 9–10), especially when it is compared to the nation-state language or other global languages associated with higher chances of socioeconomic advancement (Grenoble and Whaley). Minority languages often struggle to gain recognition as vehicles for literature or public discourse, and in some cases to be seen as “languages” in their own right (Gal).

Revitalization activities have tended to prioritize written, codified, and standardized language over language variation and orality (Eklund). Standardization has been critiqued as a sociolinguistic regime that promotes language as a homogeneous and structured system with a centrally defined “correctness.” This view produces misleadingly polarized understandings of language, whereby standard(ized) languages are associated with “progress,” the “literate/educated,” and the “universal,” while nonstandard(ized)—aka minority—languages are associated with “tradition/backwardness,” the “particular/emplaced,” and the “oral” (Gal). Although these value contrasts have been contested, standard languages and written languages are linked to a “strong belief in ‘the one best variety’ and a general denigration and rejection of all other (non-standard) varieties” (Vogl 13). Literature plays an important role in language appreciation as it “gives a language prestige; and knowledge of its literature enriches a language’s utility for its speakers” (McKenna Brown 1). Written texts thus impact the overall prestige of the language and the attitude of its

speakers who need to value their language and want to maintain it to ensure its survival, but these texts also have a practical dimension, as they can generate teaching and learning materials.

Social media may be a way of responding to the hegemony of standardization, validating heterogeneous forms of languages and challenging the historical marginalization of minority languages as being backward and inferior. New media embrace content creators and users who are scattered across geographical locations and exhibit a variety of linguistic competencies and behaviors, with one of them being the written use of forms perceived as spoken (Cormack). Although social media are primarily commercially driven and consolidate globally dominant languages, they have the potential to broaden dominant representations of languages and promote linguistic diversity. While more research is needed to understand the impact of new media on language use and planning, scholars have stressed their potential to foster language revitalization by raising the minority language's prestige, facilitating that language's use, creating new language communities, and sustaining those traditions and cultures that are not necessarily considered "standard" or "correct" (Gruffydd Jones and Uribe-Jongbloed).

As a phenomenon that occurs in mainstream publishing and on social media, (self-)translation can be not only an important practice in the struggle for language legitimization but also a crucial means for consecrating authors and texts (Casanova 86). It is also a mechanism for sustaining the minority language by reassuring speakers of its richness as a resource, by developing the domains of its use (including new media), and by ensuring the availability of learning materials. Translation into Basque, for example, has been key to developing the Basque literary language by enabling the world literary canon to be incorporated into this local tradition (Manterola Agirrezabalaga 4). However, it is essential to acknowledge that (self-)translation is a double-edged sword: far from being free from power hierarchies, it can also pose a threat to the specificity and distinctiveness of the minority language (Cronin *Translation*).

Self-Translation in Minority-Language Settings: Sleeping with the Enemy or Proclaiming One's Existence?

Literary self-translation has been discussed primarily in the context of mainstream publishing.³ While the practice of translating one's own writing is a

3 The only study of self-translation in social media focuses on influencer accounts (Desjardins).

conscious choice and often a symbolic and/or political act, its consequences for minority languages can be ambiguous. Self-translation has proven to be an important tool in the revitalization of Indigenous languages in Latin America (Gentes “Self-Translation”; Santoyo). In the Mexican context, where self-translation and bilingual publishing are closely linked, self-translation into Spanish gives Indigenous languages access to the publishing market, makes them visible on a more global scale, and creates reading material that allows audiences to develop Indigenous-language literacy. Bilingual editions serve to emphasize the richness of the minority language. In the case of Mapuche poetry, self-translation is part of a larger project that seeks to recover a silenced and stigmatized language and identity, and challenges established regimes of legitimization (Stocco). Self-translation into a dominant language can also be an export tool (Manterola Agirrezabalaga 4), paving the way for publishing and acting as a gateway for speakers of other languages who are interested in that minority language.

Still, self-translations into dominant languages have been criticized because their use as a tool for promoting minority languages and resisting hegemony may result in unintentional invisibility (Ramis), especially in diglossic contexts where self-translations tend to be unidirectional and, indeed, to move out of the minority language (Dasilva “Autotraducirse” 146; Grutman “Diglosia”). The text in the dominant language threatens to render the minority language superfluous, confirming the dominant position of the hegemonic language (Grutman “Beckett”; Manterola Agirrezabalaga). This predicament proves particularly problematic when self-translations in the hegemonic language are presented as ‘originals,’ thereby overshadowing the minority-language version (Grutman “A Sociological Glance” 74–5; Dasilva, “La autotraducción”); and the threat is further reinforced when the majority-language text is the only version that is published, discussed, or used as the basis for allograph translations into a third language.

The struggle for minority-language recognition has also been noted with regard to bilingual editions (Gentes “Potentials”). Although facing pages in such editions may aim to raise the profile of minority-language authors and gain cultural appreciation from the powerful other (Krause 137), the presence of the dominant language distracts attention from its minority counterpart. In the context of Scottish Gaelic poetry, although both linguistic versions are presented in the same typeface, the English-language text usually appears on the “eye-catching right” (Whyte 69) with no mention of its status or translator. While the layout may suggest equality between the two languages, the English versions become the “haunting double” (Whyte 70) whose dominant status is further reiterated through bilingual publications. The minority-language text is relegated to a subservient position because the reading habits are not dis-

rupted by its presence (Krause 129). Consequently, this can render the minority-language version virtually invisible and lead to a lack of acquisition of basic literacy skills in that language.

Although “[t]he dynamics of in-State self-translation are fundamentally centripetal” (Grutman “Beckett” 202), each case entails distinct historical, political, and sociocultural circumstances, and different issues of language vitality. The question remains: What happens when a minority language lacks prestige, protected juridical status, standardization, normalized use, and recognition by state institutions and speakers, as in the case of Sicilian? Does self-translation lead to further minorization, or can it function as a reminder of the minority language’s existence, contributing to its legitimization and vitality? While self-translation in minority settings may be associated with cultural appropriation and further minorization (Castro et al.), I claim that it can also be a powerful tool for sociopolitical and cultural activism whereby speakers reclaim their roots and the marginalized proves to be relevant in its own right as well as in relation to the world. As will be discussed below, the situation of Sicilian, self-translation, and related publishing practices suggest that under-researched contexts of marginalization may reveal self-translation as another tool for promoting equality and linguistic sustainability.

Self-Translation in the 21st-Century Sicilian Context

Sicilian and Its Vitality

Italian national Law 482, adopted in 1999, outlines the modalities for safeguarding 12 minority languages spoken in Italy. It is important to note that Sicilian is officially regarded as a dialect and is therefore not treated as a protected language. According to UNESCO, Sicilian enjoys “a relatively stable position” (40) within its community; yet it is simultaneously classified as vulnerable (25). The Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) reports that 68.8% of the Sicilian population above the age of six uses Sicilian at home (over 3.4 million people), but this percentage has been steadily decreasing over the years (75.3% in 2000 and 71.7% in 2006). It includes those who claim that Sicilian is the primary or exclusive language they speak and those who claim to speak both Sicilian and Italian. It does not, however, reflect the actual knowledge of Sicilian or its use, although research conducted in Sicily sheds some light on the complexities of the sociolinguistic landscape. Rather than provide an exhaustive assessment, the following discussion will highlight key points related to Sicilian and its vitality.

Due to the linguistic and political history of Italy (De Mauro), Sicily has undergone a profound transformation from being a predominantly Sicilian-speak-

ing population to being a predominantly Italian-speaking population. Moreover, there is a strong correlation between Sicilian-language monoglots (of whom there are very few) and lower levels of formal education (D'Agostino and Paternostro 442–50). Sicilian is no longer an alternative code, but one that is mixed with Italian. Empirical data collected in 2007 at the University of Palermo show that monolingual use of Italian among friends decreased in favor of a combined use of Italian and Sicilian, which is a key identity marker and a sign of group cohesion (D'Agostino and Paternostro 474–80). Italian is the mother tongue of 97% of students from Palermo (the city) and 75% of students from the province of Palermo. Sicilian fulfills a significant function as the exclusive means of communication between the elderly and students from the province (52% as compared to 8% of students from Palermo), who have greater bilingual competence. Students from Palermo have limited dialect proficiency and typically acquire Sicilian through socialization outside the family context.

The dynamics of intergenerational transmission and linguistic behaviors are closely related to anti-dialect attitudes established through linguistic politics and legitimized by schools (Ruffino). Since the political unification of Italy in 1861, dialects have been actively marginalized and stigmatized as languages of people who are uneducated and come from low socioeconomic backgrounds (De Mauro). Given that the Italian territory was deeply diversified and lacked a shared common language, the new nation had to create a national language, and dialects were perceived as the main obstacle to this goal. Schools played an important role in the Italianization of society, adopting a strong monolingual model that involved the elimination of dialects from educational programs and learning environments (Castiglione and Sardo). In a promising development, a regional law on the promotion, valorization, and teaching of Sicilian history, literature and linguistic heritage was approved in 2018, but its practical implementation will depend on the availability of suitable material and trained teachers.

Although anti-dialect prejudice has diminished (Ruffino), Sicilian still enjoys limited prestige among native and non-native speakers alike because its use does not imply added value on the job market, with all areas of life dominated by Italian. At the end of the 20th century, dialects were still considered a linguistic disadvantage that had a negative impact on the acquisition of Italian (Ruffino). This led to a constant promotion of Italian, even in family milieus (D'Agostino and Paternostro 451). A 1995 survey conducted in elementary schools across Italy showed that a significant proportion of pupils in the region of Sicily defined Sicilian as dirty, vulgar, rustic, and used by uneducated people (Ruffino). Some pupils believed it was better to speak Italian outside the home, and others declared that they spoke Italian at home but had be-

gun using Sicilian with friends when joking around. Children clearly replicate language behaviors and attitudes observed in adults, which consolidates the hierarchy between languages.

The status of Sicilian and the lack of institutional support have implications for the willingness, competence, and opportunities among speakers to use it in different domains. While Sicilian does not have a commonly accepted orthography or codification, it has a solid literary tradition that predates the hegemony of the Tuscan vulgar as the dominant language on the Italian peninsula. In the 13th century, the first poems at the court of Frederick II were written in the Sicilian vernacular, which Dante Alighieri considered to be among the most illustrious. The cultural domination of Tuscan nevertheless overshadowed Sicilian, but the 16th century witnessed an increased number of dialect poets and, over time, the appearance of various theatrical forms in dialect, such as *buffi* (protagonists who speak in dialect), *vastate* (popular farces), and *opira dei pupi* (marionette theater). Sicilian has a rich tradition as a written medium for poetry and theater, with notable poets (e.g., Giovanni Meli and Ignazio Buttitta) as well as playwrights (e.g., Salvatore di Giacomo and Luigi Pirandello), whose works have been published in both monolingual and bilingual editions (Alfieri et al.; Castiglione et al.; Haller). Although it has also been used in prose, it appears in those cases in multilingual fiction rather than in monolingual writing in dialect. In the 21st century, Sicilian continues to be used most often in poetry and in theater by adult generations. Other domains of use involve written forms of spoken language characterized by a lack of normative constraints and an openness to a plurality of expressive codes, including songs and computer-mediated communication, such as social networks (Alfieri et al. 735–39). These media, used mainly by the younger generation, do not necessarily imply fluency in dialect.

A language variety that is considered a dialect is much less likely to be maintained and revitalized (Coluzzi et al.). Sicilian therefore needs to be promoted and supported in order to remain vital, and translation may be a valuable tool in achieving this goal. The fact that Sicilians are fluent in Italian and that Sicilian is not a common medium for reading and writing, however, creates challenging conditions for the nonexistence of a translation market for Sicilian and an imbalance of translation flows. Foreign literature is typically translated directly into Italian, while translation into Sicilian is rather rare.⁴ There are more translations out of Sicilian, mainly into Italian, with most of them occur-

4 Translation into Sicilian is effectively limited to canonical texts, such as Dante Alighieri's *La Divina Commedia*, Homer's *Odyssey*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince*, and the Gospels of Luke, Matthew and John.

ring through self-translation. It is therefore important to understand the role that self-translation plays in mainstream publishing and social media in the Sicilian context.

Sicilian Poetry Self-Translation in Mainstream Publishing and on Social Media

In this section, I analyze poetry self-translation and its publication formats in commercial editions and on social media. I focus on two contemporary poets and three Facebook users whose publications symbolically decentralize the dominant position of Italian and undermine its supremacy by giving prominence to Sicilian. I only use publicly generated content from users who have agreed to the public dissemination of content in accordance with the platform's terms and conditions. I do not provide the names of user profiles in order to respect their right to privacy and since this research is ongoing. Bilingual publications and social media play a crucial role in demonstrating the viability and relevance of Sicilian as a living language, in encouraging its use, in providing reading and learning material, and in potentially increasing its readership and users.

Writing poetry in dialect is encouraged by literary prizes such as the “*Salva la tua lingua locale*” [Save your local language] National Prize and a complex ecosystem of small publishers who publish dialect poetry. However, the dissemination of Sicilian work is also shaped by a limited readership, small print runs, and the limited nationwide popularity of its writers. Minority-language writers are rarely visible on the national and/or international book market (Gentes “Self-translation” 92), unless they are critically acclaimed, find passionate readers, or are willing and able to translate their own work. In this respect, Nino De Vita and Maria Nivea Zagarella—whose publications are analyzed here—are emblematic. While self-translation is not necessarily a prerequisite for publication,⁵ having a Sicilian text published is not an easy enterprise. Bilingual editions are thus a practical solution for selling more copies, as compared to monolingual editions. Social media platforms offer other spaces that allow authors to make their work available to the public, avoiding the constraints regulating the mainstream publishing industry. Since Sicilian was historically presented as a sign of provincialism and ignorance, its presence in new media challenges this perception and shows that it has the potential to engage with modern life and modern forms of communication.

5 Nuova Ipsa published Sicilian poetry by Zagarella, Tania Fonte, and Ermanno Mirabello in monolingual editions.

Nino De Vita is considered one of the most important contemporary Sicilian poets and is recognized on a national level (De Vita *Antologia*). Born in Marsala in 1950, De Vita graduated in agricultural sciences from the University of Palermo and worked as a high school chemistry teacher. In addition to producing children's literature, he has written booklets and collections of prose and poetry. His poetry has earned him prestigious literary awards, such as the Alberto Moravia Award, the Mondello "Ignazio Buttitta" Award, and the Viareggio Jury Award. His literary debut, *Fosse Chiti* (1984), was a poetry collection in Italian, and remains an exception in his literary output, since his subsequent works were written in a variety of the Sicilian dialect spoken in Cutusio, a district of Marsala. De Vita chose the dialect because it is his first language and he wanted to both preserve it and recover what was inevitably disappearing (De Vita *Cutusiu* 1, 8–9). Despite eventual critical acclaim, his poetry had long been virtually nonexistent, as he edited and published it at his own expense and shared it only with a select readership of family and close friends, who were mainly located outside Sicily. Once Mesogea, an independent publishing house in Sicily, decided to publish his works, he was legitimized as one of the most authentic voices of contemporary (dialect) poetry.

Maria Nivea Zagarella is considered one of the most interesting voices in Sicilian poetry (Zagarella *Urologgiu*). She was born in Francofonte, in the province of Siracusa, in 1946. She graduated in classical letters from La Sapienza in Rome and worked as an Italian and Latin teacher in a high school. She has written Italian-language prose, Italian- and Sicilian-language poetry, and critical essays on Italian and foreign authors. Her Sicilian poetry has won literary prizes for dialect poetry, such as the Ciccio Carrà-Tringali and Vann'Antò-Saitta Awards. While for De Vita writing in Sicilian and sharing work with the public is associated with language preservation, Zagarella's use of Sicilian is born out of the need for a deeper rootedness in the expressive and communicative force of the poetic form. Her poetry is a homage to the beauty and sonority of Sicilian (Zagarella "Non sciupare"). The power of De Vita's and Zagarella's poetry lies in the Sicilian language, which is reinvigorated through the act of writing and rescued from the threat of extinction each time it appears on paper. In the case of both authors, dialect writing is accompanied by self-translation. Italian is challenged by the very act of self-translation, which tries to recreate the sonority of Sicilian, and by being placed alongside the Sicilian-language text.

The fact that Sicilian poetry collections are issued by independent publishers, local printing presses and/or at the author's expense attests to the clandestine character of Sicilian publications, which is rooted in the marginalization of the dialect. Table 1 presents the bilingual editions that the two poets in question have had commercially published since 2000.

TABLE 1 Commercial publications by Nino de Vita and Maria Nivea Zagarella

Title	Year of publication	Publisher
Nino De Vita		
<i>Cutusìu</i>	2001	Mesogea (Messina, Sicily)
<i>Cùntura</i>	2003	Mesogea
<i>Nnòmura</i>	2005	Mesogea
<i>Òmini</i>	2011	Mesogea
<i>Antologia (1991–2014)</i>	2015	Mesogea
<i>A ccanciu ri Maria</i>	2015	Mesogea
<i>Sulità</i>	2017	Mesogea
<i>Tiatru</i>	2018	Mesogea
<i>Il bianco della luna</i>	2020	Le Lettere (Firenze)
Maria Nivea Zagarella		
<i>U rologgiu re nichi</i>	2010	Morrone (Siracusa, Sicily)
<i>Forajocu a la cuddata</i>	2013	Morrone

An analysis of the publications reveals that none of the peritexts inform the reader that the books contain translations, and none provide information about who translated the poems.⁶ *Cutusìu* features an author's note (4) in which De Vita states that the publication includes a revised translation and that he will never be satisfied with it, since rendering the Sicilian meter and phonetics and finding Italian equivalents are very arduous tasks. Yet, he does not explicitly declare that he is the translator. None of the editions provide commentary on the translation process or the transformations involved. There is a high degree of the "zero self-translation pact" that conceals the bilingual writing and mystifies the function of the two texts.

Except for *Antologia* and *Il bianco della luna*, all titles appear in Sicilian. In the 2013 Morrone edition, the capitalized Sicilian title is followed by an Italian title that is placed between parentheses and written in lowercase letters and a smaller font. The back covers of *Cùntura*, *Nnòmura*, *Òmini*, *A ccanciu ri Maria*, *Sulità*, *Tiatru*, *Il bianco della luna*, and *U rologgiu re nichi* feature a selected Sicilian poem, with *A ccanciu ri Maria*, *Sulità*, and *Tiatru* also providing the Italian translation underneath. By contrast, *Cutusìu* and *Antologia* display a

6 The fact that the Italian texts are self-translations was determined through private communication with the publishers.

critical appraisal of the author from the preface and introduction, respectively. With the exception of in *Antologia*, the book covers either balance Sicilian and Italian or privilege Sicilian by showing the Sicilian-language version only, which symbolically makes the minor visible and breaks the power asymmetry between the two languages.

All Mesogea editions are bilingual facing pages with the Italian version on the left and the Sicilian version on the right, both presented in the same typeface. The edition by Le Lettere is also a bilingual facing pages publication, but it displays the Sicilian poem on the left and the Italian on the right. For each collection, the Sicilian titles are listed above their Italian translations, which appear in parentheses and in a smaller-sized font. The Morrone publications are bilingual “split-page editions” (Gentes “Potentials” 275), in which the Italian self-translations appear at the bottom of the page, in the same font type but smaller font size as in the Sicilian text. In the Italian versions, the line breaks are indicated by slashes, in a sense stripping the poem of its form. The layout suggests that the self-translation is purely pragmatic, to facilitate comprehension for those who do not speak Sicilian. These publication layouts reverse the usual hierarchy between Sicilian and Italian and, in a way, foster dissent from standards that reflect and strengthen power asymmetries. Using the same typeface, facing pages present readers with functionally equivalent texts of equal legitimacy, but Mesogea highlights the Sicilian by placing it on the recto page, which draws the reader’s attention. The split-page editions go one step further insofar as the visual presentation of the Italian text underscores the subordinate position of that linguistic version.

Examples of self-translation on Facebook were identified through keyword and hashtag searches, for example, #sicilianpoetry, #poesiainsiciliano, and #puisia.⁷ Since the authors are not published, no biographical information is known about them. The following observations address self-translation practices in a digital medium, based on three Facebook accounts. One of these accounts systematically posts poems in Sicilian, with most of them accompanied by Italian self-translations. The Sicilian and Italian texts appear either directly within the posts or in related photos. In the posts, the Sicilian poems appear first, and the Italian self-translations follow below, in the same typeface. The photos reflect a form of either a vertically or horizontally split-page presentation (Gentes “Potentials” 275), with both versions in the same typeface. The vertical format features the Sicilian text in the upper part and the Italian in the lower part of the photo. The horizontal format displays the Sicilian text on the

7 Considering ethical issues, the level of detail provided on Facebook examples is restricted; however, the analysis still illustrates the variety of self-translation practices.

left side and the Italian on the right side of the photo. Based on the visual presentation of the two texts on Facebook, we can argue that the photos convey the impression of equality between the two versions. This also applies to the posts; however, the fact that one has to click on “See more” to visualize all of the content gives greater prominence to the Sicilian text.

The status of the Italian text and its function are openly referred to by only one user, who explains in a caption that they wanted to include the Italian translation for those who do not understand Sicilian. Notably, the user also states that they are presenting their first poem in Sicilian and that they had never written in Sicilian before due to the lack of a codified, standardized variant. The fact that the examples analyzed are “real self-translations” (Desjardins 158–59)—that is, human-based activity generated by the same individual—can be inferred from a variety of factors: information in the profile’s introductory note; the signature (found either below the two texts in the photo or in a hashtag) or initials that correspond to the profile’s name; hashtags such as #iuscrivu [I write], #scrittoremargenti [emerging writers], and #mypoetry. The presence of these features significantly reduces the degree of the “zero self-translation pact” as compared to in mainstream publishing.

In both cases, the Italian self-translations are intended for readers living outside Sicily and for those on the island who have varying levels of Sicilian proficiency; therefore, the role of these self-translations is primarily to make the poem accessible to a larger audience. There is no guarantee as to whether or how a reader with limited knowledge of Sicilian might engage with the Sicilian text. According to Lance Hewson (155), the mere presence of the target-language text attracts the reader like a magnet, which means that audiences are likely to read the Italian version, since it is dominant in their culture, and that they will be even more likely to do so when they are not in the habit of reading in Sicilian. However, the presence of the inaccessible version forces the reader/follower to experience the alienation and exclusion normally associated with the minority-language reality, raising awareness of the issue of reclaiming one’s language and establishing the minority language in the national consciousness as a language that is worthy of recognition.

The examples above show that self-translation can serve as a valuable tool for increasing the visibility of minority languages when layouts and publication formats disrupt not only the established hierarchies between languages but also, potentially, reading patterns, by visually shining the spotlight on the minority language. The very act of writing in Sicilian contributes actively to keeping the language alive. Self-translation may also contribute to language vitality, even when it occurs *into* the dominant language. It is a helpful resource for those who do not read Sicilian and for those who wish to access Sicilian and

develop their skills in that language. Bilingual layouts place the two languages in dialogue with one another and show the capacity of the minority language to be an equal part of the global linguistic landscape, especially in new domains of language use such as digital media. This could support the recovery of prestige and further repudiation of prejudicial attitudes, ultimately leading to a revalorization of Sicilian among the Sicilian community and a shift in the dynamics of language behavior and intergenerational transmission. Whether enthusiasts, novices, or published writers, self-translators who work with minority languages demonstrate that those languages are an essential part of national life and heritage, and that they need and deserve institutional support and recognition of their value.

Conclusions

One could claim that the death of a language is a natural course of events in an ever-evolving global linguistic landscape. Yet this perspective fails to acknowledge the human factor and the conditions that lead languages to become minorized and endangered, threatening their vitality. In this article, I have sought to present a preliminary investigation of self-translation as a tool for legitimizing minority languages and contributing to their prosperity, using 21st-century Sicilian poetry as a case study. The analysis shows that individual motivations for writing in Sicilian and engaging in self-translation constitute a form of language activism. By placing a minority language on an equal footing with a more dominant language, self-translation has the potential to raise the prestige of that language and create a space for reshaping language attitudes. Through bilingual layouts that challenge language hierarchies, self-translation can play a crucial role in linguistic sustainability. It can affirm a minority language as a living language with expressive potential, ensure accessibility, provide reading and learning material, and promote the presence of the language in the global biocultural landscape. Given that content in new media cannot be controlled in the same way as that found in traditional media (Cormack 257–59), self-translation on social media platforms can undermine standard(ized) languages by giving space to nonstandard and/or noncodified language varieties. Nevertheless, assessing the actual impact of self-translation requires investigation into a broader perspective that encompasses readers/followers, publishers, and society at large, which will be addressed in subsequent research.

The bilingual publication formats discussed in this article recognize the minority language through bilingual spaces, which contests standardized monolingualism and validates multiple forms of linguistic identification. Self-trans-

lation reflects the composite nature of societies and marks individual and social attitudes toward diversity. Mainstream publishing and social media platforms come together as tools that can be used to negotiate individual and collective identities as well as to challenge expectations of, or aspirations for, cultural and linguistic homogeneity. Self-translation is a form of foreignization from within which, in the case of Sicilian, stresses Italian polycentrism as an important dimension of national identity and part of global biocultural diversity. In this context, self-translation is an act of individual empowerment and emancipation with wider implications for legitimizing minority languages and addressing global threats to environmental and human well-being and sustainability. To ensure a lasting impact, self-translation must be accompanied by concrete actions aimed at language maintenance and revitalization in addition to the implementation of sustainable laws and policies.

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