

BLOWING THE WHISTLE ACROSS LANGUAGES, ISSUES ARISING FROM THE TRANSLATION OF 'WHISTLEBLOWING' IN SUSTAINABILITY REPORTS IN ITALIAN AND ENGLISH

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Abstract

This paper sets out to exemplify the challenges arising from the translation of industrial relations concepts from English into Italian. To this end, a dataset was examined made up of a number of sustainability reports produced by companies, to see how the concept of 'whistleblowing' was rendered in Italian. The findings reveal that translators have employed different techniques to translate this concept, which pertains to industrial relations discourse, the efficacy of which varies considerably. The paper also reasserts the role of language and culture when comparing and contrasting industrial relations institutions cross-nationally, highlighting that industrial relations as a discipline has developed its own lexicon, which at times differs significantly from the legal one.

1. Introductory remarks

In industrial relations discourse, a close link can be found between sustainability and whistleblowing, which is evident if one looks at the definition of the former. Offering an explanation of sustainability which takes into account all the shades of meaning attached to the concept may be a challenging task. Indeed, this term can be viewed as a textbook example of what Newmark (1991: 90) calls "concept words", namely words that have "a wide variety of meaning depending on period and cultural community". Yet it is safe to argue that "sustainability also has a complex ethical dimension, because it involves moral choices. Ethical sustainability, in the sense of morally justifiable sustainable living, is represented by the sum of our choices and policies designed to render our living sustainable" (Howes 2011: 113). Related to this is the fact that "whistleblowing has become an increasingly important issue in business ethics in recent years" (Painter-Morland and Ten Bos 2011: 199) to the point that those who have introduced whistleblowing procedures see them as contributing to their image as an ethical and efficient organization (Lewis and Sargeant 2011). In this sense, implementing proper whistleblowing measures is a way to enhance company reputation and ethics, and thus contribute to its overall sustainability. The correlation between sustainability

and whistleblowing constitutes the rationale behind this work, as the implementation of effective reporting practices is usually outlined in company sustainability reports, which are examined in this paper. Specifically, a dataset containing a number of sustainability reports drafted by companies in both English and Italian will be scrutinized to see how the English concept of ‘whistleblowing’ has been translated into Italian. The strategies and techniques adopted by translators to render this idea will be examined, in order to assess the effectiveness of the terminology used in the target language. This research seems to be particularly relevant since whistleblowing has recently come to the fore in Italian discourse, following the entry into force of Act no. 179 of 30 November 2017, which regulates this practice in Italian labour law and industrial relations. After supplying an outline of the relevant literature (section 2), the paper goes on to provide details about the definitions and the research methodology employed (section 3), followed by a discussion of the dataset (section 4) and some concluding remarks (section 5). The paper also intends to cast light on industrial relations discourse – of which whistleblowing is part – given that the latter has been poorly researched as far as translation studies are concerned (Manzella 2017; Bromwich and Manzella 2017).

2. Theoretical background

A substantial amount of scholarly work from different perspectives has been devoted to translation and terminology issues in sustainability and corporate reporting (Osborne and Ball 2011; Magee *et al.* 2013; De Falco 2014; Maldussi 2015). One reason for the increasing interest in sustainability accounting is that “the need and demand for change has made sustainability reporting a critical success factor in business” (Gbangbola and Lawler 2014: 4). Consequently, reports “are published in several languages, including a country’s own language and English [...] This trend may be explained by the need to communicate with an increasingly international audience” (Shin and Zicari 2018: 151).

Herzig and Schaltegger (2011: 157) have pointed out that “[c]orporate sustainability reporting is characterised by several specific challenges [...] the terminology applied to non- or extra-financial reporting initiatives varies greatly and changes fairly fast”. It is important to stress that in sustainability and corporate reporting “translation may be of differing quality and might lead to different interpretations if there is no equivalent expression in the respective language” (Wagenhofer 2014: 250). As such, translation plays an important role in sustainability reporting, because “the translation process helps to create allies in the defined networks by aligning the interests of other actors to their assigned identities” (Channuntapipat 2018: 86). Basu (2011: 5) goes as far as to argue that “[a]lthough sufficient care is taken to prevent distortions, translation problems persist. This is because certain English words, phrases, and terms cannot be translated into other languages”. Yet the reverse is true as well, since it is sometimes the case that corporate sustainability terminology does not have a direct translation in English (Zeff *et al.* 2016). Therefore, the terminology issues in sustainability accounting have been given significant consideration, as have problems arising from translating industrial relations concepts, such as whistleblowing. Nevertheless, only a limited number of translation studies scholars have considered this domain (Manzella 2015, 2017; Manzella and Koch 2017; Bromwich and Manzella 2017). To a large extent, it

has been industrial relations scholars who have examined terminological issues resulting from comparative industrial relations (Hyman 2005; Blanpain and Baker 2010). Indeed, many translation problems exist in this field, particularly when dealing with context- and culture-specific terms (Singam and Koch 1994), and this is due to the fact that “translating industrial relations concepts implies examining their characteristics in the national context in which they are used, and looking for possible equivalents in the target industrial relations system” (Manzella 2017: 12). For this reason, it has been argued that “[g]lobalization does not mean standardization but rather cultivating an awareness of culturally specific phenomena, highlighting specific national practices and concepts rather than seeking standardized terms that do not always facilitate an in-depth understanding of regional and national practices” (Manzella and Koch 2017: 15). With specific reference to the notion of whistleblowing, some scholars have pointed out that “operationalising the same concept in other languages and contexts is far from automatic or easy” (Vandekerchove *et al.* 2014: 39). Research has often focused on the need to provide a positive connotation to this term cross-linguistically, and thus the need arises to develop new expressions in other languages with which to discuss this concept (Schuler 2008), especially because “the whistleblowing concept needs to be legitimised in different contexts, many of which are extremely hostile to the idea” (*ibid.*: 504).

3. Definitions and research methodology

Prior to analysing the data collected, it seems appropriate to provide a definition of whistleblowing in order to fulfil a two-fold purpose: firstly, the definition will be used to assess whether or not major conceptual differences exist between Italy and English-speaking countries where this terminology is used; and secondly, defining whistleblowing at the outset of the investigation will enable us to evaluate the effectiveness of the terms used by translators to express this concept in Italian. It may be noted that:

the word ‘whistleblowing’ is a slang term. It comes from the expression ‘to blow the whistle’ and refers to the practice of English Bobbies, who used to blow their whistle to report a crime or a wrongdoing, especially when issues of public health and safety, fraud, abuse of office were involved (Nan 2011: 7).

Limiting our analysis to the domain of industrial relations, there is no common legal definition of what constitutes whistleblowing. For example, the UK’s Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 (UK Government 1998: 1) refers to:

Any disclosure of information which, in the reasonable belief of the worker making the disclosure, tends to show one or more of the following – (a) that a criminal offence has been committed, is being committed or is likely to be committed, (b) that a person has failed, is failing or is likely to fail to comply with any legal obligation to which he is subject, (c) that a miscarriage of justice has occurred, is occurring or is likely to occur, (d) that the health or safety of any individual has been, is being or is likely to be endangered, (e) that the environment has been, is being or is likely to be damaged, or (f) that information tending to show any matter falling within any one of the preceding paragraphs has been, is being or is likely to be deliberately concealed.

This definition does not significantly differ from the one provided by Italy’s law no. 179 of 30 November 2017, which makes reference to *autori di segnalazioni di reati o irregolarità di cui siano venuti a conoscenza nell’ambito di un rapporto di lavoro pubblico o privato* (my translation: “those reporting wrongdoings or irregularities that they have become aware of while working in the public or the private sector”). In the context of industrial relations – and allowing that some minor variations may exist between laws pertaining to this concept among different English-speaking countries – in both English and Italian, “you are a whistleblower if you’re a worker and you report certain types of wrongdoing. This will usually be something you’ve seen at work – though not always” (UK Government 2018: 1).

In terms of methodology, this research will examine a dataset consisting of 60 sustainability reports produced in 2017, both in English and Italian, by companies that do business in Italy. The companies examined were selected from a longer list comprising 250 firms included in *La mappa della sostenibilità* (“The sustainability map” in English, <http://www.mappadellasostenibilita.it>), a project that intends to map out a picture of the most sustainable companies operating in Italy. The following criteria were used to single out the reports examined: a) the company selected has drafted the sustainability report in both English and Italian, and b) the English-language report includes a section on reporting policies containing the word ‘whistleblowing’.

Aspects such as company size, industry and turnover were not taken into consideration because they were not deemed to be relevant to this research. In the section that follows, the terminology employed to translate the concept of whistleblowing into Italian will be examined to understand the strategies that translators use to render this concept in the Italian version of the reports and evaluate their effectiveness.

4. Data analysis and discussion

Table 1 provides an outline of the terminology used to translate the concept of whistleblowing into Italian:

Italian version	English version
Presentare una denuncia Come presentare una denuncia alla Commissione europea per <i>segnalare</i> una presunta violazione del diritto dell’UE.	Submit a complaint How to submit a complaint to the European Commission <i>to report</i> an alleged breach of Union law.

Source: European Commission 2018 (https://ec.europa.eu/info/about-european-commission/contact/problems-and-complaints/how-make-complaint-eu-level/submit-complaint_en Accessed 2 July 2018).

Table 1. Translation of “to report” into Italian by the European Commission (emphasis added). Source: European Commission 2018 (https://ec.europa.eu/info/about-european-commission/contact/problems-and-complaints/how-make-complaint-eu-level/submit-complaint_en Accessed 2 July 2018)

As shown in Table 1, three main approaches can be found in the texts that were examined, namely the recourse to a periphrasis, the use of the English loanword in the Italian version of the document, and the concurrent use of both English and Italian terms as a kind of translation couplet. We will now take a look at the three strategies employed by translators in detail.

a) *Periphrasis*

One strategy that can be employed in the examples in this paper is a periphrasis, a means to explain an unfamiliar concept by a defining gloss using other concepts (Boer and Van Engers 2003). At times, “the indiscriminate application of periphrasis might result in a more verbose text that lacks a semantic grounding in the vocabulary of the target audience” (*ibid.*: 144), yet there is no doubt that the use of circumlocutions to translate foreign concepts is a widely used method in translation. Bastin (2014: 237) points out that “[w]hen the original wording seems to make it impossible to express the intended meaning in the target language, periphrasis or explanation might be a useful solution”. Experience has shown that periphrasis is a helpful approach to idiomatic and functional re-expression, as it lends itself to nearly limitless permutations through analogy (Bastin 2014. In relation to whistleblowing, a number of periphrases are employed which do not significantly differ from one another. However, the following wording is the most frequent circumlocution in the dataset investigated: *Segnalazione di eventuali irregolarità o violazioni*. It could be argued that this expression – which can be literally translated into English as “signalling any irregularities or infringements” – appears to accurately convey the meaning of whistleblowing. Perhaps doubts can be raised over the use of *segnalazione*. If we consider the aforementioned definition of whistleblowing, *segnalazione* might be too loose a term to refer to the act of informing on a person or organization that is engaging in an unlawful or unethical conduct. In other words, while *segnalare* might do in this context, *denunciare* – e.g. to report this conduct to someone in authority – might be more suitable. This may seem like a subtle distinction to many, especially because *segnalare* and *denunciare* are often used interchangeably. One example of this is the webpage of the European Commission that guides users through the procedures to submit a complaint to the European Commission, where ‘to report’ is translated into Italian as ‘*segnalare*’ and not as ‘*denunciare*’ (Table 2).

Strategies put in place	No. of occurrences
Texts where a periphrasis was used (<i>Segnalazione di eventuali irregolarità o violazioni</i>)	28
Texts where the English loanword was left untranslated (Whistleblowing)	20
Texts where the English term was used along with an explanation in Italian	12

Source: author’s own elaboration, 2018.

Table 2. Strategies used to translate whistleblowing into Italian in the texts surveyed (by frequency)

Although the discussion as to whether *segnalare* or *denunciare* should be employed in the expression below may appear futile, it is evident that accuracy is essential when translating technical concepts. As rightly stressed by Yen Yuen Ho (2001: 251), “[l]aw translation is different from other kinds of translation, for example the translation of literary and artistic works [...] We can’t jettison accuracy for the sake of apparent smoothness”.

A further problem which might arise when opting for *segnalare* or *denunciare* is more of a cultural one and refers to people's perception of these terms. When attempting to translate whistleblowing into other languages, it should be noted that:

the difficulty in translating the term whistleblower into other languages has led to problems in how whistleblowers are perceived publicly. In many EU countries, terms such as 'informant', 'denunciator' and 'snitch' are still commonly used by citizens and the media alike (Transparency International EU 2018: 1).

As we have seen, *segnalare* simply means 'to indicate the existence or the occurrence of something'. As such, it does not necessarily have a negative connotation. Conversely, *denunciare* – i.e. to report officially – is the act of making a formal statement or complaint about someone or something to the relevant authority. Consequently, using *denunciare* rather than *segnalare* might have consequences in how people perceive this action, with the former taking on a more negative connotation (i.e. a snitch). Therefore, translators should be aware of this difference in meaning and that using one word or the other might have a significant impact on the perception of this concept.

b) Use of English loanwords in the target text

The analysis of the collected documents reveals that another strategy used by translators is concerned with leaving the expression untranslated and employing the same wording used in the source text. It is often the case that "the translator might simply insert the untranslated word in the target text, leaving it up to the reader to find out the exact meaning if s/he so wishes" (Steemers 2012: 165).

In industrial relations – the domain to which the concept of whistleblowing belongs – the decision to maintain the original format is not due to the translators seeking to add "an exotic touch to the text" (*ibid.*), but rather to the lack of a similar institution in the target industrial relations system. When discussing the challenges arising from comparative industrial relations, Hyman (2009: 6) argues that "many of the concepts we use are simply untranslatable" because there are national institutions which do not conveniently fit into an international system of types. The same point is made by Gray (2008), who points out that in industrial relations discourse, problems emerge over seemingly mundane issues, such as the translation of terminology; therefore, sticking to the original words is a well-established practice in industrial relations discourse, as in the case of the texts examined here. In none of the cases examined in this paper, however, is an explanation provided for the loanword employed, i.e. whistleblowing. This strategy may bewilder readers of the target text, as their understanding may be affected. Nevertheless, in this specific case, the choice to leave the word in its untranslated form may be explained by the fact that whistleblowing is frequently found in Italian texts. It is not unusual to find technical documents drafted in Italian that contain the words 'whistleblowing' or 'whistleblower', as these terms are making inroads into the Italian language.

Supporting this argument is an article from *Il Sole 24 Ore*, published on 15 November 2017, soon after the entry into force of law no. 179 of 30 November 2017, titled *Il «whistleblowing» è legge: tutelato il dipendente che segnala illeciti* (my translation: Whistleblowing becomes law. Protection given to the worker who reports infringe-

ments). The industrial relations literature is replete with similar examples. For instance, a 2011 book by Frascini *et al.* bears the following title: *Whistleblowing: nuovo strumento di lotta alla corruzione* (my translation: Whistleblowing: a new tool to tackle corruption). In a similar vein, Gelmini (2018: 81) provides a definition of whistleblowing, specifying that *con il termine whistleblowing si intende uno strumento, tipizzato dal legislatore, utilizzato per segnalare una situazione rischiosa* (my translation: The term whistleblowing refers to a practice regulated by lawmakers to report a risky situation). Consequently, the use of the English term in documents drafted in Italian is gaining increasing momentum, since whistleblowing does not have a direct equivalent in Italian. The *Accademia della Crusca*, the most authoritative institution in the field of research on the Italian language, stresses that currently there exists no word in Italian conveying the meaning of whistleblowing (Accademia della Crusca 2018) and they specify that the lack of a straightforward equivalent in Italian is due to the absence of a similar concept in Italian culture. This brings to mind the words of Hyman (2009: 204) who, in examining translation and terminology issues in comparative industrial relations, points out that “institutions differ cross-nationally, and so do modes of thought”. In the reports examined in this paper, leaving the term in the original language appears to be a widespread practice, although “linguistic standardisation due to universal use of English is not always matched by a similarity of structures and functions” (Tiraboschi 2003: 192).

c) Cases where both the English and the Italian terms are used

So far we have seen two strategies that have been used by translators to transpose the concept of whistleblowing into sustainability reports produced in Italian. In some cases, translators have made use of a periphrasis to ensure that the Italian readers fully appreciate this concept; and in other cases, they have opted not to translate the term at all, assuming that the target audience – especially experts in the field – would be familiar with the meaning of whistleblowing. Looking at the reports examined in this paper, it is evident that a third technique has been employed, which is as recurrent as the previous two. Most of the documents under examination contain the word ‘whistleblowing’ – which has been left untranslated – along with an explanation of the concept in question. For instance, one case includes a mention of *il meccanismo di Whistleblowing, strumento che consente agli stakeholder di denunciare eventuali pratiche scorrette* (my translation: the whistleblowing mechanism, which enables stakeholders to report any improper practices). Yet the reverse is also true, with the periphrasis coming before the term to which it refers, e.g. *il processo di ricezione, analisi e trattamento delle segnalazioni ricevute, anche in forma anonima o confidenziale (c.d. whistleblowing)* (my translation: the receiving, analysis and treatment of disclosures, including those made anonymously or in confidence [whistleblowing]). It is safe to argue that this is the most effective way to transpose the concept into Italian, and this holds true especially if – as seems to be the case – whistleblowing can be regarded as a culture-bound term. Culture-bound (or culture-specific) terms refer “to elements or concepts that are closely associated with a certain language and culture [...] or to geography, traditions, institutions and technologies” (Palumbo 2009: 33). While various techniques are employed for the translation of such elements, a short explanation may be helpful in making the target-text reader aware of the meaning of the concept. This strategy seems to

conflict with the one examined in b) since, in this case, it is not assumed that readers are familiar with whistleblowing, so they will not be asked to “sift the meaning implicit in the general context” (Vogt-Williams 2003: 402). Additionally, supplying a gloss for the foreign word employed in the target text appears to be a useful strategy.

5. Concluding remarks

By examining a dataset consisting of 60 sustainability reports, this paper attempted to cast light on the strategies and the techniques used by translators to explain the concept of whistleblowing in Italian. As indicated above, translating the concept into Italian may be difficult for at least two reasons. Firstly, ‘whistleblowing’ can be seen as a textbook example of culture-bound terminology; in other words, it represents “formalised, socially and juridically embedded phenomena that exist in a particular form or function in only one of the two cultures being compared” (Katan 2011: 71). Consequently, transposing this concept into another culture and language can pose serious translation challenges.

Secondly, whistleblowing pertains to industrial relations discourse, a domain that has been given limited consideration by translation studies scholars. This might be due, at least in part, to the fact that industrial relations terminology is often regarded as being part of legal discourse. While this may be true, terminology in this domain is frequently the result of interactions in collective bargaining and discussions between actors involved in negotiations (Manzella 2017) to such an extent that “the field of industrial, or labour-management, relations, has its own lexicon” (Wynar and Patterson 1995: 135). In order to navigate the issues resulting from translating this culture-specific, industrial relations concept, translators have made recourse to three main strategies. Most examined reports contain a periphrasis, a widely-used device to translate terms that do not have a straightforward equivalent in the target language.

Furthermore, this applies to words used in Italian to translate this concept, which often have a negative connotation (e.g. *delatore* or *informatore*, that can be translated into English as leaker or informant, respectively). Thus, the difficulty in identifying more neutral terminology can be dealt with by making use of a periphrasis, which can then be viewed as an effective technique put in place by translators.

Alternatively, translators of these sustainability reports have opted not to translate whistleblowing, but without providing an explanation of the term. While whistleblowing is being utilized increasingly in Italian documents – particularly in technical materials – a gloss may be necessary to help readers of the target text grasp its full meaning. In other words, assuming that the target audience understands the meaning of whistleblowing without further explanation may result in misunderstanding.

Compounding the problem is the fact that challenges might arise in non-English speaking legal systems “when it comes to proposing and drafting whistleblower protection laws, because whistleblowing is not a commonly accepted legal term” (*ibid.*: 1).

Finally, a significant number of the sustainability reports examined contained the English term, i.e. whistleblowing, along with a clear explanation. In the author’s view, this is the most effective technique for disseminating this terminology and enabling readers to gain insight into its meaning. Furthermore, whistleblowing policies and pro-

cedures may differ from one company to the other, so an additional explanation in Italian can clarify the particulars of those arrangements.

In conclusion, many strategies can be adopted to translate culture-bound terms, yet only some of them appear to be effective, especially when it comes to industrial relations, the terminology of which is often laden with specific meaning. In the case of whistleblowing, the recourse to a periphrasis, either with or without the word used in the source text, can be regarded as a better translation technique than simply leaving the word in its untranslated form. This should help to prevent misunderstandings and clarify the meaning of whistleblowing in a given organization as far as reporting procedures are concerned.

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