

Sapir-Whorf in Italy: Jhumpa Lahiri and Domenico Starnone

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Author Jhumpa Lahiri, in her intriguing autobiographical essay ‘Teach yourself Italian’ (The New Yorker, December 7, 2015, pp. 30-36; translated from the Italian), provides a fascinating account of her linguistic Odyssey, from her native Bengali, through English, to a final Italian ‘metamorphosis’ (p. 34).

Her account resonated with me on several counts, having myself gone through several linguistic metamorphoses. Yet, I found one passage (if one permits the pun) particularly apt. On p. 30 of the article, the Italian writer Domenico Starnone is quoted as saying (in a letter to Jhumpa Lahiri):

“A new language is almost a new life, grammar and syntax recast you, you slip into another logic and another sensibility.”

This statement covers exactly what elsewhere has been hotly discussed under various headings such as ‘the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis’, ‘how language shapes our minds’ (and maybe even our lives), and so on. Lahiri herself is not afraid to claim that acquiring her new language (through multiple stages of

trial and error, partial successes, and “almost” complete adaptation or “metamorphosis”), in the end has resulted in re-shaping her in a new, Italian identity, partially replacing her earlier, US-English one.

As to her native Bengali persona, this emerges only in a very limited number of life situations. Lahiri is virtually illiterate in her native language, Bengali, in part due to the diverging devanagari-based script. She remarks that “I don’t know Bengali perfectly. I don’t know how to write it, or even read it.... I consider my mother tongue, paradoxically, a foreign language.” (p. 30). In contrast, as Lahiri says herself, “I’ve been writing in Italian for almost two years, and I feel that I have been transformed, almost reborn” (p. 35, my italics).

What I did not notice on a first reading of Jhumpa Lahiri’s piece is that the author illustrates the Starnone quote’s aptness by providing an example of/by herself.

In the essay, Lahiri refers to her mother, who refuses to become an American, even though she has lived in the States a

naturalized citizen for most of her adult life. Her mother

“continued, as far as possible, to dress, eat, think, live as if she had never left her India, Calcutta.”

And, when she returns to Calcutta,

“she is proud of the fact that in spite of almost fifty years away from India, she seems like a woman who never left.” (p. 36).

Interestingly in this connection, I noticed that Jhumpa Lahiri, when talking about her mother’s “refusal to modify her aspect, her habits, her attitudes, ...” (p. 36), uses the English word ‘aspect’.

This had me puzzled at first; but then I realized that in Italian, the word *aspetto* is quite commonly used for ‘face expression, looks’ (as in *una persona di bell’aspetto* ‘a good-looking person’). By contrast, the English word ‘aspect’, while carrying some of the same meaning, does not represent the same ‘sensitivity’ (it conveys a somewhat old-fashioned, bookish connotation when

used to denote a person’s ‘countenance’).

Perhaps Lahiri’s translator (Ann Goldstein) did not pick up on this (somewhat) ‘false friend’; and it arguably did not attract the original author’s attention. But observe how Jhumpa Lahiri’s language has been recast as “another sensibility”, recreating her as an Italian with not just a new (or adapted) vocabulary, a “new life, grammar and syntax” (as Starnone rightly observes in his letter) – but also, and not least of all, with a new (or renewed) sensibility for idioms and expressions, even to the extent of ‘renovating’ her mother’s *aspetto*.

Still, the renewal comes at a cost: “the change, this new opening, is costly”, like it was for the metamorphosed nymph Daphne, in Ovid’s classic tale: she, too, “found herself confined” in her new re-shape of a tree. In Jhumpa Lahiri’s case, “a new language, Italian, covers me like a kind of bark. I remain inside: renewed, trapped, relieved, uncomfortable” (p. 35).

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Austin, Tex., 7 November 2016

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