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Numerical expressions in everyday language

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Carla Bazzanella (2011): *Numeri per Parlare. Da 'quattro chiacchiere' a 'grazie mille'*. Editori Laterza, Roma

“Numeri per parlare. Da quattro chiacchiere a grazie mille” [“Numbers in speech. From a couple of words to a thousand thanks”]

This interesting volume was published by the Laterza in 2011 and is the product of fruitful collaboration between three internationally renowned scholars, each with different research perspectives. They are respectively Carla Bazzanella, who teaches General and Cognitive Linguistics at the University of Turin; Rosa Pugliese, who teaches Italian as a foreign language at the University of Bologna; Erdling Strudsholm, who teaches Italian linguistics at the University of Copenhagen.

Before moving to the strengths of the book, I would like to draw the attention to an aspect of the cover which I consider as misleading. I imagine that the publishing house, albeit recognized of its glorious tradition, may be responsible for that. The cover of the book shows a single author, Carla Bazzanella, who contributed as author and as editor at the same time. Rosa Pugliese and Erdling Strudsholm are mentioned as collaborators. In fact, the volume is truly a product of six hands. Respectively, Bazzanella composed the first and the second chapter, a total of 56 pages; Pugliese wrote the third chapter, 55 pages in length; Strudsholm drafted the fourth chapter, 55 pages. As may be proven by the equal extension of the three sections, it is evident that the three of them are authors which should be recognized by the editor.

Secondly, there are two sections of references respectively called bibliography and sources, which are arranged in reverse order compared to tradition: in fact, the source section should be placed before the bibliography. What may be considered more important is the assignment of the books to them. For example, de Mauro (2006, 8) and Gadda (2008, 437) are quoted in the conclusion (pp. 150-153), but their works, respectively, appear in different sections without explanation.

Finally due to the inaccurate dedication of the publishing house, there are several printing errors that render the text less easy to understand (see for example p. 46 .a crasi combining the two Latin words praeterpropter; p. 42, example 48 is taken from PIXI 1990, 69 indicated as "simplified transcription," but showing an incorrect use of the subjunctive; p. 47 the example in Mandarin Chinese is not numbered among other short comings).

We now turn to the content of the volume. The idea underlying the volume as a whole seems quite convincing: the goal is to analyze the use of

numerical expressions in everyday language. The discussion of the uses shows the complexity of the issues involved: the relationship between different codes, the development of the numerical system, the activation of cognitive processes, the crossing between language and culture among other linguistic aspects. After considering the canonical representation of numbers in a language (i.e. precise description), the book focuses on the approximate use of real numbers; in fact, it concentrates on the pragmatic efficiency of language use. The chance to take advantage of the linguistic system through a wide range of uses adjusted for different contexts is put in place daily; the delivery of information, the structuring of speech, the expression of emotions and thoughts are all opportunities to use the diverse range of numerals. Conversations between friends, proverbs, advertisements and other forms of discourse about the new technologies offer numerous examples of approximation through the use of numbers; the diffusion of expressions relating to numbers, especially in the advertising language, would be a subject worthy of precise case studies, because they are transferred from one context to another. It is possible to compare the approximate use of numerals in the Italian language and customs of other languages; in particular, it is interesting to compare it with Danish language (pp. 117-149).

The core of the book is also reflected in Bazzanella, Pugliese, Strudsholm "Tradurre numeri come quantità indeterminata" ["Translate numbers as undetermined quantity"], an earlier article by the same authors. This paper was delivered during the XLIII International Congress for the Study of the Italian Society of Linguistics (SIL 2009) and was published by Veronesi (ed.) "I luoghi della traduzione. Le interfacce" ["Translation Places. Interfaces"] (2011).

The vagueness of the language, which has an impact on the issue of translation, is a related topic. The most recent developments of translation theory, which consider it from different perspectives (namely, Becker 2000, Baker 2006 a-b, House 2006, Cucchi-Ulrych 2008), analyze in depth and discuss some of the issues related to the environment and other pragmatic aspects, favoring in particular the functional perspective, which tends to preserve the meaning intended by the speaker, when there is a complete match between L1 and L2 literal meanings. Since the late 90s discourse markers and mathematics are both among the research interests of the author. The so-called second axiom of Herslund (2000, 11) refers to translation equivalences, which do not necessarily have the same meaning from the perspective of linguistic intension; indeed, even in closely related languages, there is rarely a close match. The paper aims to consider the intersemiotic translation of a particular aspect of linguistic indeterminacy, one that apparently seems paradoxical. It is the use of cardinal numbers as an undetermined amount, an approximate equivalent, of which a translation is not possible. In fact, there are

numerous cases in which certain numbers do not indicate a precise amount. They intend to refer to a generic quantity and are used both to attenuate and to strengthen statements according to a scale of intensity. Elsewhere the translation problems between two languages are discussed and are treated as cases of "interference" or "negative transfer" (cfr. Crystal 1992) when they have a role in the transcription of numbers. The most interesting aspect of the chapters by Bazzanella is her attempt to taxonomize the proper and improper use of numerals. Their use is analyzed in the first part and it is marked by linguistic indicators that favor a precise interpretation of the number: they are expressions aiming to explicitly indicate that the number has to be understood in the proper sense; in the second part indicators of approximation in the use of numerals are treated. These indicators are divided by the author into three different types: the first one is when you add a modifier (the examples given are taken from different languages, such as Italian, English, French, Spanish, and Latin); the second type is called "lexical resource" and consists of a lexeme able to indicate an undetermined quantity but close to exact cardinality; the third type of approximation indicators refers to lexemes that do not contain any numeric reference, generally indicating a small or large amount. Unfortunately, this last point is not as thorough as I had expected from this book.

The most interesting aspect of the chapter by Pugliese lies in the analysis of the pragmatic uses of numerals, which is based on a very wide range of sources. By taking examples from dictionaries, literary works, novels, electronic databases, smartphone text messages, blogs, and Facebook, the author shows the idiomatic forms of inaccurate numbers, sedimented in the use or pervasive neo-formations. Pugliese argues that a division into four groups is possible: 1) from 1 to 10, starting from zero; 2) some numbers between 10 and 100, which include pragmatic uses in cultural and intercultural perspectives; 3) 100, 1000, millions, billions; 4) unspecified big numbers that are different from the previous two groups. The number zero has an idiomatic value, sign of indeterminacy in a range of shades of meaning that can be recognized thanks to the linguistic and extra-linguistic context. Zero may be a component of an adverbial phrase, a noun or an element in symmetrical correspondence with another one. It can soften to the point of becoming a neutral synonym for the verb criticize, thus creating an effect of circular semantics. In an adversative way zero can point out the direction of a digital readout just used, not to be interpreted as a generic quantity; or, with a paradoxical expression from the mathematical point of view, it can strengthen the disappointment due to the discrepancy between expectation and an event created. Some numbers are approximations used in a common way, related to a historical, political, or religious event or a quote from a famous person. In such cases, the meaning of the figurative expression is understandable only if its genesis is shared and if the expression is based on an accurate

interpretation of a quantity. Large amounts with undetermined values are often opposed to small ones; this opposition may occur when comparing a precise amount to another that has been increased to an indeterminate amount.

The polyphonic repetitions (Bazzanella 2005, 241), i.e. the formulations that reflect fixed phrases based on movies, literary titles, quotes from books, proverbs, stereotypes, slogans, and songs, are particularly highlighted. Numbers are subject to the same linguistic phenomena that typically occur with words: numbers act in a polyphonic way and are an integral part of expression; the source of their allusive meanings is found in the ample cultural repertory of a community. This mechanism includes not only specific communicative events, but also religious oratory, slogans, and proverbs.

The strong point of the chapter by Strudsholm is the comparison between the numerical system of the Danish and Italian language. The comparison highlights the differences and similarities, which stem from the fact that the Danish language has preserved the vigesimal system, unlike the Norwegian and Swedish language, which use a decimal system (called 'Northern numeral system'). In the Danish language, in addition to the vigesimal system, there also exists an older duodecimal system, which is closely related to the units of measurement. In Denmark, in 1964, the Ministry of Education attempted to recommend the use of the 'Northern numeral system' in place of the traditional numerals, but this attempt was not successful. In fact, in the perspective of the Ministry the use of the 'Northern numeral system' promotes the internationalization of the banking world. However, despite their inconvenience, both the vigesimal numeric system and the old duodecimal system of the Danish language continue to be used, even though the decimal metric system was introduced in 1907. Though the Danish and Italian language are not typologically correlated – as the first is a Germanic language and the second a Romance one – they basically follow the same numerical system. There is complete correspondence in the canonical use of numerals, but, in those cases where the direct translation is not functional, some differences related to the context, the situation, and the culture are shown. In approximated contexts the translator must take into account various strategies when aiming not only to represent the content but to integrate as much shade of meaning as possible in order to communicate both, the semantic value and the pragmatic function of the text.

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