Translating sociolinguistic variation in comics.
An example from the German-Italian language pair

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Comics are an art form in which images are typically combined with text. The text often consists of dialogues written by the comic artist, which can be regarded as instances of fictitious orality (Berg Henjum 2004, Ondelli 2020: 94-95). To make their characters sound "natural", comic artists can have them use different language varieties, just like language users do in spontaneous spoken language. Depending on the context and situation, these may include sociolinguistically marked varieties. This way, comic authors can portray their characters not only visually but also linguistically, giving them their "own voice". This linguistic diversity then forms an integral part of the comic – a peculiarity that should be paid attention to in translation, for example.
In fact, the question can be raised as to what extent sociolinguistically marked elements can be transferred into a target language. Berruto (2010) lists some strategies that can be relied on in such cases. Based on his suggestions, it will be explored whether and how the varieties attested in a source text can be rendered in translation. This will be illustrated using an example from the German-Italian language pair: two German comic books (König 2003 and 2006) and their Italian translations (König 2007, König 2010) will be analysed from the point of view of language variation. Unlike previous studies (e.g. Schreiber 2007, Costa 2015, Cinato 2021), which examined spoken or colloquial passages in fiction texts, the focus will be on a different art form – comics – and on the whole spectrum of variation: standard-near and non-standard varieties, formal and informal registers and even learner varieties alternate depending on character and situation.
The analysis will be carried out in three steps: first, sociolinguistically marked elements in the source text occurring on different linguistic levels (phonetic-graphematic, morphosyntactic, lexical) will be identified; then, it will be ascertained to what extent these elements were rendered through correspondingly marked elements in the target text. Finally, it will be discussed whether the translation can be regarded as adequate from a sociolinguistic perspective – also in view of the effects that the special features of the text type "comic book" may have had on the translational choices.
The results show that translation equivalents are found on the lexical rather than on the structural level. From a variationist perspective, the colloquial language (*Umgangssprache*) used in the original is diaphasically more marked than its counterpart in Italian, which is quite close to the standard variety. Curiously, there occur instances of variety mismatch, e.g. passages in which a character uses a formal variety which is rendered through an informal variety in Italian. Finally, learner varieties are not rendered at all; this may be related to the absence of a stylistically (and socially) accepted way of reproducing the speech of non-natives in Italian. As a general conclusion, we may state that – as already hypothesized by Toury (1995) – we witness a general levelling towards the standard variety in the Italian translation, which to some extent makes the target text less adherent to the original from a variationist – but also pragmatic-communicative – point of view.

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