

## CROSSING CULTURAL BOUNDARIES: THE FIRST TRANSLATION OF *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT* IN ITALY

IRIS UCCELLO\*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4575-6102>

UNIVERSITY OF VERONA

**Abstract:** Indirect translation, criticized for impurity, played a pivotal role in introducing Russian literature to fin-de-siècle Italy. Initial Italian translations of Russian classics stemmed from French translations, with France serving as a key hub for Russian literary reception in Europe. This article delves into the first Italian translation of "Crime and Punishment" to explore the nuances of this process. It examines the trade-offs—what was lost in translation—and highlights how the mediation through French translation paradoxically aided the reception of Dostoevsky in late 19th-century Italy.

**Keywords:** Dostoevsky; indirect translation; Crime and Punishment; literary reception

### 1. Introduction

Indirect translation is frequently stigmatized as a form of impure and erroneous translational practice (Landers et al. 2001) due to its lack of fidelity to the source text and culture, resulting mostly in the loss of semantic nuances. Despite these reservations, indirect translation played a pivotal role in facilitating the recognition of literature from distant cultures; so it was, for example, for the first translations of Russian literature in fin-de-siècle Italy (Baselica 2019). In those years France emerged as the foremost bastion of receptivity to Russian literature in Europe<sup>1</sup>. For instance, the first Italian translation of *Crime and Punishment* in 1889 (Dostoevski 1889) was mediated from the first French translation (Dostoïevski 1884). The influence of this first translation is still evident today, exemplified by the enduring usage of the title *Delitto e castigo* instead of *Delitto e pena*<sup>2</sup>.

---

\* irisucello41@gmail.com



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

Received: 26.11.2023

Revised: 18.06.2024

Accepted: 18.06.2024

© The Author(s) 2024

<sup>1</sup> A good example could be the publication of Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé's *Le Roman Russe* in 1886, the first extended work on Russian literature in Europe.

<sup>2</sup> 'Castigo' is a clear calque from the French 'châtiment.' 'Châtiment' has no judicial connotation, as the words 'peine' ('pena' in Italian) has. In Russian there is just one word for these two concepts: 'наказание' which is both a legal and internal punishment. Dostoevsky aimed at conferring the word 'наказание' a legal meaning. (Baselica 2011).

Despite these linguistic nuances, this translation played a pivotal role in introducing a Russian classic in late nineteenth-century Italy and mediating a culture perceived as savage (Renton 1961). In my article, I aim to analyze these translations to elucidate on the extent of the loss sustained from the original text during the indirect translation, but also how these losses, predominantly of a stylistic and semantic nature, facilitated a more favorable reception for a text that might have faced misjudgment had it adhered more closely to its original. This first indirect translation helps us to better understand how the first reception of Russian classics and Dostoevsky in Italy worked, and to understand how translation practices were related to and influenced by the cultural milieu in which they were made. The first translations of Dostoevsky in Italy have never been studied, due to heavy criticism toward the quality of these translations, never delving further into them.

## 2. The Context

First of all, I would like to provide a brief overview of the plot, the style and reception of *Crime and Punishment*.

Rodion Raskolnikov, a former student residing in the heart of St. Petersburg, driven by conflicting ideologies, embarks on the gruesome act of murdering an elderly pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanovna. Subsequently, he grapples with a tumultuous internal struggle resolving to confess his crime. Following his confession, Raskolnikov is met with a sentence of exile to Siberia. During his exile, Raskolnikov undergoes a profound metamorphosis, experiencing a moral and spiritual awakening. He emerges as a more compassionate and empathetic individual. The novel concludes with a glimmer of hope for Raskolnikov as he embarks on a process of rebuilding his life alongside Sonia in Siberia.

Notably, upon the first publication of *Crime and Punishment* in the Russian literary journal *Russkiy vestnik 'The Russian Messenger'* (1866), the reception was nothing short of extraordinary. As Nikolay Strakhov eloquently observed, the novel garnered immense acclaim and attention, signifying its profound impact on the literary landscape:

Только его («Преступление и наказание») и читали в этом 1866 г., только об нем и говорили охотники до чтения, говорили, обыкновенно жалуясь на подавляющую силу романа, на тяжелое впечатление, от которого люди с здоровыми нервами почти заболели, а люди с слабыми нервами принуждены были оставлять чтение (Strakhov 1883).

[“In 1866 everyone was reading it (*Crime and Punishment*), readers prior to reading were discussing it. They usually lamented the overwhelming power of the novel, the heavy impression from which people with healthy nerves almost fell ill, and those with weak nerves were compelled to abandon reading.”] (Translation mine, *I. U.*).

Not only the topic and the philosophical issues the novel engaged in, but also the language and style of the novel were very peculiar for its contemporary audience. Within the novel, each character possesses its unique linguistic characteristics, albeit the most expressive linguistic portrait is reserved for the main character. Dostoevsky deftly illustrates Raskolnikov's dual nature through various stylistic devices, including

the disjointedness of his speech, the disharmony in his syntax, and, most significantly, the contrast between the external and internal forms of his speech (Belov 1979). The writer's distinctive and captivating rhythm draws the reader into the character's complexities.

In less than two decades, *Crime and Punishment* garnered significant attention abroad, leading to translations in numerous European languages. It received a remarkable total of 26 translations in Italy. I presume this considerable amount of translations is related to the efforts to close the gap with the original text. The French translations, which number six, reflect a different approach in translation. André Markowicz, who translated *Crime and Punishment* (2016) lamented the consistent efforts of French translators to adapt, Frenchify, and sanitize the original text to conform to French literary and grammatical standards. According to Markowicz, French translations often mirrored a particular French literary era more than they preserved the original literary context and language (Markowicz, 2014). This fact is indeed true for the first translation of *Crime and Punishment*, where the primary goal was to align the literary text with literary and grammatical French norms. Consequently, the translations potentially reflected the literary and linguistic context of France more than that of the original text.

Thus, it is fundamental to delve into the historical and cultural context in which these translations were produced to better understand them. When Dostoevsky arrived in Europe, there was also the decadent movement which had thematic and philosophical similarities with Dostoevsky's works (exploration of human nature and taboos, response to social and cultural changes, pessimism and nihilism, irony and paradox). However, while these commonalities provided a fertile ground for the reception of his novels in Europe, there were significant differences between the Decadent movement and Dostoevsky, such as his literary style. The prose of Dostoevsky was considered all but aesthetic or beautiful by European audiences. Enrico Montecorboli, an Italian dramatist who penned the preface for the first publication of *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoevski 1889) may have regarded Dostoevsky's prose as disconcerting rather than aesthetically gratifying. He was convinced that a brilliant author must possess a sense of proportion, and according to Montecorboli, Dostoevsky, lacking such measure, cannot be deemed a genius. (Montecorboli 1889). Thus, in the act of translation, it became imperative to impose a sense of proportion upon his nervous and discontinuous style. The flourishing aestheticism and decadent prose that characterized this period prompted a modification of Dostoevsky's distinct linguistic style. This adaptation aimed at aligning his narrative with the refined literary sensibilities of French and Italian audiences, characterized by an inclination for ornate language and stylistic beauty. Consequently, Dostoevsky's intricate and intense linguistic expressions underwent a process of refinement and adaptation to the linguistic norms and tastes prevalent in the French and Italian literary spheres during that era.

### 3. Translation Analysis

For the analysis, I have selected pivotal extracts from *Crime and Punishment*. In the tables I have decided to show the last Italian translation by Damiano Rebecchini

(Dostoevskij 2013), recognized as the most faithful to the Russian text, to show how, after 26 attempts, Dostoevskij is now read in Italy (as if he was a different author).

**Table 1. Part 1, Chapter 6.**

<p><b>Russian original text<sup>3</sup></b></p> <p>Впоследствии Раскольникову случилось как-то узнать, зачем именно мещанин и баба приглашали к себе Лизавету. (...)Так как на рынке продавать невыгодно, то и искали торговку, а Лизавета этим занималась: брала комиссии, ходила по делам и имела большую практику, потому что была очень честна и всегда говорила крайнюю цену: какую цену скажет, так тому и быть. Говорила же вообще мало, и как уже сказано, была такая смиренная и пугливая...(р. 52)</p>
<p><b>First French translation (1884)</b></p> <p>Raskolnikoff apprit plus tard pourquoi le marchand et la marchande avaient invité Élisabeth à venir chez eux. (...) Ces gens cherchaient donc à se mettre en rapport avec une revendeuse à la toilette ; or, Élisabeth exerçait ce métier. Elle avait une nombreuse clientèle parce qu'elle était fort honnête et disait toujours le dernier prix : avec elle, il n'y avait pas à marchander. En général, elle parlait peu; comme nous l'avons déjà dit, elle était fort douce et fort craintive... (1, p. 77)</p>
<p><b>First indirect Italian translation (1889)</b></p> <p>Raskolnikoff seppe più tardi perchè il mercante e la moglie avevano invitato Elisabetta a casa loro. (...) Quella gente dunque cercava di mettersi in relazione con una rivenditrice d'abiti; ora, Elisabetta esercitava questo mestiere, ed aveva una numerosa clientela perchè era molto onesta e diceva sempre l'ultimo prezzo: con lei non si mercanteggiava. In generale parlava poco; come abbiamo già detto, era molto mite e timida...(1, p. 91, 92)</p>
<p><b>Last Italian translation (2013)</b></p> <p>In seguito, Raskol'nikov venne per caso a sapere per quale motivo il bottegaio e la donna avessero detto a Lizaveta di passare da loro. (...) Siccome venderle al mercato non conveniva, cercavano qualcuno che le vendesse in proprio e Lizaveta lo faceva . Prendeva la merce per conto terzi, andava a chiedere a destra e a manca e aveva un buon giro, perché era onesta e dava sempre l'ultimo prezzo: se dava un prezzo, era quello. Parlava poco e, come si è detto, era una donna così mite, timorosa... (p. 147)</p>

In the first Italian translation, the fidelity to the French text is evident, the texts are pretty much identical. Notably, the French translation, and consequently its Italian counterpart, appears to simplify the narrative from the outset, thereby omitting the temporal dynamism present in the original Russian text. (“случилось как-то знать” is rendered in a very simple way: “seppe più tardi”).

A deliberate choice is observed to maintain linguistic simplicity, eschewing implicit elements. The translators, motivated by a commitment to both clarity and an aesthetic quality of expression, opt for explicit renderings, thereby sacrificing the distinctive linguistic tension inherent in Dostoevsky's literary works (“она этим занималась” is rendered with “Elisabetta esercitava questo mestiere”). This explicit approach, while serving the purpose of enhancing comprehension and fostering aesthetic appeal, inadvertently leads to a diminution of the intricate linguistic tension that is a hallmark of Dostoevsky's prose. The preference for explicitness, aimed at ensuring transparency

<sup>3</sup> For citations of the Russian text, the reference edition is: Dostoevsky, Fëdor Mikhailovich. 1973. “Prestuplenie i nakazanie”. in Id., *Polnoe sobranje sochinenii v trizhati tomakh*, t. 6. Moskva: Nauka.

of meaning, results in a dilution of the inherent complexities and subtle nuances present in the original Russian text.

**Table 2. Part 1, Chapter 6**

<b>Russian original text</b>
<p>— Эж ведь спит! — вскричала она с негодованием, — и всё-то он спит!</p> <p>(...)— Опять спать! — вскричала Настасья, — да ты болен, что ль?</p> <p>Он ничего не отвечал.</p> <p>— Чаю-то хошь?</p> <p>(...)</p> <p>— Болен аль нет? — спросила Настасья, и опять не получила ответа.</p> <p>— Ты хошь бы на улицу вышел, — сказала она, помолчав, — тебя хошь бы ветром обдуло. Есть-то будешь, что ль? (p. 55-56)</p>
<b>First French translation (1884)</b>
<p>— Il n'est pas encore levé ! s'écria-t-elle avec indignation. Peut-on dormir ainsi !</p> <p>(...)</p> <p>— Encore ! cria Nastasia, mais tu es donc malade?</p> <p>Il ne répondit pas.</p> <p>— Veux-tu du thé ?</p> <p>(...)</p> <p>— Es-tu malade ou ne l'es-tu pas ? demanda Nastasia.</p> <p>(...)</p> <p>— Tu devrais sortir, dit-elle après un silence; le grand air te ferait du bien. Tu vas manger, n'est-ce pas ? (1, p. 83)</p>
<b>First Italian indirect translation (1889)</b>
<p>— Non s'è ancora alzato! esclamò con indignazione. È un modo questo di dormire!</p> <p>(...)</p>

— Ancora! gridò Nastasia, ma dunque sei ammalato?

Egli non rispose.

— Vuoi il thè?

(...)

— Sei malato, sì o no? domandò Nastasia.

(...)

— Tu dovresti uscire, disse lei, l'aria libera ti farebbe bene. Mangerai, n'è vero? (1, p. 98-99)

**Last Italian translation (2013)**

“Ancora dormi!” disse indispettita. “Ma non fai altro che dormire!”

(...)

“Di nuovo a dormire?!” esclamò Nastas'ja. “Sarai mica malato?” Lui non rispose nulla.

“Il tè lo vuoi o no?”

(...)

“Sei ammalato o no?” domandò Nastas'ja, ma di nuovo non ebbe risposta.

“Ti dovresti prendere una boccata d'aria per strada,” disse lei, dopo una breve pausa, “un po' di fresco ti farebbe bene. Vuoi mangiare o no?” (p. 154-155)

In Part 6, Chapter 6, my attention focused on the Russian employed by Nastasya, a servant and cook in Raskolnikov's building. Nastasya's speech exhibits marked deviations from standard Russian, notably characterized by the substitution of “или” with “аль” and the insertion of the emphatic “-ro” suffix, the use of “хощь” instead of “хочешь,” imparting her discourse with a unique and culturally resonant quality. All the translations, even the last one, diverge significantly from the authentic linguistic stylings of a Russian servant, assuming instead a highly elevated literary register. This departure is particularly noteworthy, as the Italian translation faithfully adheres to the French source text, thereby perpetuating a linguistic disjunction from the genuine speech patterns of a Russian domestic worker. The stark incongruity between Nastasya's colloquial Russian expressions and the elevated linguistic tenor in Italian is not casual. Differently from Dostoevsky, who conferred a specific type of language to different characters, in these translations all the characters speak with the same language. It should be said that it is quite impossible to render this specific kind of language, as can be seen from the last translation, that still does not render the peculiar language of Nastasya. Maybe in Italian that could be done only through a dialect. The

language used by Nastasya in Russia is a social dialect while in Italian there is no social dialect but only regional dialects.

**Table 3. Part 1, Chapter 7**

<b>Russian original text</b>
Удар пришелся в самое темя, чему способствовал ее малый рост. (...) Кровь хлынула, как из опрокинутого стакана, и тело повалилось навзничь. (p. 63)
<b>First French translation (1884)</b>
Le coup atteignit juste le sinciput, ce à quoi contribua la petite taille de la victime (...) Le sang jaillit à flots, et le corps s'abattit lourdement par terre. (1, p. 96, 97)
<b>First Italian indirect translation (1889)</b>
Il colpo colse giusto il sincipite, cosa a cui contribuì la bassa statura della vittima (...) Il sangue spiccìo a fiotti e il corpo ricadde pesantemente a terra. (1, p. 114)
<b>Last Italian translation (2013)</b>
Anche per via della sua bassa statura il colpo la prese proprio sulla sommità della testa (...) Un copioso fiotto di sangue iniziò a sgorgare come da un bicchiere rovesciato e il corpo si riversò supino a terra. (p. 174)

Part 1, Chapter 7, delineates the pivotal moment of the pawnbroker's murder and a notable simplification in the descriptive elements becomes apparent. This is exemplified by the absence of a metaphor that is present in the original text: “Кровь хлынула, как из опрокинутого стакана” [“The blood gushed out as if from an overturned glass”]. (Translation mine, *I. U.*). This exclusion is particularly noteworthy. The metaphor in question, depicting blood as if pouring from an overturned glass, serves as a poignant and vivid image, intensifying the portrayal of the blood flow and potentially evoking a visceral response. Its absence in the translations may be attributed to a perceived need for temperance, catering to the sensibilities of a European readership.

**Table 4. Part 4, Chapter 4**

<b>Russian original text</b>
Да ведь я... бесчестная... я великая, великая грешница! Ах, что вы это сказали! (p. 246)
<b>First French translation (1884)</b>
Mais je suis... une créature déshonorée... Ah! pourquoi avez-vous dit cela? (1, p. 50)
<b>First Italian indirect translation (1889)</b>

Ma io sono... una creatura disonorata... Ah! Perché avete detto ciò? (1, p. 135)
<b>Last Italian translation (2013)</b>
Ma se io... l'onore l'ho perduto, io... sono una grande, una grande peccatrice! Ah, ma cosa avete detto! (p. 629)

The translational trend of abridged or altered content is recurrent throughout the novel, as highlighted in a poignant dialogue between Raskolnikov and Sonia, where Sonia confesses that “she is a great sinner” (Translation mine, *I. U.*) twice, the Italian and French translations opt for a singular repetition. This modification aims to preserve a more subdued tonal quality in the heroine's speech. The stylistic choice of rendering “великая грешница” as “grande peccatrice” in the last translation aligns closely with the original, reflecting a nuanced appreciation for the depth of meaning and connotation encapsulated in the Russian phrase, as opposed to a more literal interpretation like “creatura disonorata” found in earlier translations.

**Table 6. Epilogue**

<b>Russian original text</b>
Но тут уж начинается новая история, история постепенного обновления человека, история постепенного перерождения его, постепенного перехода из одного мира в другой, знакомства с новой, доселе совершенно неведомою действительностью. Это могло бы составить тему нового рассказа, — но теперешний рассказ наш окончен. (p. 422)
<b>First French translation (1884)</b>
Mais ici commence une seconde histoire, l'histoire de la lente rénovation d'un homme, de sa régénération progressive, de son passage graduel d'un monde à un autre. Ce pourrait être la matière d'un nouveau récit, — celui que nous avons voulu offrir au lecteur est terminé. (2, p. 308)
<b>First Italian indirect translation (1889)</b>
Ma qui comincia una seconda storia, la storia del lento riconoscimento di un uomo, della sua rigenerazione progressiva, del suo passaggio graduale da una vita ad un'altra. Potrebbe essere l'argomento di un nuovo racconto, - quello che abbiamo voluto offrire al lettore è terminato. (3, p. 143)
<b>Last Italian translation (2013)</b>
Ma qui inizia già un'altra storia, la storia del graduale rinnovamento di un uomo, la storia della sua graduale rinascita, del graduale passaggio da un mondo ad un altro, della presa di coscienza di una nuova realtà a lui totalmente sconosciuta. Questo potrebbe essere il tema di un nuovo racconto, ma il nostro finisce qui. (p. 1061)



A notable stylistic aspect of the novel is the deliberate use of repetition. Viktor Toporov underscores this stylistic device, pointing out that words and adverbs are constantly repeated (Toporov 1993). In the last sentence of the epilogue, Dostoevsky employs repetition with the word “постепенный” [“gradual”] (Translation mine, *I. U.*) to underscore Raskolnikov's incremental redemption. This repetition serves the purpose of clarity, emphasizing a gradual transformation. However, in early translations, the stylistic device of repetition is often eschewed, reflecting the prevailing aesthetic norms of the time, which discouraged the repetition of words for the sake of literary refinement.

#### 4. Conclusion

The concept of indirect translation, though generally viewed negatively, can assume a positive role in literary translation. It serves to bridge the cultural and linguistic gaps between distant cultures by introducing works through an intermediary culture, language, or literary tradition familiar to the target audience. This approach facilitates the accessibility of works from distant cultures. Notably, the initial translations of Russian works into Italian were mediated through French translations (Baselica 2011), contributing to the acceptance and understanding of Russian literature in Italy. The familiarity with French culture and language provided a gateway for Italian readers to appreciate the richness of Russian literary tradition.

While acknowledging that these early translations may contain errors and French inspired phrases, their historical significance lies in their role as conduits for introducing Russian literature to the Italian audience. Despite potential challenges in readability by contemporary standards, these translations played a crucial role in fostering an appreciation for the works of Russian writers in Italy, contributing to the broader diffusion of Russian literary masterpieces.

#### References

- Dostoevsky, Fëdor Mikhailovich. 1973. “Prestuplenie i nakazanie” [Crime and Punishment]. In *Id.*, *Polnoe sobranje sochinenii v trizhati tomakh* [Complete Works in Thirty Volumes], t. 6. Moskva: Nauka.
- Dostoievski, Fiodor Mikhaïlovitch. 1884. *Le Crime et le Châtiment*, traduit par Victor Derély, 2 voll.. Paris: E. Plon, Nourrit et Cie.
- Dostoievski, Fedor Michajlovic. 1889. *Il delitto e il castigo (Raskolnikoff)*, 3 voll. Milano: Fratelli Treves.
- Dostoevskij, Fedor Michajlovič. 2013. *Delitto e castigo*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Baselica, Giulia. 2011. *Alla scoperta del genio russo. Le traduzioni italiane di narrativa russa tra fine Ottocento e primo Novecento. Tradurre. Pratiche Teorie Strumenti*. 0. Accessed November 16, 2023. <https://rivistatradurre.it/tradurre-dal-russo-2/>

- Strakhov, Nikolay N. 1883. *Biografiya, pis'ma i zametki iz zapisnoy knizhki F. M. Dostoevskogo* [Biography, Letters, and Notes from the Notebook of F. M. Dostoevsky]. Sankt-Peterburg: Tip. A. S. Suvorina.
- Belov, Sergey V. 1979. Roman F. M. Dostoevskogo «Prestuplenie i nakazanie» [The Novel of F. M. Dostoevsky "Crime and Punishment"]. Leningrad: Prosveschenie. Leningradskoe otdelenie.
- De Vogüé, Eugène-Melchior. 1886. *Le Roman Russe*. Paris: E. Plon, Nourrit, et Cie.
- Gacoin Lablanchy, Pauline, et Adèle, Bastien-Thiry. 2014. "André Markowicz et les enjeux de la retraduction." *Bulletin de l'Institut Pierre Renouvin*, 40(2): 83-94. Accessed November 16, 2023. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3917/bipr.040.0083>.
- Landers, Clifford E. 2001. *Literary Translation: A Practical Guide*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Renton, Bruce. 1961. "La letteratura russa in Italia nel XIX secolo." *Rassegna sovietica*. V: 70-83.
- Toporov, Vladimir Nikolaevich. 1993. "Poetika Dostoevskogo i arkhainnye skhemy mifologicheskogo myshleniya" [The Poetics of Dostoevsky and the Archaic Schemes of Mythological Thinking]. In *Roman F. M. Dostoevskogo «Prestuplenie i nakazanie» v literaturnoj nauke XX veka* [The Novel of F. M. Dostoevsky "Crime and Punishment" in the Literary Science of the 20th Century]. Izhevsk: Izd-vo Udmurt un-ta, 105–123.

#### **Conflict of Interests**

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

#### **Ethical Standards**

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.