

Elizaveta Khachatryan

**The North seen by People from the South.
Italian Explorers about the Arctic.
The Journal of Giacomo Bove**

The objects of my analysis are the travel writings and expedition reports of Italian Arctic explorers. In the present paper I will analyse the Journal of Giacomo Bove, who was a member of the Swedish Arctic expedition of the ship “Vega” (1878-79) headed by Nordenskjöld (Il Passaggio del Nord-Est. Spedizione artica svedese della “Vega”. Diario di Giacomo Bove. A cura del dott. A. Fresa, 1940, Memorie della R. Società Geografica Italiana, volume XIX. Roma.). One of the tasks given to Giacomo Bove by the Italian Geographic Society was to describe the expedition. One of the problems that Bove had to solve in this case was which words to use when speaking of an alien reality. This other reality was for him constituted not only by natural phenomena (like, i.e., fauna and flora, ice and weather), but also by an unfamiliar material culture (the life of the northern people), and by the life of the expedition.

It is well known that one of the fundamental problems of communication is the necessity to find words appropriate to speak about the world, or, better, about our representation of the world. The process of communication has three participants: the speaker / the hearer (the speaker becomes hearer and vice versa) – the words – the world (i.e. the speaker’s representation of the world). As shown in several previous studies (in contrast to pragmatic theories)¹, the speaker does not have a privileged position, he is just one participant in communication, as are the words that describe his representation of the world, and the world that is made accessible through these words. Nothing guarantees that the

¹ See, for example, A. Culioli *La communication verbale. Document ronéoté*. UFR. Université Paris 7, 1999 ; A.Culioli, *Variations sur la linguistique. Entretiens avec Frédéric Fau*. Paris : Klincksieck, 2002.

words used by the speaker will be interpreted in the same way by the hearer.¹

The words should be adequate for speaking of the surrounding world, and they should also be understood and interpreted correctly by the hearer (this means that they should create a similar representation in both speaker and hearer). The problem of deficiency or inadequacy of words could be described on different levels of the analysis of discourse. The analysis in this paper will deal with the situation where the speaker does not really have enough words to speak about the surrounding world. The aim of the present study is to describe the lexical means and the discourse strategies used by the speaker in such a case.

As a starting point of my study, I made the hypothesis that not only the language used by the speaker contributes to the construction of the text, but also her/his mother tongue and cultural identity. This means that several discourse strategies change with the mother tongue of the speaker. In other words, the language imposes on the speaker the manner in which s/he has to speak about the world (even if it is an unfamiliar world). (That is why the speaker does not have a privileged position in communication; he is just one participant, as are the words and the world). This conditioning by the mother tongue is active on different levels of language (grammatical, lexical, syntactical). In this paper, I am interested in the lexical level.

Travel writings and expedition reports have the aim of describing an unfamiliar reality. This means that the speaker needs to find an appropriate way to speak of it. He has to create as exact and realistic an image of the surrounding world as possible. To this end, s/he tends not to use a number of artistic strategies which are more typical of fiction (like metaphors or allegories, etc.), but he prefers a wider range of explanations.

¹ This problem, by the way, generates reformulation, hesitation, and misunderstanding, phenomena marked by various discourse expressions, typical of each language. In English, for instance, such markers can be: *like, well, I mean, I don't know, you know what I mean, etc.*

The speaker needs to think of the addressee (the hearer or the reader) of the text, and to use words that will be understood, i.e., interpreted appropriately. It is obvious that the representation of the world created through words will change with the speaker: the same word will almost never be interpreted in the same way by different persons. We just have to reduce these inevitable losses to a minimum.

The Italian explorers of the North had various problems, typical of everybody who deals with an alien culture or an unfamiliar reality. First, several objects do not exist in Italy, so there are no Italian names for them. This is a case of deficiency of words often signalled in spoken language by expressions like “how do you call it” or by the use of the words with a wide semantic field (i.e. “thing”). Second, the explorer lives in a multilingual environment. G. Bove, for instance, speaks English or French with his colleagues, and tries also to study Swedish, as well as the language of the Chukchi. So, in some situations he prefers to use words from another language instead of searching for an Italian word (even where one exists). This problem can be called the inadequacy of words: the translation does not create an identical representation. For example, the Russian word *izba* describes a particular kind of wooden house. The Italian translation (*capanna*, Engl. hut) will evoke a different image, so it is in this case inadequate.

The Journal of G. Bove uses different languages in different ways and in different situations. Italian is the main language of the narrative; there are also several words in Piedmontese dialect (the author comes from Piedmont). French is used to describe the conversation with the head of the expedition (three pages in French, without translation). For the Piedmontese Bove, French is almost a second mother tongue. Other languages are present through loan words or expressions, as well as through vocabulary. Speaking about the life of the expedition, the author uses Swedish and English words. English is also used to describe nature and, particularly, ice. Latin terms, as well as Swedish and English loan words, are used to speak of the flora and fauna. Loan words from

Russian and the language of the Chukchi are used in the description of the life of the local inhabitants.

The speaker is Italian; he is a foreigner not only among the northern people that he meets, but also on board the ship, among the members of the expedition. He is the only Italian (Southern man, he refers to himself as “a child of the South”) in a team consisting of Swedes (in the majority of cases), Norwegians, and even one Russian. Thus, his descriptions refer to three realities (worlds) which are different from his own, and are new and strange for the reader: the life of the expedition, the life of the Chukchi and of the North in general.

Speaking of the life of the expedition, the author describes the objects used, food, and also scientific activities. For example: boots used to walk on the snow, clothes, Swedish food (i.e. *Knäckbröd*), and scientific instruments.

Intanto comincio a conciliarmi con la cucina svedese cioè a quelle minestre dolci e quella carne collo zucchero.

(In the meantime, I begin to resign myself to the Swedish kitchen, i.e., to the sweet soups and the meat with sugar.)

When speaking of the life of the Chukchi, G. Bove presents an almost ethnographic analysis, often accompanied by small illustrations. He describes the different boats of the Chukchi, different kinds of sledges, the orders given to the dogs (in the Chukchi language), musical instruments, their dwellings, and their fishing tools.

In the expedition, Bove has the position of hydrographer. So, his main task consists in describing natural phenomena. In the majority of cases, he uses Latin (or sometimes English) terminology (examples 1), and gives an Italian translation (when it exists¹) in brackets. Sometimes, he does the opposite (examples 2).

¹ Generally, standard Italian often lacks words to refer to flora and fauna. The necessary words exist only in various Italian dialects or in Latin.

(1) a. Gli eiders, a coppie felici, nuotavano nelle placide pozze e le *Harelda glacialis* facevano sentire il rauco loro suono: a-an-gitche a-an-gitche. I colombi selvatici si tuffavano nell'acqua con guaiti di cane battuto.

(The eiders, in happy couples, swam in the peaceful pools of water and the *Harelda glacialis* produced their hoarse sound: a-an-gitche a-an-gitche. The wild doves plunged into the water with yelps like beaten dogs.)

b. L'amo è di ferro bianco senza dente e l'esca si ricava dalla falange di un uccello-marino: credo l'*Uria grylle*.

(The fishhook is of white iron and the bait is obtained from the phalanx of a marine bird: I think the *Uria grylle*.)

We can note that in (1a) three different languages (English, Latin and Italian) are used in the same phrase to indicate different birds.

(2) a. Fu portata a bordo un'alca (*Uria Brünnichi*), uccisa dagli indigeni all'acqua aperta...

(A loom (*Uria Brünnichi*), killed by the natives in open water, was brought on board.)

b. Stormi di procellarie (*Procellaria glacialis*) volteggiano intorno ai nostri alberi.

(Flights of procellarians (*Procellaria glacialis*) whirl around our masts.)

c. ... vidi una grandissima quantità di sterco di lepre (*Lepus glacialis*)...

(I saw an enormous quantity of droppings of hare (*Lepus glacialis*) ...)

The reason for choosing foreign words is not only the speaker's professional role: he uses the language of his profession when speaking of his field. Often there are no adequate words in Italian. He is obliged to use words from another language. For example, speaking about fish he freely uses Italian, English and Swedish words to denote the same species (i.e. *trichecco* – *valros* (*walrus*),

or *salmone* – *lax* (*salmon*)). But when the author does not know the name of a fish, he uses the Chukchi language.

I pesci pescati in detta laguna sono, con linguaggio indigeno, i seguenti: *Orokadlin*, *Ciad-cia*, *Nuccio-nuccio*, *Belupil*, *Canaolchi*.

(The fish caught in this lagoon, are, in the indigenous language, the following: *Orokadlin*, *Ciad-cia*, *Nuccio-nuccio*, *Belupil*, *Canaolchi*.)

There is a very representative example with the name of salmon: in similar contexts (speaking about fishing), the speaker uses, in one place in the narration, the Swedish word *lax*, with the correct plural form (*laxar*) and in another place, (some days later) he uses the Italian word *salmone*.

La pesca consiste principalmente nella cattura delle foche, dei *valros* e del *lax*. (...) I *laxar* vengon presi con reti fatte di filo e presso a poco eguali a quelle usate dai nostri pescatori.

(The fishing consists mainly in catching seal, *valros*, and *lax*. (...) The *laxar* are caught with nets made from cord, more or less like those used by our fishermen.)

This free interchangeability of languages shows that there is no problem with naming elements of the fauna. The use of foreign words corresponds to pointing or to the use of words with a wide semantic field in spoken language: there is no need for the hearer to understand, for him the term corresponds to the name.

In the description of natural phenomena, however, the author uses another strategy: he frequently describes or explains.

We can distinguish two main strategies used by the speaker to describe the surrounding world:

- the use of loan words;
- the use of comparisons.

1. Loan words.

The most widespread way to solve the problem of the inadequacy of words is to borrow words from another language. For this reason, there are many loan words in the text. They are introduced in a variety of ways.

1.1. Explanation

One possible way to introduce a loan word is to explain it when it is used for the first time. It is interesting to see how the explanation is presented in the text:

The explanation can have the status of a reformulation. In this case it is marked by special words: discourse markers of reformulation: (*cioè* (= it means), *vale a dire*:

Il vestire dei Samoiedi: Per gli uomini esso si compone di una *matisa*: vale a dire di una tunica fatta di pelliccia di renna, col pelo all'indietro e guarnita al collo ed all'orlo inferiore di pelle di cane e di volpe.

Later: Alla *matisa* è in generale attaccato un cappuccio ...

(The clothes of Samoyed: For men it consists of a *matisa*: i.e., a tunic made from reindeer fur, with the hair on the inside, and at the neck and lower hem with borders of dog's and fox' hair.

Later in the text: Generally, a hood is attached to the *matisa*.)

Another possibility is to give a definition of the foreign word.

I russi di Cabarova, al numero di nove, costituiscono una società da essi chiamati *artill*: eguali diritti eguali doveri.

(The Russians of Cabarova, in quantity of nine, constitute a society which they call *artill*: equal rights, equal duties.)

Il campo è però più compatto e ondulato verso il nord, mentre al sud appare slegato e intersecato da larghi canali e vasti bacini d'acqua (*vakar*).

(The field is, however, more compact and undulating towards the North, whereas to the South it seems disconnected and

intersected by large channels and wide basins of water (*vakar*)¹.)

1.2 Only a loan word.

The easiest way to introduce a word from another language is just to put it in italics with no further explication. This technique is used mostly in the case of flora and fauna names, and in referring to phenomena of weather and ice (*ice-berg*, *pack*). In this case, the loan word has the function of pointing. The speaker knows the meaning of the word, because he has seen the phenomenon that the word describes.

Si è prodotto una larga *vak* a nord della nostra posizione, ma davanti a noi il *pack* è solido e impenetrabile.

(A large *vak* has appeared to the north of our position, but in front of us the *pack* is solid and impenetrable.)

Intanto il *pack* che ci si presenta dinanzi è alto e composto di *hummocks*, alcuni dei quali possono raggiungere anche i 20 piedi.

(Meanwhile, the *pack* that we see in front of us is high, and is made up of *hummocks*, some of which can be as high as 20 feet.)

In descriptions of the material reality, the speaker does not explain words because often he does not know their meaning. He merely quotes a foreign word used by his interlocutor. Sometimes (like in b.) he even make mistakes (the word *ispranovich* does not exist in Russian). We understand the approximate meaning from the context

... ci presentò un *ukase* scritto in russo nel quale era considerato come il capo dei Ciukci ...

1 From the grammatical point of view we can notice that for Swedish words the speaker uses both the singular and the plural forms without explanation: *lax* - *laxar*, *vak* - *vakar*.

(...he presented us with an *ukase* written in Russian in which he was considered the head of the Chukchi...)

... fu loro consegnata la nostra corrispondenza, con una lettera per *l'ispranovich* del Colima per pregarlo di inoltrarla il più presto possibile.

(...we delivered them our mail, with a letter to Colima's *ispranovich*, which requested him to forward it as soon as possible.)

...*la faccia del mugic si rischiarò completamente ...*

(...the face of *mugic* lightened up completely...)

... *si accostarono alla nave in due batelli ed in alcuni caiaki.*

(...they approached the ship in two boats and several *kayaks*.)

1.3. Translation

The third possibility is to translate the foreign word.

...ci invitarono graziosamente ad entrare nelle loro *izbe* (capanne).

(...they graciously invited us to enter their *izby* (huts).)

Il *timermann* (carpentiere) abbraccia tutte le donne che vengono a bordo

(The *timermann* (carpenter) embraces all the women who come on board.)

... ci siamo recati ad Irgannuck con una grande slitta (*maigurgor*).

(... we had come to Irgannuck on a big sledge (*maigurgor*).)

In this case, the speaker is conscious of the inadequacy of the word: on the one hand, he tries to be exact, so he uses a foreign word. On the other hand, he also wants to be understood by the hearer (the reader), so he has to translate using an Italian word that cannot be considered an exact equivalent.

Another example: writing about the birthday of a member of the ship's crew – the speaker uses an Italian expression (*il giorno della nascita*) followed by a Swedish word in brackets (*födelsedag*), adding a comment: *preferiscono festeggiare il giorno della nascita piuttosto che l'onomastico come in Italia* (they prefer to celebrate the day of birth and not the day of the angel, like in

Italy). In fact, the Swedish word *födelsedag* has an equivalent in Italian (*compleanno*), whereas the expression used by the speaker is just a literal translation of the Swedish word. However, the Italian word *compleanno* entered the language (according to the dictionary) only in 1865 (and the Journal was written in 1878). Thus, it is possible that Bove did not know the word.

Speaking of the calculation of distance:

Ci vogliono dieci *cipisca* (dormite) per giungere colà ...

You need ten *cipisca* (“sleeps” - the Italian *dormite* is a noun from the verb *dormire* “to sleep”)

Geographical names are often translated into Italian: la Corrente del Golfo (Gulf Stream), il Capo Svjatoj Nos (a Russian name) is translated as Sacro Capo (Holy Cape), which is a mistake, the Russian means “The Cape of the Holy Nose.

É una di quelle terre che I norvegiani chiamano Fogelberg (montagna di uccelli) per causa della quantità innumerevole degli uccelli.

(It is one of those lands that the Norwegians call Fogelberg (mountain of birds) because of its immense quantity of birds.)

2. Comparisons.

There are two ways of introducing comparisons:

- a construction with a typical marker of comparison (*una specie di...- a sort of*);
- more often, the author uses a long detailed comparison that could be considered a digression from the narration. In these cases he often introduces Italian realities or tries to find Italian equivalents to the world he sees.

Description of drums: Tali tamburi vengono suonati con bacchettine d’osso di balena e mandano suoni somiglianti a quelli che le nostre contadine napoletane producono su consimili tamburelli.

(These drums are played with sticks made from whalebone, and they produce sounds similar to those that our Neapolitan peasant women produce on similar drums.)

Speaking about a church: ... a visitare questa loro basilica; il vestibolo che forma come la sacrestia del santuario...
(... to visit this their basilica ; the hall which forms a kind of sacristy to the sanctuary...)

Il Capo Kekurnoi: Aveva l'apparenza di una collina di Genova colle sue muraglie.
(It looked like a hill of Genoa with its walls.)

... un cielo stellato di cui neanche noi figli del Mezzogiorno abbiamo idea.

(... a starry sky of which even we children of the South have no idea.)

Gli si fecero diverse domande intorno allo stadio del ghiaccio e del quando esso se ne sarebbe andato. Domande superflue poiché a mio parere è lo stesso che domandare a un contadino del centro del Piemonte notizie del mare vicino a Genova.

(We asked him several questions about the state of the ice and when it would disappear. The questions were superfluous, given that, in my opinion, it was like asking a peasant from Central Piedmont about the state of the sea off Genoa.)

To conclude, the speaker reaches his aim. He is conscious that in several situations words are inadequate or non-existent. He thus seeks recourse to different languages or to different possibilities of the Italian language. He also uses the language of images (small drawings that accompany some of the descriptions). With the help of these means he is never defeated by the surrounding world and succeeds in describing the different realities he encounters.

Only in one case does he have difficulties: speaking about the *Aurora Borealis* (northern lights) when he sees it for the first time:

Che magnifico spettacolo mi si presenta dinanzi: ed invero la mia penna rifugge dal profanare tanta bellezza! E con quali colori descrivere la purezza del cielo che si stende sopra di noi, la bianchezza e la varietà di tinte del manto che copre il mare.

(What a magnificent spectacle appears before me: and in truth, my pen recoils from profaning such beauty! And with which colours could I describe the purity of the sky that spreads out above us, the white and the variety of colours of the mantle which covers the sea.)

But later he manages to find words to describe also this “magnifico spettacolo” in a very neutral and detached way.