THE METALINGUISTIC DIMENSION OF LITERARY MULTILINGUALISM:
LINGUISTIC BIOGRAPHIES IN ITALIAN FICTION

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ABSTRACT
In this article, I argue that a thorough analysis of literary multilingualism and code-switching needs to take their metalinguistic dimension into account. Many scholars have noticed multilingual authors’ tendency to frame code-switches with metalinguistic comments, but they are sometimes treated marginally, or as just one of the many functions of code-switching. My article argues that metalanguage is, in fact, a fundamental characteristic of literary multilingualism, and key to its interpretation. This is particularly evident when we look at how the contemporary Italian writers Laura Pariani, Silvana Grasso and Elena Ferrante construct their characters through linguistic biographies, and how they describe dialect use, bilingualism, language loss and shift and other collective and individual sociolinguistic processes. I also show that metalanguage needs to be analysed together with other tools used by authors to flag multilingualism: namely intratextual translations and peritextual elements (such as glossaries or notes), but also visual cues, such as italics.

Keywords: metalanguage; literary multilingualism; code-switching; linguistic biography; dialect; Italian contemporary literature; Laura Pariani; Silvana Grasso; Elena Ferrante

Introduction
In a final note to the second edition of his historical novel Un filo di fumo [A Wisp of Smoke] in 1997, the Sicilian author Andrea Camilleri (1925–2019) introduces an annexed glossary containing Italian translations for 141 dialectal words and expressions which could potentially be unknown to the average Italian reader.¹ What had changed in the seventeen years since the first edition of the novel in 1980 was that Camilleri considered the glossary unnecessary, and its publication something of an inside joke.² By 1997, however, not only did Camilleri’s new editor Elvira Sellerio not view his unusually heavy dialect as a risky endeavour, but in the meantime Camilleri’s readers had also acquainted themselves with his idiosyncratic Italian-Sicilian code-switching and mixing. In fact, between 1994 and 1996 Sellerio...

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published the first three Commissario Montalbano detective stories, which would become best-sellers, be translated into dozens of languages and inspire a hugely popular TV series.\(^3\)

Luigi Matt – along with many other Italian scholars – has noted how Camilleri, more than any other contemporary writer, has contributed to making the use of dialects in fiction acceptable and indeed welcome to the general public.\(^4\) Camilleri’s idiolect should, however, be considered as a literary product, which does not aim for a faithful representation of a spoken Sicilian dialect, even though it refers to the latter’s phonological and syntactic features. He also appears willing deliberately to train his readers: in the first three Montalbano novels the use of glosses and other intratextual translation techniques are particularly frequent.\(^5\) Conversely, while intratextual translations diminish over the course of the series, the overall presence of dialect progressively increases in the author’s works.\(^6\) What is constant, however, is Camilleri’s general metalinguistic sensibility; that is, frequent and explicit remarks made through the narrator’s or characters’ voices about the way different language varieties are used in the text. By drawing readers’ attention to how characters are described and differentiated by the way they express themselves, metalanguage contributes to character construction: for example between the native Sicilian protagonist Montalbano and his non-Sicilian fiancée Livia, who is often openly hostile to Montalbano’s dialect or code-switching.\(^7\)

In this article I argue that, as the Camilleri case shows us, a thorough analysis of literary multilingualism and code-switching as a narratological tool needs to take the metalinguistic dimension of the text into account. Scholars of literary code-switching have noticed translingual authors’ tendency to frame code-switches with metalinguistic comments, but these observations often remain sparse, with metalanguage treated as just one of many functions of code-switching. I argue that metalanguage is, in fact, a fundamental characteristic of literary multilingualism and key to its interpretation. This is particularly evident when we look at how authors construct their characters through linguistic biographies, and how they describe dialect use, bilingualism, language loss and shift and other collective and individual sociolinguistic processes. I also point out that metalanguage as an umbrella term covers other tools used by authors to flag multilingualism and to address their readers: intratextual translations, peritextual elements such as glossaries or notes and the use of visual cues such as italics. As a result, metalanguage should be analysed together with these elements. The study of literary multilingualism is by nature interdisciplinary, as it draws upon code-switching and narratological studies, as well as translation studies.

In the following sections, I first give a brief outline of the context of my analysis, multilingualism and dialect use in Italian literature. I review relevant studies about both literary multilingualism and metalanguage, and examine how the metalinguistic dimension is viewed by scholars of literary code-switching. I then discuss examples of authorial metalanguage and linguistic biographies of multilingual literary characters in a selection of works by three Italian contemporary writers.
Multilingualism in contemporary Italian literature

The above mentioned Sicilian best-selling author Andrea Camilleri represents the new wave of literary dialect, which has resurfaced in Italian fiction since the 1990s (in spite of pessimistic prophecies). In my previous work, I have analysed texts by a number of contemporary authors who have chosen to use dialects or Romance minority languages alongside and mixed with Italian. My research shows that literary multilingualism reflects the whole range of the language contact continuum from sparse insertions to fully mixed-language texts, and that these forms are linked to different narratological functions. Single culture-specific realia terms typically fill lexical gaps, while longer quotations recall oral dialect culture (for example verses and proverbs). More profound degrees of code-switching and code-mixing contribute to the mimetic representation of characters’ voices.

The importance of metalanguage also clearly emerges from the analysis: explicit comments contribute to representing regional culture and dialect community through code-switching, and are often accompanied by intratextual translations, peritextual elements and visual cues. Metalanguage concerns both collective and individual sociolinguistic processes depicted by authors: for example, the linguistic hardship of North-Italian emigrants in Argentina in the late nineteenth century in Laura Pariani’s Quando Dio ballava il tango [When God Danced the Tango] (2002), or dialect loss and rediscovery of Sicilian identity in Silvana Grasso’s Disio [Desire] (2005). Despite being far less popular than Camilleri, these two authors have, since the 1990s, challenged the mainstream contemporary canon which seemed to have distanced itself from any linguistic experiments or regional connotations. Pariani and Grasso both combine linguistic otherness with gender alterity in their locally rooted stories about women on the margins, discussed in Sections 4 and 5.

Multilingualism is not new to Italian literature, which has its origins in a centuries-long diglossia situation between Florentine-based literary Italian and numerous Romance dialects, which the vast majority of Italians continued to speak – often exclusively – until as late as the mid-twentieth century. Amidst the belated linguistic unification process of Italian society, a dialectal vein continues to run through the Italian literary canon, as demonstrated by the Primo Tesoro della Lingua Letteraria del Novecento [First Treasure of Literary Language of the Twentieth Century], edited by Tullio De Mauro. This annotated digital corpus consists of a hundred novels which were nominated for the Strega Prize between 1947 and 2006, and allows for the extrapolation of all dialectally or regionally annotated lexemes in the texts. A quantitative analysis of the corpus shows that in twenty-two novels (22%) there are more than a hundred dialectal or regional occurrences. Importantly, De Mauro highlights the metalinguistic dimension of twentieth-century Italian fiction and the writers’ marked sensitivity not only to dialect, but also to explicit comments on characters’ localized accents or vernacular. These comments often precede or follow dialectal or regional elements in the text, but they are also used to represent underlying dialectality, when the actual dialect is absent or minimal on the page. This is

Apart from dialectal authors, multilingualism in Italian fiction is also associated with a growing number of translingual and transnational writers, who are extending the very notion of the national literary canon. Franca Sinopoli rightly suggests considering these authors within the ‘Italicity’ paradigm, a term proposed by Piero Bassetti which describes an active process of cultural acquisition, as opposed to ‘Italianity’, which is intended to refer to ‘belonging to a community only from an ethnic-linguistic or juridical-institutional point of view’. ‘Italic’ literature includes both literary production by Italian diasporas around the world, such as those Italian-Canadian authors analysed by Michela Baldo, and works written in Italy in Italian by authors of foreign origin. Some examples of this latter type of ‘Italic’ literature are connected to Italy’s colonial past, like the authors of Ethiopian or Somali descent who are studied by Cristina Lombardelli-Diop. For others, the relationship with the Italian language is highly elective, as it is for Jhumpa Lahiri, an Anglophone Bengali American writer who embraced the Italian language in her book *In altre parole* [*In Other Words*] (2015) and has written in Italian ever since. *In altre parole* is a linguistic autobiography, a learning diary and a declaration of love for Italian in which Lahiri discusses questions of multilingual identity, belonging and rootlessness through continuous metalinguistic reflection. This work inspired me to employ the concept of the linguistic biography of literary characters in order better to understand literary multilingualism and its metalinguistic dimension.

**Literary code-switching and metalanguage**

In answering the question about what literary code-switching can teach us about code-switching in general, Daniel Weston and Penelope Gardner-Chloros point out that from a contemporary sociolinguist’s point of view, each literary character can be considered a kind of sociolinguistic informant; the characters’ voices convey notions about linguistic norms and behaviour, as well as contributing to linguistic awareness and the ways in which language varieties are valued in the community they represent. Although Weston and Gardner-Chloros give examples of how these notions are rendered through meta-commentary of flagged loanwords or other code-switches in Eva Hoffman’s autobiographical novel, which has a strongly linguistic theme, they never mention *metalanguage* as a concept or dwell on its definition.

A short-hand definition for metalanguage as ‘language in the context of linguistic representations and evaluations’ has been proposed by Adam Jaworski, Nikolas Coupland and Dariusz Galasiński. They underline the interplay between actual language usage and the social evaluation of this usage, and rightly point out that metalanguage itself can be a strategic communication resource for speakers and
writers. However, the traditional perspective that considers metalanguage as one of the many functions of language does not sufficiently take into account the intrinsic metalinguistic nature of language, which is language precisely because it can refer to itself. To Dennis Preston, metalanguage includes three different aspects:

1. Talking about language in a broad sense, especially by lay language users, for example conscious and overt comments about language itself, such as commenting on odd pronunciation
2. Language use which refers to a specific element of language itself or to the content of an utterance, such as the phrase ‘in other words’ or other similar expressions
3. Socially motivated and shared beliefs about real or ideal language use which inform and influence the first metalanguage-type comments.

Metalanguage is used by linguists and non-linguists alike. Metalanguage used by authors in their literary works appears interposed between these two extremes, and therefore challenges this very dichotomy. Writers are not usually linguists, but they work with language – they work language – in order to produce highly conscious texts. Moreover, many multi- and translingual authors show a particularly pronounced metalinguistic sensitivity, which is conveyed through the narrator’s or characters’ voices. To be precise, authorial metalanguage seems to combine all three aspects described by Preston above and in this article I consider all of them as metalanguage. First, authors construct their characters through the way the latter express themselves and differentiate themselves through linguistic variation. Second, authors use metalinguistic comments to clarify and accentuate the meaning of foreign or dialectal words and expressions. Finally, they explain the social connotations of the variety of dialects that is used. These evaluations are shared socio-cultural constructions, and making them visible on the page opens a literary window onto the community and its ongoing sociolinguistic dynamics. A careful analysis of metalanguage can give us useful insights about the socio-cultural and narratological-textual motivations that lie behind the use of multiple languages in a literary text. At the same time, open questions remain about the extent to which it is possible to distinguish between the author and their literary characters as sociolinguistic informants. Whose attitudes and beliefs about language are we evaluating when we analyse literary code-switching and its metalinguistic dimension?

An example of a wider socio-cultural perspective on the metalinguistic dimension of literary multilingualism is Carla Jonsson’s research on contemporary Swedish novels with code-switches in the national minority languages Finnish/Meänkieli or Sami. Even though Jonsson only refers to the concept of metalanguage in passing, she includes among the global functions of code-switching macro-level questions about power relations and hybrid identities, which are in fact discussed by the authors through metalinguistic reflections. On a more local level, she also points out how code-switches can have explanatory functions in the text as they mediate
between the characters and the reader, often through reiterations, and are framed by explicit comments. A more textual approach is chosen by Katharina Müller in her analysis of twentieth-century Italo-Brazilian prose texts, in which she repeatedly emphasizes the role of metalinguistic comments and considers them as a distinct functional category of code-switching. Metalinguistic reflections in her corpus address the situation of language contrast between Portuguese-speaking natives and Italian immigrants, and sometimes highlight a ludic function or incomprehension between characters.

In her seminal research on English-Spanish Chicano fiction, Laura Callahan provides a more systematic analysis of the metalinguistic dimension of literary code-switching, paying particular attention to other tools used by authors to flag code-switching and mediate between the text and its readers. She applies a tripartite division of instances of intratextual translation in literal, non-literal and contextual translation, alongside footnotes or glossaries which some authors use to provide detailed translations (for examples, see Section 4). What emerges from her corpus is a high number of metalinguistic references, especially considering the linguistic competence and language choice of characters. Out of thirty texts, ten contain several or numerous metalinguistic remarks, and in another thirteen there are at least some metalinguistic references. In the seven texts with no explicit remarks, in most cases either all the Spanish is italicized or it is accompanied by literal or contextual translations (or both). Only two of Callahan’s texts lack metalanguage, intratextual translation, italics or glossaries altogether. Some works analysed by Callahan have a metalinguistic theme, but even those which have a seemingly lesser focus on the language in any case demonstrate a preoccupation with it. There are instances of representation of heritage language loss and the use of Spanish as an ethnic marker to signal belonging to the minority community. All the above cited scholars recognize to some extent the role of metalinguistic comments, which tend to be associated with code-switching and multilingualism in the texts examined. These comments also seem to pertain to the same overall metalinguistic dimension that includes intratextual translations, peritextual elements and visual cues. Let us now turn back to Italian and examine examples of the different ways in which literary multilingualism and different forms of metalanguage can interact.

Laura Pariani: Language shift and in-betweenness

Laura Pariani’s novel Quando Dio ballava il tango contains a consistent amount of Lombard dialect and (Argentinian) Spanish alongside and mixed with Italian. This multilingualism reflects the different grades of language contact and linguistic hybridity of sixteen women, whose stories stretch across the Atlantic Ocean from Northern Italy to South America over a period running from the late nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first. Some of the women emigrated and experienced the difficult process of settling in a new country, like Mafalda Cerutti, while others were born in Argentina but were of Italian descent, like Teresa Roveda. Some never left Italy but saw their husbands, fathers or sons emigrate and never return, like
Venturina Majna, while others closed the circle by migrating from Argentina to Italy, like Corazón Bellati. Linguistic biographies of Pariani’s protagonists form a collective ‘transnational memory’\(^{42}\) and represent various stages of language contact, shift and loss that have been documented in sociolinguistic studies. She describes these processes through detailed metalinguistic commentary, such as when the character Mafalda Cerutti reflects on the difficulty of sharing her nostalgia for Italy with anybody. Mafalda emigrates in 1947 at the age of fifteen, and is traumatized by her father’s decision to uproot the whole family despite her mother’s protests. Yet she is alone in her homesickness, as her younger siblings are too young to remember their birthplace and quickly settle in their new home country: ‘Comunque era un ragazzino, si era già abituato al nuovo ambiente, come del resto le bambine: parlavano spagnolo meglio del dialetto. Avrebbero dimenticato, perché non avevano fatto in tempo a affezionarsi all’Italia’ (\(\text{Q}, 168–69\)) [Anyway, he was just a young boy, he had already become used to the new environment, like the little girls: they spoke Spanish better than dialect. They would have forgotten, not having had the time to grow fond of Italy.] For Mafalda, a fundamental component of her attachment to Italy is her native dialect and the idea of gradually losing it increases her sense of rootlessness. The only person with whom she can recall it affectionately is her cousin Teresa Roveda, who as a third-generation immigrant has only passive knowledge of dialect as a heritage language, one that is both fascinating and distant: ‘Non era mai stanca di sentirla parlare in dialetto: le diceva che solo sua nonna Catterina sapeva usare quelle cadenze-li’ (\(\text{Q}, 169\)) [She never grew tired of hearing her speak in dialect: she told her that only her grandmother Catterina was able to use those intonations.] In the examples above, dialectal elements are absent, apart from a hyphen as a visual cue in the words ‘cadenze-li’, which contributes to the more general orality of the quotation. In the novel there are also examples of mixed-language utterances by characters in the midst of the language acquisition process, like Luis/Luigi, Teresa’s grandfather: ‘Luis invece rideva, dicendo nel suo castellano sgangherato: “A l’è proprio verdad”’ (\(\text{Q}, 88\)) [Instead, Luis laughed and said in his ramshackle castellano: ‘That’s really true’.] The quotation represents a hybrid trilingual expression, consisting of Lombard dialect (‘A l’è proprio verdad’), Italian (‘proprio’) and Spanish (‘verdad’), and is preceded by a metalinguistic comment about Luis’s imperfect language competence. Corazón Bellati, another of Teresa’s cousins, goes through a specular language acquisition process when she escapes Argentina’s military dictatorship and moves to Cascina Malpensata, her Italian grandmother Venturina’s native village. Regardless of the geographical and temporal distance, Corazón discovers that she is able to understand Venturina’s dialect (\(\text{Q}, 20\)), and in a lengthy metalinguistic reflection recognizes the past difficulties of her migrant relatives who built their lives in a new country, inhabiting hybrid identities between two languages, not belonging fully in either of them (\(\text{Q}, 219\)).

Even though Pariani does not generally use the most explicit peritextual or visual tools to accentuate and mediate dialectal or Spanish elements, such as translation in notes, italics or quotation marks,\(^{43}\) there are numerous examples of all three types of intratextual translation outlined by Callahan (see Section 3). Literal translations are
bare glosses or partial translations that follow, precede or appear near foreign words or expressions; nonliteral translations typically provide an explanatory paraphrase; and contextual translations take various, more implicit forms in revealing the meaning of a potentially obscure element in the text. These categories can co-exist, like in ‘Dice il proverbio che gli uomini sono come i scirè, le ciliegie: dove ne va uno, ga ’n van des’ (Q, 15, my emphasis) [The proverb says that men are like scirè, cherries: where goes one, ga ’n van des.] In the first part, ‘cherries’ in dialect is immediately followed by a gloss in Italian forming a literal translation, whereas in the second part the reader’s comprehension depends on the parallelism between the two elements (one man vs. two men), and the type of contextual translation chosen is made more accessible via the closely related Romance language varieties. On the other hand, non-literal paraphrasing often frames culture-specific lexical gaps: ‘Be’, di mangiare in Argentina ce n’è: sanguinacci, le torrejas che son pezzi di carne foderati di cervella e serviti in salsa brusca’ (Q, 22, my emphasis) [Well, there are things to eat in Argentina: blood sausages, torrejas that are pieces of meat covered with (animal) brain and served in hot sauce.]

Together with these covert forms of intratextual translation, in Pariani we also find overtly commented translations: for example, ‘“Golondrinas” si chiamano in castellano i lavoratori stagionali come il Togn. “Rondini”. Che nome poetico per una vita d’inferno, pensa la ragazza’ (Q, 23) [‘Golondrinas’, they call in castellano the seasonal workers like Togn. ‘Swallows’. Such a poetic name for a hell of a life, the girl thinks.] Here the Spanish word and the following literal gloss are accentuated by an explicit metalinguistic remark about the word’s origin and further highlighted by quotation marks. The comment also draws the reader’s attention to a thematically significant term that depicts the hardship of migrant workers and their double lives, precariously located in the ‘in-between’.

Such overt metalinguistic glosses are just one example of cushioning and contextualization, which Susanne Klinger defines in general as ‘strategies that serve to render the selectively reproduced words and phrases intelligible for readers who are unfamiliar with the selectively reproduced language’. However, in the framework I am advocating here, the act of translating is by nature a metalinguistic operation and therefore all types of intratextual translations should be analysed as part of the metalinguistic dimension of literary texts, regardless of their salience to readers. Intratextual translation appears as a particular example of self-translation by multilingual and translingual authors, which ‘allows them [...] to have their cake and eat it too’, as Dirk Delabastita and Rainier Grutman put it. Writers use different types of intratextual translation not only to guarantee readers’ comprehension, but also as a stylistic tool to signal linguistic alterity and highlight the contrast between multiple language varieties. This tool can also be used non-verbally through italics and other visual cues, as the examples in the following section demonstrate.
Silvana Grasso: Dialect loss and rediscovery of linguistic identity

While the linguistic biographies of Pariani’s migrant characters reflect collective, and often forced, sociolinguistic processes of language shift and loss, the Sicilian author Silvana Grasso builds a more intimate and elective metalinguistic narrative in her novel Disio. Her protagonist Memi Santelia decides to abandon her real name when emigrating to Milan from her native Sicily as a young adult. Officially Domenica (chosen in honour of her grandmother) but called Memi by her family, instead of the more common hypocoristic form Mimma, she becomes Ciane to erase any regional connotation of her Sicilian identity. Together with her new name, she adopts standard Italian and learns to fade out all dialectal traits in her pronunciation. In line with her professional identity as a doctor, the rejection of her Sicilian identity is associated with self-control and a lack of emotion. Even her closest colleagues are unaware of her origins and baffled by her later decision to apply for a job in a hospital in Sicily. Although Ciane/Memi has succeeded in hiding her true Sicilian nature, her return to the island exposes her to the call of the Sicilian dialect: what started as an expressive tool becomes the key thematic element of the story.

In her analysis of Grasso’s works, Marina Castiglione describes the dialect as having a dual function as both a stigma and a liberation for Ciane/Memi. Its rediscovery should be seen as a repatriation that redeems the repressed linguistic identity. In Disio, dialect becomes an implicit protagonist of the novel through a net of metalinguistic perceptions and its functions become poetic-connotative, compared to the narrative-connotative functions of Grasso’s earlier novels. In fact, Grasso’s metalinguistic attention also dwells on the keyword of the title ‘disio’ [desire] and on its untranslatability and greater expressiveness compared to its Italian counterpart, desiderio.

Grasso describes with phonological and morphological precision how Ciane at first approaches her native island and the aggression of its inhabitants, protected by her alleged foreign identity and her neat standard Italian:

Con la mia maschera da continentale e una pronuncia asciutta, senza erre rutilanti né geminazioni consonantiche, facilmente riconoscibili, del tipo colleggio, o senza quel passato remoto stiedi per stetti ch’era una specie di teratoma della coniugazione sicula, potevo avvicinare feroci leviatani affamati senza restarne divorata. (D, 90, original emphasis)

[With my continental mask and dry pronunciation, without conspicuous rolling r’s or easily recognizable consonant geminations, like in colleggio, without using stiedi instead of stetti in the past tense – a kind of teratoma of Sicilian conjugation – I could approach ferocious and hungry leviathans without being devoured.]

This example does not contain dialectal elements, but rather common features of regionally connotated Southern Italian. However, dialect gradually re-emerges in Ciane’s/Memi’s repertoire, and dialectal insertions become increasingly frequent in her internal monologue. This transformation does not go unnoticed by her former colleague Luzi:
Anche i toni sono medesimi a quelli di prima, professionali, senza scursuni né sbauttaménti, controllati. [...] Non sento dolore che muzzichi la carne, mentre di ragione soffro ancora. [...] A stanarmi solo l’inflessione siciliana, la calata dialettale, a cui m’abbandono lena e lasciva, di giorno in giorno, senza opporre resistenza, con malcelata complicità. ‘Che fai, Ciane? Ora parli pure da siciliana? [...]’ mi dice Luzi. (D, 85, my emphasis)

[Even the tone of voice is the same as before, professional, without shivers or hesitations, controlled. [...] I don’t feel pain that bites the flesh, but on a rational level I still suffer. [...] Only the Sicilian inflection, the dialectal cadence, to which I abandon myself, docile and lascivious, from day to day, without opposing resistance and with ill-concealed complicity, flushes me out. ‘What are you doing, Ciane? Do you now also speak like a Sicilian? [...]’ Luzi asks me.]

Here dialectal insertions – ‘scursuni’ [snakes, but also snaky shivers], ‘sbauttaménti’ [scares, hesitations], ‘muzzichi’ [bites] – are neither italicized nor glossed, but rather interestingly they are signed with redundant accents, defined by Castiglione as ‘metatextual dialect markers’, which Grasso uses in an irregular manner in her work.\footnote{50} In Anglo-American dialectological tradition a similar strategy, in which authors highlight dialect through graphic tools, has been called ‘eye-dialect’. The aim is to create ‘visual dialect’ and draw readers’ attention to a character’s speech and to its markedness, and to create contrast with the surrounding text.\footnote{51} Ciane’s/Memi’s linguistic biography unfolds as the native dialect gradually invades her: vowels open up and the characteristic consonant retroflexion (cacuminal pronunciation) ddu gains strength. Sicilian dialect, however, has contrasting connotations for her, as it represents a ‘naturale terreno di coltura’ [natural breeding ground] and ‘correnti d’emozione’ [currents of emotions], but its pronunciation also ‘infetta’ [infects] and the sounds ‘grattano’ [scratch] (D, 85–86). The protagonist’s conflictual search for identity is reflected in the dialect. After rejecting her Sicilianity for decades, it is as if she is reborn. The rebirth is sealed with the decision to adopt her given name Memi as a part of a deeper metamorphosis. A culminating moment of this transformation is marked by the dialectal lullaby about a bat quoted and sung by Memi:

\begin{align*}
\textit{vola vola taddarìta cu la còppula di sita} \\
\textit{vola vola taddarìta ca l’aspetta la to zita} ...
\end{align*}

Sotto il lampione, accenato dalla luce, furriava cieco e pazzo un pipistrello e vi sbattuliava contro, incapace di prendere il largo con la mantiglia alata. \textit{Vola vola taddarìta cu la còppula di sita}, era una senia siciliana, e Memi cominciò a cantarla piano, con una calata siciliana che non lasciava dubbi sulla sua nascita, al pipistrello dalla testa lucente come una cuffia di seta, a che volasse in cielo dal suo amore, dalla sua zita. (D, 204, original emphasis)

\begin{align*}
\textit{[vola vola taddarìta cu la còppula di sita]} \\
\textit{vola vola taddarìta ca l’aspetta la to zita} ...
\end{align*}

Under the streetlamp, blinded by the light, a bat raged blind and mad, slamming against it, unable to take off with its wings. \textit{Vola vola taddarìta cu la còppula di sita}, was a Sicilian
lullaby, and with a Sicilian intonation that left no doubts about her origin, Memi began to sing it softly to the bat with its head shining like a silk cap, so that it would fly into the sky to his loved one, to his zita.]

Here, dialectal verses are in italics, detached from the body of the text, and their meaning is rendered in the following narration with a contextual translation: ‘al pipistrello dalla testa lucente come ...’ [the bat with its head shining like ...]. Grasso does not use italics systematically to indicate all the dialectal elements, but typically employs them to signal longer quotations of verses and proverbs. Memi’s rebirth becomes visible and audible precisely through a link to the collective repertoire of dialectal oral culture (the so called oraliture). In Diño, acute metalinguistic attention is combined with the use of typographical elements and visual cues – in other words, non-verbal metalinguistic tools – which contribute to conveying meanings and connotations about alterity.

Elena Ferrante: Social mobility through languages

Metalanguage not only supports and accompanies literary multilingualism, as in Pariant’i’s and Grasso’s works, but it can also represent multilingualism in a mostly monolingual text, as Elena Ferrante’s case shows us. In Ferrante, the use of Neapolitan dialect and multilingualism is mostly implicit and rendered through metalinguistic comments. As Elisa Segnini points out in her analysis, ‘the fact that dialect is constantly mentioned, yet never quoted in the text, is one of the unifying stylistic features of Ferrante’s novels.’ Strictly speaking, in the hugely popular Neapolitan tetralogy, the actual dialectal elements are limited to a handful of expletives and insults, used almost exclusively in direct speech and not glossed or otherwise translated. For example, in the opening volume, L’amica geniale, the typically masculine insults ‘chillu strunz’ [that asshole], ‘chillu c’antaro’ [that piece of shit] or ‘t’ammaro’ [hick] are used a total of six times. In contrast, the very word ‘dialetto’ [dialect] appears thirty-five times in the novel, indicating constant and explicit remarks about the way the characters express themselves. Typically, this kind of comment is found in a reporting clause, which precedes a dialogical utterance in standard Italian and leaves the underlying dialect implicit: ‘Poi disse in dialetto: “Vuoi che dica la verità?” ’ (A, 234) [Then he said in dialect: ‘Do you want me to tell the truth?’] Numerous other words, such as ‘lingua’ [language], ‘italiano’ [Italian], ‘accento’ [accent], ‘cadenza’ [cadence], ‘parola’ [word] and ‘vocabolo’ [term], point to metalinguistic comments.

As Andrea Villarini notes, Ferrante’s Neapolitan novels mirror the sociolinguistic situation in Italy from the post-war years to the present, and especially the relationship between Italian and dialect. Neapolitan could even be regarded as one of the protagonists of the story, yet its continuous presence is merely evoked. The thematic relevance of dialect use is also pivotal in constructing the characters’ linguistic biographies. While united by a visceral friendship, Elena describes her friend Lila through the contrast between her ability to master scholarly Italian and the crudeness of her dialect use:
Lila invece non piaceva, [...] perché aveva la lingua affilata, inventava soprannomi umilianti e pur sfoggiando con la maestra vocaboli della lingua italiana che nessuno conosceva, con noi parlava solo un dialetto sferzante, pieno di male parole. (£, 57)

[Instead, Lila was not liked, [...] because she had a sharp tongue, she invented humiliating nicknames and even though with the teacher she flaunted words of Italian that no one knew, with us she only spoke a biting dialect, full of bad words.]

As a matter of fact, in L’amica geniale Lila’s extraordinary learning ability brings about a continuous competitiveness in the relationship between the two girls. First, Lila teaches herself to read, astonishing both her elementary school teacher and her illiterate mother; in the following years a shared passion for Italian and a dream about writing a book together spurs Elena to keep up with her friend, although she often feels inadequate. Second, Lila secretly learns Latin and Greek, with the help of dictionaries borrowed from the local school library, and even teaches Elena. Languages therefore play a central narratological role in the novel, with this role described through numerous metalinguistic comments.

Finally, the study of Italian and later of Latin and Greek (but also English) definitively marks the gap between the two girls. Lila’s family refuse to let her continue her studies, and she remains trapped in the vulgar, aggressive and violent world of dialect speakers, while Elena, despite continuous hardship and being less brilliant than her best friend, manages to get out of it by virtue of language acquisition. She distances herself from her family, from the ‘rione’ and its vernacular, and eventually becomes a novice writer. Elena becomes fully aware of this gap when, in the final chapters, she witnesses Lila’s marriage at the age of sixteen to the son of the neighborhood’s feared contrabandist. ‘[M]a io dovevo ignorarla, ricordarmi che ero la migliore in italiano, latino e greco, [...] ricordarmi che sarebbe comparso un articolo con la mia firma nella stessa rivista dove scriveva un ragazzo bello e bravissimo di terza liceo’ (£, 318–19). [I had to ignore her, remind myself that I was the best in Italian, Latin and Greek, [...] remind myself that an article with my signature would appear in the same magazine in which a handsome and very talented third-year high school boy wrote.] Representation of linguistic mastery in Ferrante indicates socio-economic differences between characters and in particular Elena’s social mobility. Latin, Greek and Italian belong to a written sphere, which marks a strong contrast with the purely oral dialectality. Elena’s efforts to learn to write and translate properly are described in detail. Interestingly, in the collection of letters and interviews La frantumaglia [Frantumaglia: A Writer’s Journey], Ferrante claims to be a native Neapolitan speaker and to have pursued classical studies, like Elena. She also reveals that translation was an important activity for her from very early on.

The question of the equivalence between the linguistic biography of the author and their literary characters is beyond the scope of this article, and we cannot be absolutely certain of Elena Ferrante’s identity. However, in 2016 Claudio Gatti, an Italian journalist for Il Sole 24 Ore, identified Anita Raja, a translator from German for Edizioni e/o and the wife of the Neapolitan writer Domenico Starnone, as the author of the bestsellers.
Segnini rightly points out that the fact that Ferrante uses standard Italian in her work to convey the local flavour and dialectality of the world she depicts increases its translatability and accessibility to international readerships.⁵⁸ In the same way, Katy Brundan found that Bram Stoker’s novel Dracula anticipates its own translatability by representing one of the most intense engagements with polyglossia, linguistic mastery and translation in late nineteenth-century fiction.⁵⁹ Just like Ferrante, Stoker renders the underlying multilingualism almost exclusively monolingually, with a very limited number of quotations or toponyms in German or Hungarian in the otherwise English text. And yet Dracula is also a pervasively metalinguistic novel, in which a ‘vortex of multilingualism’ and the ‘politics of polyglossia’ play fundamental roles in character construction, intimately affecting the relationships between the protagonist and the other characters.⁶⁰ Metalanguage indeed seems a common feature for a variety of multilingual texts, regardless of the quantity of foreign elements, or its explicit or implicit impact. However, further research will be needed to clarify the exact relationship between literary multilingualism and metalanguage, as L’amica geniale and Dracula show us. In these works, multilingualism remains mostly latent, and metalanguage is used not only to comment on it, but also to represent it.

Conclusion
This article has drawn attention to a particular feature of literary code-switching, namely the use of metalinguistic reflection and its role in building characters’ linguistic biographies. The tendency of multilingual and translingual authors to use metalinguistic comments on various linguistic phenomena on the page has been noted in numerous studies about literary code-switching, but often the role of meta-language is treated marginally, or its position insufficiently theorized. I argue that a more interdisciplinary approach is necessary to gain a better understanding of how literary multilingualism and metalanguage are intertwined. I have analysed works by three contemporary Italian authors – Laura Pariani, Silvana Grasso and Elena Ferrante – who all pay close attention to metalinguistic elements and either use multiple languages and dialects or represent the multilingualism of their characters. Pariani describes language shift and the in-betweenness of Italian migrant communities in Argentina and other collective sociolinguistic processes, while Grasso depicts a more individual dialect loss and the rediscovery of her Sicilian protagonist’s linguistic identity. On the other hand, Ferrante hardly uses any dialect on the page, but dialect and linguistic identity play a pivotal role in her work as a narratological tool, and she constantly comments on the real or ideal language use of the society.

A close reading of these works and the process of linking them to a variety of other examples of literary multilingualism and code-switching demonstrates that explicit examples of metalinguistic comments need to be analysed together with other tools used by authors to flag multilingualism and to address their readers – namely intratextual translations; peritextual elements, such as glossaries or notes; and visual cues, such as italics. Translating is an intrinsically metalinguistic operation that aims to clarify the meaning of potentially obscure elements to the reader, while visual cues
are used by authors to highlight the contrast between language varieties. Together these tools form the metalinguistic dimension of literary multilingualism, constituting a fundamental characteristic and a key to its interpretation, rather than one of its many functions. Analysing metalanguage can help us to strengthen an interdisciplinary approach between sociolinguistic and literary studies. However, further studies will be needed to clarify the exact relationship between literary multilingualism and metalanguage, especially in the case of texts in which metalanguage replaces multilingualism.

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NOTES

2 Ibid., p. 123.
9 Ala-Risku, ‘Contrasti e commistioni’.
12 Laura Pariani, Quando Dio ballava il tango (Milan: Rizzoli, 2002); Silvana Grasso, Dio (Milan: Rizzoli, 2005).
13 Gigliola Sulis, ‘Dare voce alle vite marginali: plurilinguismo di genere nella narrativa di Laura Pariani’, The Italianist, 33.3 (2013), 405–26 (pp. 405–06).
15 Primo Tesoro della lingua letteraria Italiana del Novecento, ed. Tullio De Mauro (UTET, 2007) [On DVD].
16 Tullio De Mauro, ‘Stats x Opere’ in Primo tesoro.
17 Tullio De Mauro, ‘Note’ in Primo tesoro, pp. 46–47.
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27 Ibid., pp. 3–4.


29 Dennis R. Preston, ‘Folk Metalanguage’, in Metalanguage, pp. 75–102 (pp. 75–88).


32 Ibid., pp. 218–19.


34 Ibid., pp. 255–56.


36 Ibid., pp. 103–12.

37 Ibid., pp. 26–35.

38 Ibid., pp. 27–29, 32, 34.

39 Ibid., pp. 28, 34.

40 Ibid., pp. 121–29.

41 Pariani, Quando Dio ballava il tango. In the citations, I refer to the title with ‘Q’. All translations of Italian quotations into English in this article are my own unless otherwise specified.


44 Callahan, pp. 104–06.


47 Grasso, Diòs. In the citations, I refer to the title with ‘D’.


49 Ibid., pp. 258–59.

50 Ibid., pp. 43, 53 n. 53, 60, 67.
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52 For discussion of oraliture, see Ala-Risku, ‘Contrasti e commistioni’, pp. 136–47.


54 Elena Ferrante, L’amica geniale. In the citations, I refer to the title with ‘A’.


57 For discussion on this identity reveal, see Segnini.


60 Ibid., pp. 3, 7.