The background is a soft, watercolor-style gradient of purple, pink, and blue. A large, blue and gold fountain pen is positioned horizontally across the middle of the image. The pen's nib is on the right, and its cap is on the left. Two small, stylized human figures in suits are standing on the pen. One figure is on the left, leaning forward as if walking or balancing on the cap. The other figure is on the right, standing upright on the nib. The pen is bridging a gap between two large, rounded shapes: a blue one on the left and a yellow one on the right.

# Author and Translator: A Success Story

*By Giles Watson*

**I made the first move,** as I am sure Italian writer and journalist Severgnini Beppe will tell you.

Back in the 1980s, when Severgnini was based in London, I looked forward to his articles in the Italian daily newspaper *il Giornale*, which were engagingly written and informed readers more by observation than by preconception. When he published his experiences as a book entitled *Ingesi*, I got hold of a copy. While I enjoyed the read, I soon found myself noting down various factual errors. There was nothing particularly serious in what I found, and certainly nothing that detracted from my enjoyment of the book, but facts are facts. I wrote Severgnini a letter suggesting one or two corrections, for which I was duly thanked.

Thereafter, nothing much happened on the Severgnini front for a while, but we had established an acquaintanceship. Eventually, an English-language version of *Ingesi* translated by somebody else appeared, but life carried on. At a certain point, however, Severgnini contacted me again to talk about a new project he was considering—a book on the English language. Severgnini’s goal was to present English in an entertaining way to Italians, particularly those who were struggling, or had struggled, to learn English and to encourage them to continue their efforts. I had some experience with teaching English to Italians and had acquired certain insights into the problems of Italian-speaking learners. The book would eventually be published as *L’inglese. Lezioni semiserie* in 1992. It was this project that cemented our rapport.

Apart from the initial letter I wrote to Severgnini, we found other commonalities that connected us. For

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## With Severgnini, boredom is not an issue: whatever the subject, the Italian will be well written.

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example, we are much the same age, we both come from middle-class, professional backgrounds, and, perhaps most important, we both have a classics-oriented secondary education, which gives us a shared language of language. A classical education enabled me to appreciate the usefulness to Italian readers of the rather formal, grammar-flagged framework of *L’inglese. Lezioni semiserie*. The downside of a classics-based approach, of course, is that if you apply the grammar categories of Latin or Greek to English, you risk overemphasizing the elements that are relevant to classical languages and ignoring features that are important to English—the ones that cause Italian-speaking learners the most difficulty. Because of my teaching experience, I was able to make suggestions for one or two of these Italian-specific areas, such as aural comprehension and phrasal particles. For instance, to help Severgnini explain the comprehension difficulties caused by the syllable timing of English to speakers of stress-timed Italian, I suggested the following example:

- SMALL CATS EAT LESS  
(4 syllables, 4 stresses)
- ARCHibald macALLister is  
TRAVelling to BenBECula  
(16 syllables, 4 stresses)

A native English speaker might enunciate both sentences comprehensibly in roughly the same length of time. However, the unstressed syllables in the second example often

become barely distinguishable. This is counter-intuitive to speakers of syllable-timed Italian, who stress each syllable more or less equally. As such, speakers of Italian might expect the second sentence to take about four times longer to produce than the first, and tend to panic when they cannot make out each syllable. When they realize that all of the information they need to understand the English correctly is in the stressed syllables, the panic recedes.

Another of my suggestions concerned phrasal verbs (verb + particle), where in Italian the particle has a verbal meaning, the grammatical verb being reduced to the role of an adverb. Here is an example from the book:

- Andreotti breezes through any crisis = *Andreotti attraversa le crisi disinvoltamente/con disinvoltura*

In the sentence above, the meaning of “breezes” corresponds to the adverb *disinvoltamente*, and “through” conveys the verbal notion in *attraversa*.

Severgnini, no slouch on the uptake, swiftly digested my feedback and incorporated it into the book. The result: *L’inglese. Lezioni semiserie* proved popular with Italian readers and Severgnini became a firm friend.

### Book Translations

The next stage was doing something for actual cash. In 1994-1995, Severgnini spent a year in the U.S. as a correspondent for *la Voce*, the short-lived daily edited by Indro ➡

Montanelli, who had fallen out with *il Giornale's* new owner, Silvio Berlusconi. Although *la Voce* itself folded in 1995, Severgnini turned his experiences from his stay in Georgetown into a book, published in Italy in 1995. He was keen to see an English-language version in the shops and asked me to get started on a translation while he persuaded Italian publisher Rizzoli that the book was a good idea. Severgnini's ever-effective persuasive powers worked their magic, the project went ahead, and the book, *An Italian in America* (2001), sold well. Subsequently, Doubleday/Broadway Books published an American edition under the title *Ciao America* in 2002.

The book was such a success that Doubleday/Broadway Books commissioned a companion volume set in Italy, published as *La Bella Figura* in the U.S. (2006) and the U.K. (Hodder & Stoughton, 2007), for which I revised the translation, and as *La testa degli italiani* in Italy (2008). An English-language version was also published in Italy by Rizzoli under the title *An Italian in Italy* (2007). This time, I was translating the book more or less as it was being written, a process that generated problems of its own.

When the publishers received the first draft, they decided that there were a few changes that needed to be made, and Severgnini set about working them into the text. Since the changes were structural in nature, albeit fairly limited in scope, the entire text was involved. Thankfully, I was using a computer-assisted translation tool for the translation, which meant that these changes could be identified and dealt with in very short order.

In 2010, Severgnini continued his cultural investigation of Italians with *La pancia degli italiani*, which I translated for New York-based Rizzoli

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**The main drawback with book translations is that they are long-term projects, which makes it difficult to plan for a steady flow of income.**

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International Publications, Inc. (the English edition was renamed *Mamma Mia!*).

### More Work

In between books, the Severgnini connection was generating other work. When he was writing monthly articles for *The New York Times* News Service/Syndicate in 2009-2011, I was translating them. Over the years, other journalists have given me work on the strength of the Severgnini connection, or because they liked my translations of his articles. When Severgnini went off on one of his epic rail journeys last summer, courtesy of Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*, the La7 television network, and the Goethe-Institut in Rome, I translated his daily musings into English.<sup>1</sup> However, the biggest, and most satisfying, project that has emerged from the connection is *Italian Life* ([www.corriere.it/english](http://www.corriere.it/english)). When Marco Pratellesi, the first editor of the *Corriere.it* website, decided it would be nice to have a page in English on the site, Severgnini's translator was the obvious person to contact. That was in September 2003, and since then *Italian Life* has provided me with a steady source of work that is varied, interesting, and often challenging, given the very tight turnaround times.

### Money

"But what about the money?" I hear you ask. Well, *An Italian in*

*America/Ciao America* may have sold by the barrel load, but the take-it-or-leave-it contract from the original publisher was less than generous. Expressed as a per-word rate, the fee was well south of Lit.100. There was even a gag clause, which I was told was customary in Italian publishing contracts. (No other client has insisted on one since.) As a direct result, I joined the London-based Society of Authors' Translators Association, the main incentive being the association's contract vetting service, which I have been using ever since.<sup>2</sup>

For the second book, thanks to Severgnini's support and the excellent sales of the first volume, Doubleday/Broadway Books agreed to a decent fee. Even taking into account the rewriting mentioned above, the per-word rate was somewhere around US\$ 0.20, the equivalent of a mid-range commercial translation, which seemed fair to me. The U.K. edition brought in another fee for revising (localizing) the original text.

By and large, I am not particularly enamored of royalty payments for translations. Speculating on sales is the business of the author and the publisher. If you make your living from translation, you ought to be able to negotiate a professional fee for the job. This will avoid any potential conflict of interest with the author over royalties, as the translator's royalties are deducted from the author's own

percentage. Publishers also prefer to treat translations as work for hire, since a fixed sum is easier to cost into a book proposal and more straightforward to administer. But even a fixed fee will come out of the author's advance, from the point of view of the publisher's budget, so some sort of conflict of interest is inevitable.

However for *Mamma Mia!*, the U.S. version of *La pancia degli italiani*, I thought I would see if it was possible to negotiate a royalty arrangement. I made two offers: one fixed-fee plus royalty, and one fixed-fee only. Rizzoli International Publications, Inc. went straight for the fixed fee, even though it was more than double the fixed fee in the royalty option. As it turned out, the book was a little shorter than had been foreseen and the final per-word rate was even higher than for *La Bella Figura*, but that is what comes of hitching your wagon to a star like Severgnini. I am under no illusion as to why people buy his books—he is the star—so, given that there is no “competition” for the job, I try to negotiate a translation fee that represents the opportunity cost of getting the work done in the time allotted.

### Downside of Book Translation

There is another point worth making about translating books for customers abroad. Publishers seem to be as averse to the risks associated with currency exchange as they are to paying translators royalties. Books take many months to translate, during which time currency fluctuations can have a serious effect on your fee. If possible, make sure the contract is denominated in your currency; if not, arrange for payment in installments. Otherwise, you may find yourself losing or gaining significant amounts of money—I have done both.

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## Publishers seem to be as averse to the risks associated with currency exchange as they are to paying translators royalties.

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Apart from exchange risk and publishers' not always generous expectations of how much translators should be paid, the main drawback with book translations is that they are long-term projects, which makes it difficult to plan for a steady flow of income. (For example, *La Bella Figura* was published in 2006, but the original translation agreement was drawn up in May 2002.) And if the subject matter is less than enthralling, even a well-paid book translation can quickly pall. This is why when I am offered a book to translate, I rough out a few pages to see how it goes and then decide whether I will take on the project.

### In Praise of Severgnini

With Severgnini, boredom is not an issue: whatever the subject, the Italian will be well written. It also helps that he is a journalist, in the sense that his books tend to be written in thematically linked, more or less self-contained newspaper article-length passages. His style is a constant stimulus because it is concise, allusive, and grammatically elliptical. For instance, Severgnini is careful to start and end his arguments with an engaging introduction and memorable conclusion. This example from *La pancia degli italiani/Mamma Mia!*, which rounds off a discussion of the independence of the press, is fairly typical. The first sentence is grammatically unexceptionable, the second, with its initial coordinating conjunction, is more journalistic in register,

and the third is distinctly colloquial:

- *L'idea che giornali e televisione debbano essere indipendenti è considerata, in Italia, un'ingenuità, un'illusione o un'ipocrisia. E noi non amiamo mostrarci ingenui o illusi. Ipocriti, si può discuterne.*
- “In Italy, the idea that newspapers and television should be independent is looked on as naive, self-deluding, or hypocritical. We don't like to seem naive or deluded. Hypocritical, we can talk about.”

As this example illustrates, Severgnini puts a lot of effort into honing each word, phrase, and paragraph. I try to make sure the English translations receive the same attention.

A final thought. Like many Italians, Severgnini thinks he speaks and writes excellent English. Unlike many Italians, he is right. So why does he need a translator? I am afraid you will have to ask him. For my part, I try to work out what constitutes value for the project in hand and deliver that.

### Notes

1. Severgnini's posts are available at <http://blog.goethe.de/Atlantico-Pacifico/pages/ilviaggio.html>.
2. Society of Authors' Translators Association, [www.societyofauthors.org/translators-association](http://www.societyofauthors.org/translators-association).

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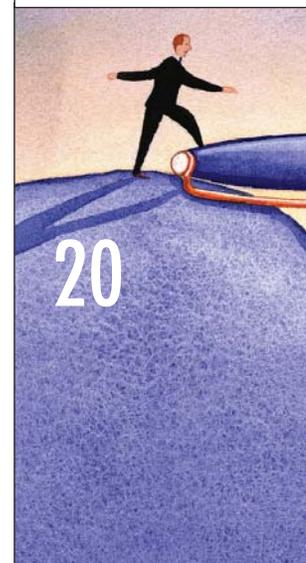
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*The Voice of Interpreters and Translators*



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Severgnini, initially as an advisor on Severgnini's *L'inglese lezioni semiserie* and subsequently as the translator of *An Italian in America* and *Mamma Mia! Berlusconi's Italy Explained to Posterity and Friends Abroad*. He has a degree in modern and medieval languages from the University of Cambridge. Contact: [gileswatson@gmail.com](mailto:gileswatson@gmail.com).



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