

The Unsustainable Anglicisation of Sustainability Discourse in Italian Green Companies

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Abstract

Following the economic crisis triggered in 2008, the presence of “green discourse” in politics and business has been growing steadily. As far as Italy is concerned, the growing presence of English to promote sustainable and environment-friendly activities is evident when observing well-known companies such as Lifestage, Slow Food or Eataly, which have chosen to use English even for their name. The aim of this paper is to explore the way English is employed to promote environment-friendly Italian activities, focusing on the use of Anglicisms on their Italian websites, and what the effects could be of this Anglicisation process.

Keywords: anglicisms in Italian, sustainability discourse, advertising, greenwashing.

1. Introduction

The Anglicisation of Italian in business-related communication is a well-known and growing phenomenon (Pinnavaia 2005; Furiassi 2010). Most investigations concerning such Anglicisms have been carried out from orthographic, phonological, morphological and semantic perspectives (Görlach 2002; Pulcini 2004; 2008; Rando 1987) while recent studies have also focused on discourse-related aspects (Fusari 2012; Leonardi 2010). The aim of this paper is to observe Anglicisation trends in Italian business companies trying to “green” their brand image. As Stubbs (2001: 176) points out, there is a clear connection between loan words and culture, as loan words are usually employed to denote areas of meaning which speakers of the borrowing language (stereo)typically relate to the culture of the source language. Stubbs (2001: 177) adds that English loans in other languages may not necessarily convey connotations of Britishness or Americanness, but rather modernity and internationalness. This

is certainly the case for many Anglicisms in Italian employed in business discourse.

Focusing on English loans in Italian, Pinnavaia (2005) underlines the positive connotative meaning they convey. While the use of neologisms as euphemisms has been analysed by various scholars (e.g. Chilton 1988; Fowler 1991; Fairclough 2006), only a limited number of works have focused on the way in which Anglicisms may be employed as a strategy to cover up, rather than clarify, some controversial aspects of a business. Fusari (2012), for example, demonstrates this aspect in her analysis of the discourse of Alitalia's bailout.

According to Dieter (2004: 140), there is a strong link connecting Nature and language:

Increasingly uninhibited neo- or turbo-capitalism is environmentally destructive and its coupling to the one, indeed "single" turbo-language, is culturally destructive. We speak here not of English, but of BSE – Bad Simple English – the language of global marketing.

Several environmentalist movements question the capitalist system and argue that the current levels of consumption are not sustainable, while only a strategy of de-growth can actually save humanity from reaching the point of no return (see Latouche 2009). De-growth promotes traditions, local production and less consumption, which appear in contrast with modernity, globalisation and consumerism; concepts that tend to be associated with the English language and the United States. Hence it might appear surprising that Italian companies try to attract environment-friendly customers by employing a language with which those customers could associate dangerous levels of consumerism and pollution. This paper surveys the presence and prominence of Anglicisms in a selection of Italian company websites and evaluates their impact on communication and the construction of company identity.

2. Consumerism and de-growth

The forces of consumerism and de-growth can be conceived as the two extremes of a continuum with different companies situating themselves along the line. The concept of sustainability has been

appropriated by both trends with different implications, contributing to the obfuscation of its actual meaning. What has often happened, as Barkemeyer *et al.* (2011: 15) put it, is that “the limitations imposed by sustainable development have been downplayed in favour of a managerialist emphasis that is in line with the win-win paradigm in corporate sustainability.” It is also necessary to bear in mind that in the current economic system a company always needs to promote consumption, hence any company favouring de-growth is doomed either to some degree of contradiction or to business failure (see Alexander 2009; Grant 2007). Hence in this paper “sustainability” is not employed to refer to practices that are actually environment-friendly, but to practices that companies promote as such.

The hypothesis that the present work aims to investigate is that the prominence of Anglicisms – found on the Italian websites of the companies under scrutiny – is higher for companies that tend towards the consumerist approach. This trend also appears to characterise businesses that are less justifiable from the environmental point of view, as their products or services are superfluous and/or highly polluting. The companies selected for the analysis are Lifegate, Slow Food, Eataly, San Benedetto, Ethic, Ecobimbi, and Fiat. They belong to very different business sectors and are different in size; what they have in common is that sustainability and respect for the environment have been a prominent element in their recent promotional campaigns.

The investigation was carried out through a qualitative approach as it is in the prominence, rather than in the number, of the Anglicisms found that the hypothesis is verifiable. The websites were downloaded and Anglicisms were searched manually; their position on the website was taken into account in terms of visibility and in terms of co-presence with other Anglicisms.

2.1. Lifegate

This Italian company represents a prominent example of environmentalism based on a capitalistic logic: Lifegate operates in the business of carbon trade, provides green marketing consultancy and also sells energy. The subheader of their logo is People Planet Profit, foregrounding the main role profit plays. Here are some examples of Anglicisms found on their website (emphasis added):

- (1) La scelta di energia rinnovabile denota una propensione all'innovazione e alla sostenibilità, porta [...] una valorizzazione nel lungo periodo con positive ricadute su *brand equity* e *performance*.
- (2) Zero Impact® Web nasce per [...] far diventare il tuo sito, blog, portale uno strumento per combattere il *global warming*.
- (3) Il percorso di sostenibilità inizia con la realizzazione di un *assessment* sostenibile esteso all'intera attività dell'Azienda, il cui *output* è una valutazione della situazione "*as is*" da cui partire.
- (4) Alla luce del della [sic] recente delibera al CIPE torna d'attualità il possibile ricorso a strumenti di fiscalità (*green taxes*) al fine di preservare e garantire l'equilibrio ambientale.

Most examples belong to the typical business jargon found in Italian promotional texts. They are mainly found on pages that describe the company's mission, projects and working methods; that is, the pages that address investors and customers, rather than environmentalist visitors. Most of the Anglicisms detected could easily be substituted with their Italian equivalents, hence the use of English can only be explained in terms of 'Mystique factor' (Bhatia and Ritchie, 2004: 536f); that is, the socio-psychological effects Anglicisms are able to convey. Pulcini (2008: 197) employs the label "luxury loans" to describe those cases in which "the Anglicism is introduced in competition with an already existing word [and it is] marked by a connotation of style and modernity" (see also Furiassi, Pulcini, Rodríguez González 2012: 10).

Example (4) is interesting in the way it introduces an Anglicism as an explanation for an Italian phrase within an Italian text. This strategy, which was observed on other websites as well, appears to signal controversial issues. The insertion of Anglicisms has an obfuscating function. When the context in which the examples are found is examined, it becomes clear that the text producers are providing controversial information. In this case, the aim of exploiting green taxes for a company is mainly to save money and not to protect the environment, as Lifegate argues.

2.2. Slow food and Eataly

Among the controversial aspects of the Slow Food movement is the choice of an English brand name. As fast food restaurants are stereotypically associated with the American lifestyle, the choice of

contrasting “fast” with “slow” serves the purpose of highlighting the difference while taking advantage of McDonald’s marketing through an oppositional strategy. On the other hand, “going with the market” by choosing an English brand name might appear at odds with the goals of the movement.

The contrast between fast and slow was at the centre of an advertising battle in October 2011: a McDonald’s advertisement promoting the new McItaly sandwich ran “Slow e Fast non sono mai andati così d’accordo” (“Slow and Fast have never got along so well”¹), to which Slow Food responded with a mocking advertisement stating “Slow e Fast non sono mai andati ~~così~~ d’accordo” (“Slow and Fast have never got along ~~so well~~”). From the linguistic point of view, the striking aspect is that an Italian campaign was run through the use of English adjectives that have come to represent a whole lifestyle philosophy – and was presumably expected to be widely understood (Slow Food 2011).

Associated with the Slow Food movement is Eataly, the supermarket/restaurant chain selling high quality food products and promoting Slow Food (Venturini 2009). The brand name, a commercial respelling, presents a double pun: the obvious one is the blending of the verb ‘eat’ in the name of the company, thus reinforcing the stereotype of Italy as the country of food. The more subtle part is phonetic: the pronunciation of the brand name sounds like “Italy” pronounced with an Italian accent. This part is lost on most Italian speakers and could be interpreted as slightly derogatory.

When analysing the two websites very few Anglicisms were detected. Their absence could be explained in two ways: in Italy food is a sector that has mostly remained untouched by Anglicisation, probably because Italian customers do not (stereo) typically associate Anglo-American countries with good food. But another explanation is that they do not want to project a business-oriented image of themselves: they aim to background their business-marketing strategies and foreground their ethical and social commitment, as opposed to profit-making (see Venturini 2009).

¹ All the translations are mine.

2.3. San Benedetto

As Italy is one of the world leaders in terms of production and consumption of bottled water (Block 2011) and Italian environmentalists try to oppose this trend, companies operating in this sector have been working on their brand image in order to “green” it. San Benedetto was selected because the company has been prosecuted for greenwashing. On San Benedetto’s website, Anglicisms tend to be concentrated in passages in which the packaging-related issue is being discussed, as the production and waste of plastic bottles is a main environmental concern (emphasis added).

(5) Tutto questo sforzo tecnologico è approdato, infine, nella filosofia dell’*energy saving* come elemento strategico, [...]

(6) Innanzitutto sono state effettuate le analisi dei consumi di CO₂ dell’intero ciclo di vita delle acque minerali, calcolando l’impronta di carbonio (*carbon footprint*) di ogni aspetto della produzione e della distribuzione del prodotto [...]. La metodologia di calcolo della *carbon footprint* si è basata sugli standard internazionalmente riconosciuti.

(7) Dopo lo sviluppo negli anni ’70 dell’innovazione di processo basata sul “*one way packaging*” (vuoto a perdere) in vetro, il Gruppo veneto nell’80 lancia, prima azienda italiana nel settore, i contenitori in PET da 1,5L, cui seguiranno i formati da mezzo litro, da 1L e da 2L.

(8) Da un lato il nuovo *cluster* da 6 bottiglie con una grafica fresca, moderna ed impattante, dall’altro la nuova bottiglietta “*nude look*” che, grazie alla *shape* sinuosa e alla preziosa incisione del logo Ben’s San Benedetto sul vetro, rispecchia ancor meglio le caratteristiche di un prodotto di altissima qualità, sempre *trendy* e ad un prezzo assolutamente interessante.

Examples (6) and (7) again show cases in which both Italian and English phrases are employed. The phrase *carbon footprint* aims to mitigate the negative emotional response of readers towards the pollution created by the company. Example (7) – opposing glass to PET bottles – is even more controversial, as the sentence structure induces the reader to think that plastic bottles are not wasted like glass ones, which is false. Moreover it is worth highlighting the use of English in example (8): the description hints at a somehow sexy look and two Anglicisms are employed, *nude look* and *shape*, maybe to tone down the sexual implication that in Italian could result too explicit.

Interestingly, the prominence of Anglicisms on the San Benedetto website is evident from their main menus, where several examples can be found (e.g., *Mission, I nostri Brand, Company profile, Kids, Area Press, Newsletter, San Benedetto Educational, Drinks Corner, Fun&Download, Sport 4 Fun, Sport 4 You*). These do not appear to represent examples of obfuscation, but rather to convey the positive feeling Pinnavaia (2005) refers to.

2.4. Ethic

On the website of the fashion company Ethic, English is prominent on the homepage (and in the brand name): starting from the top, the page shows the company's logo, the picture of a model and, underneath, a line with words linked to other pages (sub-menus are reported in brackets): *home, history (intro, mission, profile), campaign, monobrand (intro, schedule, punti vendita, gallery), stores (monobrand, multibrand, distributors), lookbook, contacts, and login*. When one clicks on one of the linked words, an animated window opens to show texts which are exclusively in Italian and no English version of the website exists.

The website seems to be targeted mainly at potential franchisees, and the passage in which Anglicisms are most prominent is the paragraph detailing the rules for franchisees (emphasis added):

(9) A differenza della maggior parte dei *franchisors*, 3NDLAB non richiede *fee* d'ingresso. L'approccio ai *budget* previsionali è sistematico e metodologico e si avvale di formule di *marketing* strategico e operativo. [...] La gestione del *SELL-IN SELL-OUT* (entrata e uscita del prodotto) è affidata all'azienda madre [...]

We notice again the strategy of explaining an English phrase in Italian when dealing with controversial issues: the fact that the main company controls the *sell-in/sell-out* flux is not clear in terms of shop management and is certainly debatable in terms of sustainable consumption.

2.5. Ecobimbi

Ecobimbi is a small Italian company that produces and distributes re-usable diapers and baby-related products. Like food, diapers are

not superfluous and their production, if environmentally friendly, is not controversial. Very few Anglicisms are found on the website, but the trademark of their main product is “*Mutandina EcoDry*” and customers can choose from different typologies of “kits”: *Starter Kit*, *Kit Premium*, and *Kit Deluxe*.

2.6. Fiat

The last company surveyed sells a product most commonly accused of pollution: cars. The website section which proved interesting for this analysis is the “Air Technologies” section. A list of the (pseudo) Anglicisms found among the main page headings provides a picture of the Anglicisation trend: *Start&Stop*, *MultiJet*, *Blue&Me*, *Heritage*, *i-Efficiency*, *Dualogic*, *Traction Plus*, *Eco:Drive*, *Easy Power GPL*, *Multiair*, and *TwinAir*. When clicking on the latter, we read:

(10) [...] *TwinAir* è il massimo del *downsizing*: non si riduce solo la cilindrata, ma addirittura il numero dei cilindri. [...] Come sarebbe il mondo con *TwinAir*? *Think Twin*!

(11) L'abbinamento di un turbocompressore a una significativa riduzione della cilindrata del motore (*downsizing*) permette una diminuzione delle emissioni di CO₂ e dei consumi, mantenendo invariata la potenza e migliorando il divertimento.

In example (11) we find another case of English and Italian phrases: the controversial aspect of this passage is the association of driving with power/strength (*potenza*) and fun (*divertimento*): the Anglicism obfuscates the fact that the piston displacement (*cilindrata*) is lower and reinforces the idea that the car's performance when driving fast for fun will not be affected.

3. General observations

Observing the way in which Anglicisms are employed on the Italian websites analysed, it appears reasonable to consider most of them as examples of BSE (Dieter 2004). As explained above, the higher prominence of BSE Anglicisms – as far as the websites analysed are concerned – corresponds to a stronger positive attitude towards capitalism. If we were to position the companies analysed on a straight line to show their tendency towards capitalism versus de-

growth, on the basis of the prominence of a business-oriented discourse on their respective websites, a possible outline would be:

Capitalism oriented Lifegate < Ethic < San Benedetto < Fiat > Eataly > Ecobimbi > Slow Food **De-growth oriented**

As explained above, since the distinctions cannot be drawn clearly, even a brief outline like the one above can help us achieve a clearer understanding of the observable trends.

From the linguistic point of view, it is worth pointing out that on all the four websites positioned on the left (Lifegate, Ethic, San Benedetto, and Fiat) a peculiar choice was observed: the insertion of an English phrase followed by its Italian equivalent in brackets or viceversa. If an Italian equivalent exists, what is the point of inserting the phrase in English? This strategy was already observed in the analysis of the ERG website (Caimotto and Molino 2011) and appears to be found where most controversial issues are being discussed. Fusari (2012: 331f) observed a similar problem in her work, analysing a case of overtranslation.

4. Conclusions

The analysis identifies three aspects which deserve further investigation: the presence of Anglicisms in Italian texts written by companies that foreground their sustainability can belong to a very general trend to use English as a sign of modernity. This is the most widespread trend and the analysis showed it was present in all the websites observed, especially in brand names and headlines. In these cases the loss of propositional meaning is compensated for by the positive connotative meaning (Pinnavaia 2005).

The second aspect observed concerns the higher prominence of Anglicisms in some specific sections of the website. It has been noted that in most cases higher prominence was detectable in sections that might prove controversial as they can be perceived as contradictory when compared to the values promoted throughout the rest of the website. Such Anglicisms tend to be employed to conform to a stereotypically Anglicised business discourse. They do not therefore convey connotations of Britishness or Americanness

but rather connotations of a capitalistic approach to business, which Dieter (2004) considers “environmentally destructive”.

As explained, favouring consumption can prove problematic in a text promoting sustainability or de-growth. In fact the third trend highlighted appears to confirm this hypothesis: English and equivalent Italian phrases are inserted in the text together. This apparent redundancy actually signals problematic aspects, as the Anglicisms mitigate the negative connotations an Italian reader is likely to associate with the Italian phrases and also convey authoritativeness (see Fusari 2012).

Although it remains to be verified, it may be reasonably hypothesised that a higher prominence of Anglicisms is found on the websites of companies that tend towards a more capitalistic approach. Therefore the detection of prominence of Anglicisms not only can be considered an alert for potential greenwashing (see Caimotto and Molino 2011) but also a signal showing the position of the company in terms of capitalism versus de-growth. Sustainability is a concept that different schools of thought can employ to mean very different things, consequently customers and citizens should go beyond the surface in order to understand which values are actually being promoted. Awareness of green discourse strategies can empower them, and the ability to recognise the obfuscating functions of BSE Anglicisms can prove a simple but useful tool to protect themselves. Companies as well are likely to gain from higher awareness of the implications of Anglicisation in their “green” business discourse.

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