

Affidarsi

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A few years ago, we stumbled on the untranslatability in English of the Italian reflexive verb “*affidarsi*”. We were reasoning on the data one of us gathered during her fieldwork in a northern Italian industrial district specialized in the production of designer furniture (Parolin 2010).

In one of the described cases, a product manager working for a leading Italian furniture design company based in the district, asked a craftsman of the district to engineer the seat of a new chair. This is common practice in Italian industrial districts, where bigger companies outsource to smaller ones the production of high-quality components, often through informal agreements based on “trust”. Such trust is based, in turn, on reciprocal knowledge and familiarity. In the specific observed case, the product manager provided the craftsman with a mockup of the seat that came out of the designer’s studio and a very vague and loose brief: “make it soft and sustaining [...] *come meglio credi*” (Parolin and Mattozzi 2013), i.e. “as you deem best” – literally, “as you believe best”.

However, we could not adequately describe what we observed by referring to trust, as it is usually described in the literature about industrial districts. Especially through the latter sentence – “*come meglio credi*” – the product manager was not just trusting (“*avere fiducia in*” or “*si fidava di*”, in Italian) the craftsman and/or his skills. He was doing something more, which, for us, only the Italian word *affidarsi* could render: the product manager “*si affidava*” to the craftsman. This meant that the product manager was giving up control on the craftsman and was disposing himself to accept any result of the craftsman work. By doing that, he was opening a space of free experimentation for the craftsman, through which the latter has been able to produce an innovation by reinterpreting the brief and, consequently, by completely reconfiguring the initial designer’s mockup. As for the craftsman, he, on the one hand, “*si affidava*” to the materials he was able to assemble and to the feelings they elicited on his body (Parolin and Mattozzi 2013). On the other, he, given the informality of the request, “*si affidava*”, in turn, to the product manager and his capacity to appreciate the result of his work and to advocate for it to the company.

As we saw it, “*affidarsi*” produced empowerment through the relinquishment of agency. We thought that such dynamics resonated well with what Antoine Hennion (2007; Gomart and Hennion 1999) had shown about amateurs. We then considered “*affidarsi*” an interesting and positive set of dynamics that could, if proven diffused and frequent, account for the innovations that characterize “Made in Italy”.

We tried to translate “*affidarsi*” in English, but we did not find any adequate translation. Nor “to trust” or “to trust in”, nor “to count on”,

nor “to rely on”, nor “to have confidence in”. Though all relevant, they do not convey the relinquishment of agency we, as Italian native speakers, sense in “*affidarsi*”.

And yet, these are the ways in which “*affidarsi*” is often translated. Let us consider two recent examples. In a Netflix documentary about “San Patrignano”, a controversial Italian rehab community for drug addicts, you can hear at least twice the word “*affidarsi*”. The first time, through archive images, we see an important Italian journalist, Enzo Biagi, interviewing, on prime time on the main Italian television channel, the founder and leader of the community Vincenzo Muccioli. Biagi asks “what would be the consequences of a possible conviction for the people who *si affidano* to you?” (Spender 2020, S1E3, 0’10”). The second time, we see the daughter of one of the patients of the community who states: “my father understood that Muccioli wasn’t the same person to whom *si era affidato* in the past” (Spender 2020, S1E5, 1’20”). Both times “*affidarsi*” is translated with “to rely on”: “who rely on you” and “person that he relied on”.

In a recent translation of an ethnography of “*raccomandazione*” (Zinn 2019) – an untranslatable phenomenon too, strictly related to “*affidarsi*” – you can read, in the Italian original version, the word “*affidarsi*” twice: “many women who *si sono affidate* to Santa Anna or Santa Rita to protect their pregnancy and childbirth honor a newborn girl with these names”; “*l’affidarsi* to others outside th[e] context [of family and friends] is judged critically as submission, mediocrity, and a threat to the integrity of the individual” (Zinn 2019, 104 and 181). The first is translated with “who counted on”, the second with “reliance”.

We are not saying that these translations are wrong, given that they are somewhat fine for what the English language allows. Nevertheless, these translations not only miss the issue of the relinquishment of agency, but also the specific form of “*affidarsi*”. Indeed, all the mentioned English verbs are intransitive and in their active voice. The latter means that they clearly differentiate the acting agent – the one who/which trusts, relies on, counts on, etc. – from the recipient of such action. In Italian, we have verbs related to the semantic field of trust that are intransitive and in the active voice, thus actually homologous to their English counterparts: “*contare su*” (count on), “*avere fiducia di/in*” (to trust), “*confidare in*” (to rely on – to trust in), “*fare affidamento su*” (to rely on). However, the most common verb used to translate “to trust” is “*fidarsi di*”. Apparently a reflexive verb, like “*affidarsi*”, “*fidarsi*” is actually an intransitive pronominal verb. Through such construction, Italian can express the middle voice of a verb, i.e. a verb, which subject is neither the agent (as in the active voice) nor the patient (as in the passive voice) of an action, but an agent affected by the process. We could probably translate it to “taking on oneself the act of trusting”.

“*Affidarsi*” is morphologically a reflexive verb. As such, it is a verb in the active voice, which anyhow addresses as subject and as object the same agent – something, which differentiates it from “to count” or “to rely on”. Though apparently in the active voice, we deem that, like many reflexive verbs in Italian, also “*affidarsi*”, like “*fidarsi*”, to which is strictly connected etymologically, morphologically, semantically and phonetically, is in the middle voice, completely engaging the agent in the process of relinquishing his/her/its agency.

The mentioned documentary and book did not actually provide us only with examples of English attempted translations of “*affidarsi*”, but also with situations of use of the verb related to patriarchalism and religion, different from the one we introduced.

Indeed, the documentary, tellingly called *SanPa: Sins of the Savior* (Spender 2020) – where the “Savior” is Muccioli, the founder and leader of the community –, is a story of one of the various metamorphoses of the never-vanished Italian patriarchy. Muccioli, indeed, presents himself and is seen by many of the patients and by his supporters as a good father who, when necessary, can beat his children up out of love, because he knows what they need in order to be saved.

Dorothy Zinn’s (2019) ethnography of “*raccomandazione*” provides us with an insightful description of everyday “*affidarsi*” in a southern Italy town. Indeed, with “*raccomandazione*”, Zinn (2019, 53) intends a form of sought mediation asked “to another person for intervention with [third] parties” in order to obtain or to accomplish something. Through such emic notion, she aims at reconfiguring the issue of clientelism and patronage – a classic of Mediterraneanist anthropology – in terms of an intricate, stratified and faceted favor system based on kinship, friendship and other kinds of personal relations. In the town where Zinn’s fieldwork took place, more or less everyone, to differing degrees “*si affida*” to others through various forms of “*raccomandazione*”, often supported by gifts or offerings (to Saints) or money. In this last case “*raccomandazione*” can become a way of “bribing”.

Such circulation of favors and counter-favors, gifts and counter-gifts, through which people “*si affidano*” to others in order to

obtain or accomplish something, create various bonds, which are not symmetric or evenly distributed, given that they usually follow and strengthen hierarchies and forms of domination. Therefore, such “*affidarsi*”, as already emerged in the previous quotation from Zinn’s book, are not always seen in a positive way, as one of Zinn’s (2019, 181) informants told her: “[‘raccomandazione’ entails] los[ing] one’s freedom, bend[ing] oneself to the will of others”.

Even readers who know very little about Italy, will have very likely understood that such circulation of “*raccomandazioni*” and “*affidarsi*” provides the humus on which Mafia can thrive.

More than the kind of relations initially described, *affidarsi* seems then to belong to and to dispose asymmetrical (patriarchal) relations between patrons and clients, fathers and children, deities and devotees. As underlined by Zinn, within the Italian collective these relations are homologous and quite rigid, with clients-children-devotees, who “*si affidano*” to patrons-fathers-deities, by eventually relinquishing agency in a total way, given that the latter have in their hands the life of the former.

Such kind of “*affidarsi*” is present in everyday parlance, as shown by relevant politicians, like Silvio Berlusconi or Pier Ferdinando Casini who, when fallen sick, did not hesitate to say “*mi affido*” to God (*la Repubblica* 2016; Falci 2021), also through other expressions like “*mettersi/essere nelle mani di*” (to put oneself/be in the hands of) or “*rimettersi*” (to defer oneself to).

Affidarsi is, nevertheless, formalized and clearly explicated by the Catholic Church in its liturgical guidelines. There we find a definition of “*affidamento*”, and specifically “*affidamento*” to the Blessed Virgin Mary,

“Affidamento” (*“commendatio”*, *“dedicatio”*, in Latin) translated in English as “entrustment”, is considered a more correct word than “consecration”, in order to refer to situations when, for instance, children or a nation is placed “under the protection” of “the Blessed Virgin Mary”.

“Consecration”, instead, is used correctly when it refers to a “self-offering” to God. Such self-offering is never direct and takes place through the intercession – among other mediations – of the “the Blessed Virgin Mary”, to whom one “entrusts” him- or herself (Congregation for divine worship and the discipline of the sacraments 2001, 204). As we can see, the difference between “consecration and entrustment” holds when the verb “to entrust” is used transitively (to entrust somebody or something to), but when used reflexively (to entrust oneself to) the difference fades: “entrusting oneself” becomes a step into consecration. A step, then, into self-offering to God, which takes place through a self-offering to “the Blessed Virgin Mary”, a total relinquishment of one’s agency, as we can see in many prayers – “[...] take me wholly to yourself as your possession and property. Please make of me, [...] whatever most pleases you. [...] use all that I am and have without reserve, wholly to accomplish what was said of you: ‘She will crush your head [...]’ (taken from Saint Maximilian Kolbe’s *Prayer of Total Consecration*, see also Chiesa Cristiana Universale della Nuova Gerusalemme 2016).

Finally, we found a translation in English for *“affidarsi”*, and yet we feel that “to entrust oneself to” is not completely adequate. First because *“affidarsi”* as an expression is part of everyday Italian language (Figure 1), whereas “to entrust oneself to” tends to be used only in religious

discourse in English. Secondly, because we have the impression that “to entrust oneself to”, though a verb in its reflexive form like “*affidarsi*”, maintains its active voice, contrary to what we have hypothesized for “*affidarsi*”, as a middle voice.



Figure 1: Online banner addressed to Italians wanting to immigrate to Canada by the immigration consulting agency Make it Canada! (www.makeitcanada.com).

A few years ago, Bruno Latour (1999; see also, Hennion 2007) recovered the notion of middle voice in verbs, in order to say that we should refer only to that voice when talking about collective relations and action. Indeed, talking about action in the active – I do something, I

am the active master of my action – or in the passive – I undergo someone/something's action, I am the passive instrument of someone/something's action – misses the fact that action is always a “*faire-faire*”, a “making do” – or, “dialogic”, as Zinn (2019) put it, looking at the circulation of “*raccomandazioni*”. Italian language teaches us that we can talk about action as “*affidarsi*”, which accounts for the partial or total relinquishment of agency needed to allow an action to unfold.

By noticing that “making do” creates bonds, attachments, Latour (1999) added that the issue is not to oppose freedom, as absence of bonds, to coercion, as their presence, but whether we are well or poorly bound. “*Affidarsi*” accounts for different kinds of attachments. Some tend to be dynamic and flexible. Through them, more or less asymmetric positions never get fixed, but tend to stay always relative, partial and reciprocal – as seen in the first case we introduced, where “*affidarsi*” unfolds thanks to a reciprocal acknowledgment of the other's competence and the limit of one's own. Others, tend to be more rigid, with asymmetries becoming fixed and hierarchies becoming absolute – as seen in the other two cases we mentioned.

From what we have sketched and hypothesized, “*affidarsi*”'s circulation provides, on a general level, a fertile field of research on the issue of good and bad attachments, not easily accessible only through the English language.

More specifically, “*affidarsi*”'s circulation, considered in tension with “*fidarsi*” – both assumed as middle voices – allows one to reconsider not only traditional categories of Mediterraneanist anthropology, thus bringing forth what proposed by Zinn with the notion of

“*raccomandazione*”, but also the sociological literature on “trust” in Italy (Gambetta 1996; Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1994).

As anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (2009, 232) noticed, the notion of “*fiducia*”, which “can also have the more general sense of ‘trust’”, though he translated it also as “credibility” and “faith” (Herzfeld 2009, 145 and 200), “is disproportionally underreported in the available ethnographies of Italian society” and, where it is taken into account, as in “Putnam’s ideal-typical representation of ‘trust’ in the Italian context [...] it is not clear [whether] this corresponds to the local understanding of *fiducia*”. From what we have sketched here, it does not.

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