

News, Pamphlets and Print in Early Modern Europe

Florence, 27 February 2015

By Elisabetta Cecconi

On 27th February 2015, at 9.00 a.m. the University of Florence opened the doors of its building in via G. Capponi, just behind Piazza Santissima Annunziata in the heart of Florence city centre, to host the one-day conference on *News, Pamphlets and Print in Early Modern Europe*. It was a lovely sunny day when colleagues and friends from Italy and abroad gathered together in the conference room to receive the warm welcome address of the conference organizer, Nicholas Brownlees. The cast of speakers included three international guests, who gave their presentations in the morning: Brendan Dooley from University College Cork, Andrew Pettegree from the University of St. Andrews and Sara Baker from the University of Leeds. The afternoon session had a more local character with three speakers from the University of Florence: Nicholas Brownlees, John Denton and me (Elisabetta Cecconi). The conference had the patronage of the Department of Languages, Literatures and Intercultural Studies (University of Florence) and CLAVIER, the interuniversity research group working in the field of Corpus and Language Variation in English Research.

As Nicholas Brownlees explained in his introductory greetings, the conference had an interdisciplinary character and aimed at integrating different approaches to the study of news networks in early modern Europe. Historians, researchers of the Medici Archives, historical news discourse analysts and experts in translation studies had the opportunity to exchange ideas and compare their perspectives in a very relaxing and productive atmosphere.

The first invited speaker was the historian Brendan Dooley. In his illuminating paper entitled “International News Flows in the Seventeenth Century”, he analysed the dynamics of news transmission across Europe, showing how the same news events moved from one country to the other *via* translation. In particular, he compared the 17th century English newsbook *The Moderate Intelligencer* with the French periodical *La Gazette* and presented similarities in the translation/reporting of the same story. He concluded that *La Gazette* was a source of Mediterranean news for the *Moderate Intelligencer* and hypothesised that newsletters or diplomatic correspondence must have been a source of news for *La Gazette*. The subsequent discussion underlined the extraterritorial character of 17th century news.

The second invited speaker was the historian Andrew Pettegree who delivered an intriguing paper entitled “Tabloid, Values, Commerce, Innovation and Partisanship in the seventeenth-century book world”. Pettegree carefully reflected upon the 17th century criteria to build up a commercially viable enterprise in the tough world of early newspaper publishing by discussing the business failure of the Dutch news writer Abraham Verhoeven. He identified Verhoeven’s innovation in the creation of a newspaper entitled *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* (1620), which combined the advocacy style of occasional pamphlets with serial publication, thus opening up new market perspectives in the world of news distribution. Unfortunately, the cheap and regular character of the newspaper, as opposed to the long-lasting tradition of manuscripts and occasional pamphlets, turned out to be a recipe for business failure. Verhoeven’s idea found no echo in contemporaneity, though his model would become influential in the future development of news market. A very stimulating discussion followed.

After a reinvigorating coffee break, it was the turn of the third invited speaker Sara Baker, who talked about “Form and Format in News Translation”. In her detailed analysis, she considered how language and layout were both subject to translation when stories moved between linguistic cultures in early modern Europe. By using the *Universal Short Title Catalogue* (<http://www.ustc.ac.uk>) she showed the European distribution of news by language, countries and cities and traced the evolution of news pamphlet production from 1470 to 1600. Regarding news circulation across Europe, Baker interestingly noticed how useful modern catalogues are for matching titles and mapping

translations. Comparisons between English and French title pages of pamphlets revealed that in several cases there is a good level of fidelity between the original title and the translated title. Baker significantly underlined how these matches help our understanding of early modern news transmission.

It was then lunchtime and we were escorted to a very nice restaurant-bar at the corner of Piazza Santissima Annunziata where the entire lunch-room had been reserved for us by the thoughtful conference organizer. That was the ideal setting to continue our talk in a cosier dimension, while being served a delicious first course, cake and coffee.

After lunch, the afternoon session opened with Nicholas Brownlees. In his enlightening presentation entitled “ ‘We have in some former books told you’: the significance of metatext in 17th century English news”, he carefully analysed the terminology that 17th century news writers themselves adopted in relation to their own publications and the news they were presenting. His detailed analysis focused both on the frequency and content of editorial metadiscourse between 1620 (the start of periodical news) and 1695 (the lapse of the Licensing Act). A key-term to designate news publication as well as a manner of presenting news was *continuation*. Nicholas Brownlees reflected upon the value of continuity as documented by the progressive numbering of issues from 1620s up to the 19th century. He concluded that the notion of *continuation* encourages a historical perspective on news and ascribes the reader the challenging task to make sense of stories either through consultation of previous numbers or through re-elaboration in coffee-houses.

It was then my turn (Elisabetta Cecconi). I presented a paper on religious lexis and political propaganda in two English Civil War newsbooks: the royalist *Mercurius Aulicus* and the parliamentarian *Mercurius Britannicus* in the years 1643-1644. After providing an overview of the socio-political and religious context in which the two newsbooks circulated, I carried out a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of the religious key-words adopted by the editors to construe their political propaganda. The corpus used for analysis was the *Florence Early English Newspapers Corpus*, available on the Lancaster Corpus Query Processor Website (<http://cqpweb.lancs.ac.uk>). Differences in the frequency and collocational behaviour of politically controversial religious words uncovered some of the discourse strategies adopted by *Aulicus* and *Britannicus* in order to frame opposite versions of the news event and construe ideological consensus in the readership.

The third and final speaker of the day was John Denton with a paper entitled “From Translation Studies to ‘Cultural Translation’: Researching Translations without translations?”. After acknowledging an increasing interest in Early Modern English translations of literary and non-literary texts among historians and English literary and Renaissance scholars, he noticed that there is still little attention paid to the manipulative process undergone by the transfer of a text from one language and culture to another. In this regard, he meticulously mentioned several studies, among which Boutcher’s essay on the historical context in which the first English translation of Polybius was produced (2011). Apart from its remarkable historiographical value, the study fails to illustrate the translation strategies followed from the source to the target text. John Denton significantly argued that though the role of context is important in translation “this does not mean that we should study translation without translations”.

The final round up closed our successful conference meeting. Heartfelt thanks go to both the organizer Nicholas Brownlees and the many participants who attended and interacted so positively in the discussions for a very productive and enjoyable conference!