 Reading time: 5 min.

Piedmont in the early 19th century was still a peripheral area compared to the rest of Italy. The language spoken was Piedmontese. Italian was only used in special cases, just like one wears a special suit on special occasions. The upper classes preferred French in writing and resorted to dialect in conversation.

In 1822, King Charles Felix approved a regulation for schools with special provisions for the teaching of Italian. However, these provisions were not very effective, especially given the method by which they were applied.

It is therefore not surprising that the correct use of Italian also cost Don Bosco no little effort. There is a reason why, in his *Memoirs* it is easy to find Piedmontese words Italianised or Italian words used with dialect meanings as in the following cases:

"*I noticed that [...] a* sfrosadore *was appearing*" (ASC 132 / 58A7), where *sfrosadore* (Piedmontese: *sfrosador*) stands for fraudster, and likewise, "*Don Bosco with his* sons *could cause a revolution at any time"* (ASC 132 / 58E4), where *figli* (Piedmontese: *fieuj*) stands for youngsters. And so on.

If Don Bosco was then able to write with propriety of language, combined with simplicity and clarity, it is due, among other things, to the patient use of the dictionary which Silvio Pellico advised him to use (MB III, 222).

A correction

A significant example can be found in the correction of a sentence in the first dream he described in his *Memoirs, "Renditi sano, forte e robusto"*.

Don Bosco, revising the manuscript, drew a line through the word "sano" (healthy) and wrote "umile" (humble)" in its place (ASC 132 / 57A7).

What did Don Bosco really hear in his dream and why did he then change that word? There has been talk of a change of meaning made for didactic purposes, as seems to have been Don Bosco's custom at times in narrating and writing down his dreams. But could it not instead be a simple clarification of the original meaning?

At 9 years of age the little John Bosco only spoke and heard Piedmontese. He had just started studying "the elements of reading and writing" at Fr Lacqua's school in Capriglio. At home and in the village, only dialect was used. In church, he would hear the parish priest or chaplain read the Gospel in Latin and explain it in Piedmontese.

It is therefore more than reasonable to assume that in a dream John heard both the "dignified man" and the "Lady of stately appearance" express themselves

in dialect. The words he heard in the dream must then be recalled in dialect. Not: “humble, strong and energetict”, but rather “*san, fòrt e robust*” in the characteristic local accent.

In such circumstances these adjectives could not have a purely literal but a figurative meaning. Now “*san*”, in a figurative sense, means: without wickedness, upright in moral conduct, i.e. good (C. ZALLI, *Dizionario Piemontese-Italiano,* Carmagnola, Tip. di P. Barbié, 2 a ed, 1830, vol. II, p. 330, used by Don Bosco); “*fòrt e robust*” means “strength” with stamina in the physical and moral sense (C. ZALLI, op. cit., vol. I, 360; vol. II, 309).

Don Bosco would never again forget those three adjectives “*san, fòrt e robust”* and when he wrote his *Memoirs*, while at first glance he translated them literally, thinking back on it later, he found it more appropriate to better specify the meaning of the first word. That *san* (= good) for a 9-year-old boy meant *obedient, docile, not capricious, not haughty*, in a word, “*humble”*!

It would therefore be a clarification, not a change of meaning.

Confirmation of this interpretation

Don Bosco, in writing his *Memoirs*, candidly emphasised the shortcomings of his boyhood. Two passages taken from the same *Memoirs* confirm this.

The first concerns the year of his first Confession and Communion for which Mamma Margaret had prepared his John: Don Bosco wrote. “*I treasured my mother’s advice and tried to carry it out. I think from that day on there was some improvement in my life, especially in matters of obedience and submission to others. It was not easy for me to be submissive to others because I liked to do things my own way and follow my own childish whims rather than listen to those who gave me advice or told me what to do.*” (ASC 132 / 60B5).

The other can be found a little further on, where Don Bosco speaks of the difficulties he encountered with his half-brother Anthony in giving himself up to study. It is an amusing detail for us but one that betrays Anthony’s temper and John’s as well. So Anthony is said to have said to him one day, seeing him in the kitchen, sitting at the table, all intent on his books, “*I’ve had my fill of this grammar business. I’ve grown big and strong without ever setting eyes on these books.*” *And Don Bosco said,* “*Carried away by blind rage I replied in a way I should not have. ‘Our donkey is bigger and stronger than you are and he never went to school either. Do you want to be like him?’ This so angered him that only speed saved me from a volley of blows and smacks.*” (ASC 132 / 57B5).

These details give us a better understanding of the dream’s warning and at the same time may explain the reason for the linguistic “clarification”mentioned

above.

In interpreting, therefore, Don Bosco's manuscripts it will be useful not to forget the problem of language, because Don Bosco spoke and wrote correctly in Italian, but his mother tongue was the one in which he thought.

In Rome on 8 May 1887, at a reception in his honour, when asked which language he liked best, he said, "*The language I like best is the one my mother taught me, because it did not require any great effort to learn it, and I find it easier to express my ideas with it. Then too, I do not forget it as easily as I do other languages.*" (BM XVIII, 275)