

# Changing words – changing history

## *Translating offensive language in 20th century literature*

*Johanna Hedenberg*

Natalia Ginzburg's *Lessico familiare* (*Family Lexicon* in the most recent English translation) starts with a preface where the author states that “[p]laces, events and people in this book are real”, that the names are also real and that she has written only what she remembers. Though often defined as a novel, this modern classic is actually more a kind of memoir, with portraits of the author's family as well as friends and acquaintances many of whom played a prominent role in Italy's political and cultural history. One of its crucial features is how the story is told – the first-person narrator describes people and relates events without commenting or judging, without showing much of what she thinks and feels. An equally or even more crucial feature is the ‘lexicon’ – specific, often dialectal or somewhat peculiar words and expressions are frequently used by the different family members. They serve not only to characterize these persons but also to hold the memories together, to run as a common thread through the story and give rhythm to the text. So, when I retranslated this book (it was

translated into Swedish for the first time in 1981 by Ingalisa Munck), I had obviously to be very careful about them.

The first pages of the novel give much space to Ginzburg's father. He's an irascible domestic tyrant with firm views and severe judgments on others' behaviour, but as the story evolves, he appears in a more conciliatory light. There is often a contrast between his invective and what he really says – it is used in a deprecatory rather than harshly insulting way. Two of his ‘lexicon items’ are ‘*negro*’ and ‘*negrigura*’. Just as some of the other items, they are put between quotes and the reader gets an explanation of how the father uses them and what they mean to him. A *negro* is an awkward or ill-mannered person and *negrigura* indicates a wide range of habits or actions which the father dislikes, but all of them are in fact harmless, like wearing the wrong sort of shoes or clothes on mountain hikes or engaging in conversations with everybody. And he uses these words about and towards members of his own family and other persons around him, none of them black.



**Covers of Natalia Ginzburg's *Lessico familiare* and its Swedish translation by Johanna Hedenberg**  
**Photo: Johanna Hedenberg**

### The changing meaning of words over time

Once a widely used term for black people, the Italian word *negro* is today considered a racist and strongly offensive term that should be replaced, for instance by *nero* ('black'). And I would say that the use of *neger*, the Swedish equivalent of Italian *negro*, is banned in an even more far-reaching way. It's often replaced by 'the n-word' (*n-ordet*) even in theoretical discussions about racism, literature etc., when the mere mentioning of the word *neger* is seen as a grave offence. Personally, I find this problematic. Values and attitudes change, and striving for more equality and inclusion can bring many positive contributions to a language. But how can we understand changes and discuss them if it's not clear exactly what we are discussing? In Swedish there is in fact more than one word that is considered offensive in this context, and the tendency to use the term 'n-word' hides the fact that there are distinctions between *neger* and *nigger* – the latter also a word used in Swedish and, of course, with even more offensive connotations.

Many would say that these words can't be used anymore or shouldn't be used at all. But in the case of *Lessico familiare* I was completely convinced that *neger* and *negerfasoner* (something like 'negro manners') would be the best translation, for various reasons. Natalia Ginzburg's book was first published in 1963, the story itself begins in her childhood in the 1920s, and her father, Giuseppe Levi, was born in 1872. When Ginzburg wrote the book almost sixty years ago, the use of the word *negro* was not regarded in the way it is today. Thirty or forty years earlier, in the period when the father uses this word in the book (in a period when Italy had a Fascist regime and colonial ambitions), it was even more common, and possibly his language use had been formed already in his childhood fifty years earlier, at the end of the 19th century.

This is, in short, a book that contains many different time layers, and the sixty years that have passed between the publication of the book in Italy and its retranslation in Sweden adds an extra layer which together contribute to the complexity of the text. I think it's crucial not to try to reduce this complexity. But there is another important dimension. Giuseppe Levi was Jewish and grew up in a community where words from an ancient Judeo-Italian dialect with Sephardic and other influences were used. In this context, *negrigura* and *negro* denoted precisely foolish things and awkward, foolish or stupid persons, without any racial connotation. This aspect, which I discovered during my research, is however not often referred to in discussions about the text, and there is no explaining note in modern Italian editions. As far as

I have understood it's not evident to every reader of the original today, and neither was this the case earlier.

### Interpreting the author's intentions

How did Natalia Ginzburg regard these words and was she aware of their Jewish history? We can't know, as she didn't comment on it publicly. And neither can we know how aware her father was of it or how he thought about using them. Furthermore, as shown in the preface cited above, the very aim of *Lessico familiare* is to depict the past through the memories in a direct manner, without interpreting them or imposing certain views. Of course, the mere selection of certain memories and the rendering of them in a certain wording *must* be an interpretation in some sense. But Natalia Ginzburg's intention is certainly to be as close to the actual words said as possible, when she relates what she has heard as a child from her parents and other persons – who, in their turn, in many cases furthered a language from their childhood.

All these factors taken together spoke for the choice of *neger* and *negerfasoner* in the Swedish translation. I was strengthened in my conviction by the fact that the latest English retranslation uses 'negro' and 'negroism', combined with a note on the Jewish dimension, a solution which I thought was worth considering for the Swedish edition too. But I was aware that some readers could take offence and that the publisher might have another view. In fact, I was told by the publisher that these words were impossible to use, and after a discussion I reluctantly accepted to find

words without any racial connotations that corresponded to the meaning the father gives them and at the same time were a bit odd or obsolete.

### Caught in an absurd situation

The story could have ended there, but when my translation of these words was questioned in a Swedish review of the book, and was said to make the text more harmless, I found myself in an absurd situation. In fact, I agreed with a criticism against my own work and was held responsible for precisely the choice that I hadn't felt entirely satisfied with from the beginning. So I wrote an [article](#) where I explained the whole background, and there was a small debate<sup>1</sup> with the publisher.

**“It's crucial not to try to reduce this complexity”**

One could ask whether all this is actually worth making a fuss about. When a book is translated, edited and published, there are always compromises, aren't there? Yes, but here the question was raised before the normal editing process, and the literary director of the publishing house was involved as well. It was more than just a common difference of opinion about details, and I felt strongly pressurised. The words I finally chose, *grobian* and *grobianfasoner*, work in the context but don't convey the whole picture; an important dimension is lost. And

<sup>1</sup> The initial article was followed by an answer from the [publisher](#), and the final [replique](#) from Hedenberg. All were [published](#) in the daily Swedish newspaper *Sydsvenskan* where the review for the book was published (note from the editors).



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**Johanna Hedenberg**  
**Photo: Håkan Lindgren**

the case of this individual translation sheds light on a bigger problem.

As previously mentioned, values and attitudes change, and so does language. But we underestimate the intelligence of the readers if we presume that they are not capable of reading older texts without a filter, and the more we adapt the past to the present, the more difficult it will be to understand the history.

In my work I try to render texts in Swedish as well as I can, with my experience, knowledge and discernment, but I never try to change them, to smooth over things I don't like or to adapt them to other people's expectations. I don't believe that it's the translator's task to figure out what the author thought or meant, beyond what can be understood by reading the text. And even less how he or she would have written it today. Firstly, because it's impossible to know and can't be anything other

than speculation, and secondly because *the text was not written today.*

The tendency to adapt texts to what one supposes is understandable and suitable for modern readers leads to anachronisms and puts the authors' integrity and the translator's autonomy at risk. Even if such an adaptation often springs from good intentions, it reflects a disrespectful attitude to literature. And there is no guarantee that this tendency will be limited to single words or certain areas. I can perfectly well imagine a future where translators are asked to fill in a dialogue situated in 1850 with terms for disabled people introduced in our century, or to change an incidentally mentioned flight into a more politically correct train-journey. I can also imagine a future where this process is driven not by progressive but reactionary forces. But hopefully I will be proven wrong, and hopefully we will be able to discuss these questions, openly and without prejudice.