(TRANS)CULTURAL, IMAGINARY, HUMOROUS

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Abstract: *The paper points out the idea that transcultural flows make translation a much more complex process, since the most appropriate solutions have to be found in rendering the concepts specific to the SLC by something which is specific to the TLC. Thus, the integration of the new concepts in the TLC is of utmost importance, some of the most important steps of the translating process being: imagining and converting the cognitive environment, making new assumptions, rethinking, reconceptualizing and rewording the context. Focus is laid on the main steps in translating jokes, and an Expectation – (Dis)Confirmation model has been imagined in terms of the TRs' reaction to the translated jokes.*

Keywords*: transcultural flows, imaginary, humorous, reconceptualization, reader/recipient satisfaction in translating jokes, from negative disconfirmation to positive/high confirmation.*

Introduction

Each society has its own cultural traditions, which "supports rather than undermines the Humboldtian view of language as an expression of culture" (Wierzbicka 2009: 6). Moreover, the unique character of the language spoken by a certain community and its unique cultural aspects express the close link between the language spoken by that community and its own way of living and thinking.

As Humboldt put it, "language is the identity of a nation". Besides, "every language draws about the people that possess it a circle whence it is possible to exit only by stepping over at once into the circle of another one" (Humboldt 1988: 60). By stepping over the boundaries of one's first language, one can look at that language from the outside and become aware of the thick web of assumptions and values embedded in it. (Wierbizca 2009)

This holds so much the more valid about two very different languages such as English and Romanian: English does not share anything with Romanian, hence the great differences between the cultural heritages of Britain and Romania.

Nevertheless, the idea is entirely shared that

> "cultures are not immutable essences, with clearly drawn boundaries. Then, to reduce us all as cultural beings to members of myriad groups—crosscutting, overlapping, and ever evolving, means to overlook the central reality. . . . no one is more acutely aware of this reality than a bilingual who lives in two languages and cultures" (Wierzbicka 1997: 18; see also 2005a, 2005b).

On the other hand, the idea is partially shared that immigrants to English-speaking countries are not interested in acquiring (Anglo) English.

When the problem of the immigrants' language is brought up, we consider Kramsch's (1999: 26) opinion worthwhile mentioning:

> "immigrant language learners are increasingly disinclined to . . . buy into the values and beliefs that underpin native speaker language use in their respective communities."

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Kramsch supports her view on this point with a quote from Kristeva (1988: 10):

> "The absorption of foreignness proposed by our societies turns out to be inacceptable [*sic*] for modern day individuals, who cherish their national and ethnic identity and their intrinsically subjective, irreducible difference".

However, there are lots of biographical testimonies by immigrants to English speaking countries proving that such a view does not match the reality. Thus, much as they stick to their national and ethnic identity, when they live in a foreign country, they have to absorb a great deal of "foreignness" (Anglo English, American English, Canadian English, Australian English, New Zealand English, etc), because they have to share the same way of living, the same traditions, habits, and not only.

However much they may absorb of that "foreignness", and no matter the form of English which took root in a different cultural soil, the ideal is to absorb as much as they can from the "roots and trunk of English", given the fact that cultural heritage is mediated through the English language. However, this does not mean a rigid point of view in favour of "an increasingly public recognition of the global position of English", i.e. English as a lingua franca.

Transcultural

People living in a bilingual context need to be aware of their own unconscious assumptions and values, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to get familiar to the assumptions and values of the natives and, more than that, to understand and acquire their speech practices. This is rather difficult to achieve, being the cause of a large number of misunderstandings, due to mismatches in cultural assumptions. In order to solve out such mismatches, "the tiny crevices of talk", as Miller (2000: 252) calls them, need to be known. This is because it is in our everyday talk that recurring misinterpretations and misunderstandings arise which have much to do with the concept of 'crossing linguistic borders'. "The linguistic flows across borders do not imply homogenization but reorganization of the local. Our suggestion is to label them as *translinguistic flows*." (Croitoru 2011: 4)

It may not be exactly the same as Venuti's (1998) concept of *translingualism* that refers to breaking the domesticating tendencies of reducing and even removing differences through translation.

At a higher and more complex level, *transcultural flows* are well defined by Pennycook (2008: 6) as "the ways in which cultural forms move, change and are reused to fashion new identities in diverse contexts". We share Pennycook's opinion that this is not merely a question of cultural movement but of

> "take-up, appropriation, change and refashioning. While not ignoring the many detrimental effects of globalization on economies and […], I am interested centrally here in the cultural implications of globalization, the ways in which cultural forms spread and change". (Pennycook 2008: 6)

On this line of thinking, take-up involves new parameters of meaning that cannot be referred to as simple adoptions of either global or local practices.

Thus, *transcultural flows* are different from the simple phenomenon of 'crossing the linguistic borders', because they involve much more complex stages such as rethinking and rewording. The process of rewording presupposes the remaking one.

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The processes of *rethinking, remaking and rewording* are followed by the most difficult and challenging stages, i.e. *reconceptualization and cultural (re)production*. Furthermore, transcultural flows are viewed in terms of both fluidity, i.e. their movement across borders, and in terms of fixity, i.e. traditions, customs, values, beliefs, etc.

> "Thus, they are at the same time fluid and fixed, since they move across communities, nations and borders, on the one hand, and are rethought, remade, re-created in the local, i.e. localized and reconceptualized, on the other." (Croitoru 2011: 5)

In addition, no clear-cut distinction can be drawn between the fluid and fixed character of transcultural flows. As Pennycook (2008: 8) puts it,

> "[C]aught between fluidity and fixity, then, cultural and linguistic forms are always in a state of flux, always changing, always part of a process of the refashioning of identity."

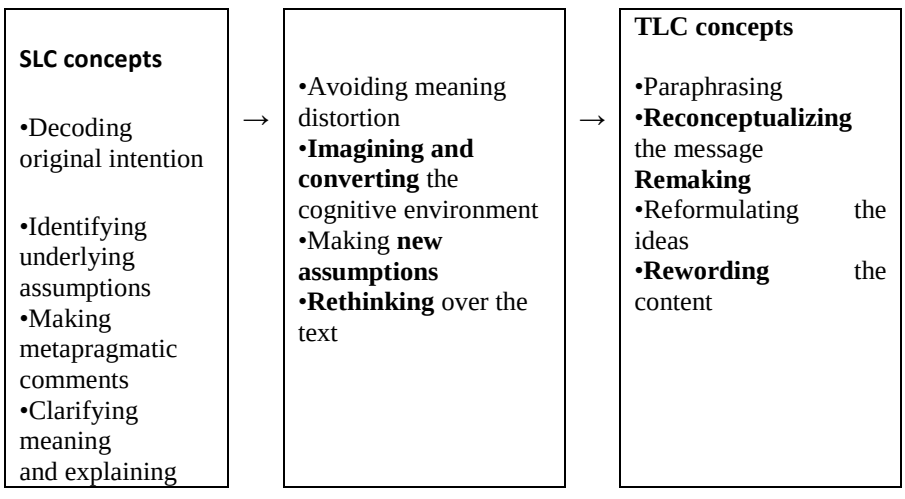
The transcultural flows make the process of translation much more than a process of encoding and decoding across languages, i.e. a process "of making meaning across and against codifications" (Pennycook 2008: 55).

This perspective has been assimilated by translators, the bilingual and bicultural negotiators, or bridge builders who have to fill in the gap between two different cultures by bringing together two worlds with different values, beliefs and concepts.

> "The position of the bilingual and bicultural negotiator implies equal judgement of the values and concepts in both SLC and TLC, clarifications of meaning, finding the most appropriate solutions in the ways of rendering the concepts specific to the SLC, making new assumptions before reformulating the message(s) and reconceptualizing what is specific to the SLC in order to match the TLC context. That is to say, the translator has to integrate new concepts in the TLC." (Croitoru 2011: 6)

All this can be represented as in Fig. 1:

Integrating new concepts in the TLC



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The integration of new concepts in the TLC can very well be applied to translating humour, with reconceptualization and rewording as the last stages of the translating process. In translating humour, more often than not, the TRs are not familiar with the cultural environment of the ST. Thus, metapragmatic comments, paraphrases, clarifications of meaning and explanations are necessary for the **right rewording** of the message in keeping with the necessary **reformulations** and **reconceptualizations**. In order to achieve such goals, the translator need **to imagine the TRs' reaction** to the translation product and if/ how/ to what extent they will accept it.

Imaginary

The view of translation as a form of linguistic and cultural practice which preserves the identity of the "Other", and Ricœur's (1992) concept of "oneself as another" may lead to the interpretation of the relationship between translation and identity in cultural diversity as being related to the concept of "one imagining oneself as another". On this line of thinking, it would also be interesting to relate Ricœr's notion of the "kingdom of the as if" to translation, possibly interpreted to be in a close relationship with the cultural and linguistic imaginary.

As mentioned above, transcultural flows presuppose location, tradition and cultural expression in the reorganization of the local, which has much to do with a community's cultural imaginary. In dealing with a community's cultural imaginary, the definition of culture and the concept of imaginary are considered to be the starting point. Almost all definitions of culture refer to values and beliefs, to assumptions, focus being laid on meaning (production/reproduction of meaning, sharing meaning and exchange of meaning) which is at the core of a culture.

It is interesting that something new has been lately added to the concepts of culture and imaginary, i.e. the migrant community, based on the migrants' experience as a form of cultural imaginary: the way migrants imagine their own culture in a space that looks like a "no man's land" due to the loss of the sense of belonging. Not only do they imagine their own culture, but also they create a sense of relatedness to a particular time, place and condition (Camacho 2008).

In other words, the cultural imaginary can be said to make up for the loss of the sense of belonging, thus leading to the concepts of a nation as an "imagined community" (nationhood) and identity. Therefore, cultural imaginary is socially constructed to suit the needs of a community, of a particular group, on the one hand, and to form the sense of belonging to the community, on the other.

Changing the original "no man's land" space into a shared space, i.e. the space people share, and the connections / bonds and laces they create in the respective space to tie the society together will enrich the notion of meaning with the sense of communion. The meaning enrichment is imagined and made possible, i.e. applied to that community only within certain cultural parameters. This reminds of Lacan's (1997: 21) idea of the imaginary as one of the three intersecting orders that structure human existence (besides the symbolic and the real), on the one hand, and of Laing's (1969: 38-40) argument about our being drawn into *social phantasy systems*, thus about the experience of being in a particular set of human collectivities.

Considering the social constructions of the imaginary, it "can have very real effects", as Macey (1994: xxi) puts it. As a matter of fact, long before him, references had been made to the imaginary of the society, in the sense that it "creates for each historical period its singular way of living, seeing and making its own existence" Thompson 1984: 23).

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The changes at all levels, at a given time, have real effects upon language. The relevance of the cultural "baggage" embedded in the language goes hand in hand with exploring the content of that baggage, which is important for the practice of language. It is also important to identify the historically shaped cultural meanings embedded in the language.

At the language level, the imaginary and non-imaginary states of the language may co-exist even in the same sentence. In this respect, the Aladdin's Lamp State, i.e. the state of wishful-thinking (SWT) (Pimpel 1976: 356-357) is worth mentioning.

The linguistic imaginary is closely connected with the possible worlds theory, hence with the meanings and uses of the subjunctive (hypothetical meaning), with epistemis modalities, modulation, etc. Specifically, at the lexical level, in comparing different languages in use, one can find that, though they have words which in translations and dictionaries are supposed to "correspond" to one another,

> "yet there is scarce one of ten amongst the names of complex ideas . . . that stands for the same precise idea which the word does in dictionaries it is rendered by" (Wierzbicka 2009: 302).

The connection between linguistic choices and the imagined situational and cultural contexts is of utmost importance. For the semantic and lexico-grammatical levels, Halliday and Martin's circles model (1993) is relevant because it relies on the lexical choices – language – in a social context. In such a social context, the communicative levels of genre (cultural context) and register (situational context) are decisive in the communicative act of interpretation and translation.

Humorous

Humour is a multi-dimensional process, it relies on mutually independent elements such as the text, the speaker and listener(s), and the context, which all fall under the systemic common denomination of system-incorporating network. (Popa 2005)

> "Humour is the ability to appreciate the situations when wordplay is funny or amusing. The word *situations* refers to the fact that humour is socially dependent and depends on interaction in a process between people. *Wordplay* refers to the language content in humour. (Popa 2005: 54)

The translator's task of a mediator becomes most difficult in translating **humour.** Translating humour is translating cultures. In other words, cultural mediation with humorous prose, comedies, jokes, puns is extremely complex, because the translator has to overcome lots of obstacles and traps generated by polysemy, homonymy, troublesome words, especially by ambiguities. The greatest difficulty is discussed in terms of acceptability, and consists in finding the 'equivalent' in the TLC that will be accepted by the TRs. The degree of acceptability will be judged by the TRs' response. If the response is the expected one, it means that the translator was able to cross the bridge between the two cultures and fill the cultural gap. It means that (s)he found the right 'gap fillers'. The complexity of the humour translation lies in that it has to take into consideration the transfer of the situational, cultural, and linguistic content of the SL joke to the TLC not to mention the Skopos of the translation. Skopos-oriented

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translation procedures are highly relevant for humorous texts, in general and for jokes, in particular.

As suggested above, translation can be viewed as a "relocation of meaning", which consists in contextualizing meaning. The relocation of meaning is relevant for cultural dynamics, in close connection with transcultural flows, as well as for imaginary situational and cultural contexts.

The idea of meaning relocation may prove useful in the analysis and evaluation of translations, especially with (un)successful translations of humour from English into Romanian and viceversa. It is the heterogeneous phenomenon of humour that may make translations unsuccessful, besides the misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the cultural items. Moreover, the same signifiers may be understood in different ways in different language cultures, and people belonging to different speech communities may have different attitudes towards humorous texts, in general, or specifically jokes, wordplays, puns, in particular.

Translating jokes

In the case of different cultures and languages, it is often very difficult to do an effective translation of a joke because it needs to be explained: it needs extensive explanations and footnotes. In such situations, the target readers (TR's might not understand the stereotype, hence they might not get the point. At this point, mention should be made of the disagreement about what is funny in different countries, for people belonging to different nations. What is funny or a harmless joke for some may be embarrassing, or offending, or illegal for others, not to mention the humour control in the communist period which used to affect the type of humour. In this respect, a good example can be the strange, or embarrassing situations in which immigrants may find themselves if they misunderstand or misinterpret some joke, or even worse, when they entirely miss the point.

Understanding jokes is entirely dependent on the TRs' recognition of the linguistic and cultural features contained in the utterance. Furthermore, quivalence needs to be reconsidered in favour of the skopos which is presumably to amuse.

On this line of thinking, other questions may arise: Do culturally different TRs laugh at the same words, or is the amusement the same when they read or hear a joke? If they do not react to the joke, to what extent does this depend on culture-specific presuppositions and in what degree on the quality of the translation, given that the quality of translation is a very important variable in "tasting" a joke, in making or breaking it? To put it differently, how much does the effect of the translated jokes depend on cultural differences, on individual differences, or on the translation itself?

As a general coordinate, in translating jokes, the first step is to analyze the passage, to find out what makes it funny and to state the type of humour.

Raphaelson-West (1989: 130) divided jokes into three groups: "1. linguistic, such as puns; 2. cultural, such as ethnic jokes; 3. universal, such as the unexpected".

Linguistic jokes make use of words meaning something linguistic and which are similar to the words they rhyme with. If they mean something linguistically, they will give a meaning to the sentence. However, it rarely happens that a similar, or rhyming word or idiomatic expression may fit the context perfectly or to such an extent that the TR's can get the right point. This is because in the SL, the humour comes from an ambiguity which cannot be rendered in the TL where there will be little humour in a literal translation.

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There are also situations when the humour comes from misunderstanding and misinterpreting an idiom, hence from translating it literally. More often than not, the translation of such jokes will be hilarious.

Last but not least, Raphaelson-West's (1989:132) opinion is worthwhile mentioning about the humour and irony of the sentence "I'll teach you to steal" which

> "means exactly the opposite of the surface structure. Clues lie in intonation and context. It is important to realize, therefore, that this joke contains *linguistically-oriented humour* and although it translates well into English, it would not translate well into other languages." (emphasis in the original)

Therefore, linguistic jokes will not be efficient in translation by themselves, but as practical examples in teaching foreigners about linguistic structures of the SL.

With cultural jokes, there are a lot of situations when the stereotype is very difficult to understand, or even not understood, and the point is missed. This is due to the (great) differences between the two language cultures. Semantically speaking, the jokes may have the same meaning, but in terms of pragmatics and culture, they are untranslatable. Then, the question may arise: What is the translator supposed to do? The most appropriate answer is that (s)he has to find and use what is specific to the target language culture (TLC). In other words, the humour has to be rendered in such a way that it will be accepted by the TR's. That is to say, it has to be reconceptualized. Reconceptualization is an extremely important stage in the translating process of jokes.

Thus, in terms of intercultural communication, translating humour, in general, and jokes, in particular, is a real challenge for translators due to the linguistic and cultural specificity. Not only linguistic but also cultural differences are real obstacles to positive humour response across cultures.

Universal jokes are described by Raphaelson-West (1989: 131) as "bicultural jokes", based on the argument that

> […] there being semantic universals, I venture to say that there are a good number of cultures which would find the following situations funny:
> a) a child making extremely mature, adult-like statements;
> b) a victim getting harmless but embarrassing revenge on his offender;
> c) the unexpected, unusual response.

One of the frequent solutions in translating jokes is translating the idea of something funny, of exaggerating something ridiculous, not of translating the text itself. In translating jokes, the grammatical analysis is very important. In making such an analysis, Nida-Taber's (1982: 33) three steps are still worth mentioning:

1. analysis of the surface structure in terms of a) grammatical relationships and b) meanings and combinations of words;
2. transfer of analyzed material to the target language;
3. restructuring of the transferred material so that it becomes acceptable in the target language.

Reader / recipient satisfaction in translating jokes

Reader / recipient satisfaction (RS) can be defined in terms of the impact which the translated jokes have on the target readers (TRs), i.e. in terms of their reaction. In order to measure the RS, or the degree of the RS, we imagined an Expectation –

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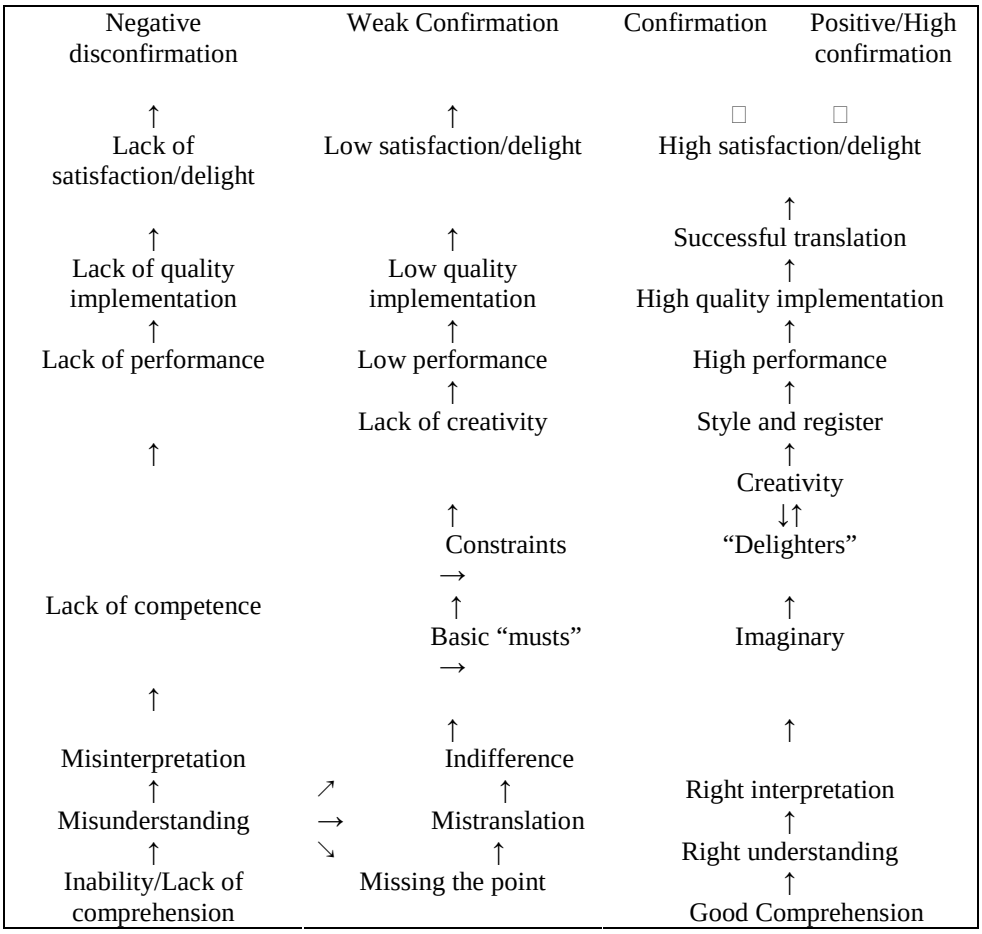
(Dis)Confirmation Model (Fig. 2). Such a model may show that an individual's expectations are:

a) confirmed if the TRs' reaction is as expected;
b) positively / highly confirmed if the TRs' reaction is better than expecteed;
c) weakly confirmed if the TRs' reaction is not as good as it was expected;
d) negatively disconfirmed if the TRs' reaction is poorer/worse than expected.

Fig. 2 Representation of (trans)cultural, imaginary, humorous



On the one hand, confirmation (a) and positive / high confirmation (b) bring satisfaction and high satisfaction, respectively, to the TRs shown in their having (much) fun, as a result of good comprehension, understanding, right interpretation and successful translation. Mention should be made about the translator's knowledge of the basic "musts" and of both SL and TL constraints. Moreover, the translator's good handling of the "delighter's", besides the register and style aspects, will lead to high performance, consequently to high quality translations, thus providing high satisfaction / delight to the TRs. The fact should be added that an extremely important coordinate of translating humorous texts, jokes, puns, etc is the translator's creativity not only in

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rendering the culture - specific elements, but also in making the apparently untranslatable translatable on condition of its making *the same sense* in the target language culture (TLC), thus having the same impact on the TRs and making them accept it, on the one hand, and be very pleased, on the other. To put it differently, the degree of acceptability depends on the effect that piece of humorous prose, or pun, or joke, etc has in the TLC; it has to be the same as the SLC effect.

On this line of thinking, it is known that there are lots of situations and contexts where there is a lower degree of acceptability with translating humorous prose, in general, and with translating jokes, in particular, the cause being not the translator's poor (or lack of) knowledge of the TLC norms and constraints, but the means of expression specific to each language culture especially in achieving the play upon words that makes the humorous effect. This may be illustrated by the following example:

e.g. *I married Miss Right. I just didn't know her first name was Always. (Tibballs 2006: 199)*

You may marry the man of your dreams, but 14 years later you're married to a couch that burps. (Tibballs 2006: 203)

What do you call a man…?
What do you call a man with a spade on his head? – Doug
What do you call a man without a spade on his head? – Douglas.
What do you call a man with a seagull on his head? – Cliff.
What do you call a man with a car on his head? – Jack.
What do you call a man with 50 rabbits up his ass? – Warren.
What do you call a man with three eyes? – Seymour.
What do you call a man who has lost 90 per cent of his brain? – A widower.
(Tibballs 2006: 211)

A cop spotted a woman driving and knitting at the same time.
"Pull over!" he called.
"No, officer, it's a scarf!" (Tibballs 2006: 246)

Why are families like a box of chocolates? – They're mostly sweet, with a few nuts. (Tibballs 2006: 127)

What do you get if an elephant sits on your best friend? – A flat mate.

A pollster was taking opinions outside the United Nations building in New York . He approached four men – a Saudi, a Russian, a North Korean and a resident New Yorker. To each one he said: "Excuse me, I would like to ask you your opinion on the current meat shortage.
The Saudi replied: "Excuse me, what is a shortage?"
The Russian replied: "Excuse me, what is meat?"
North Korean replied: "Excuse me, what is an opinion?"
The New Yorker replied: "Excuse me, what is 'excuse me'?" ((Tibballs 2006: 230)

What did the cannibal had when he was late for dinner? - The cold shoulder (70)

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Have you heard about the cannibal restaurant where dinner costs an arm and a leg?

> *A man was captured by cannibals. "What," asked the cannibal chief, licking his lips, "was your job before you were captured?"*
> *"I was a newspaper man," came the reply.*
> *"An editor?"*
> *"No, merely a sub-editor."*
> *"Cheer up. Promotion awaits you. After dinner you will be editor in chief." (69)*

Such contexts are relevant for the distinction that needs to be drawn between the situations of weak confirmation generated by the translator's lack of creativity and low performance that lead to low quality translations, consequently providing low satisfaction / delight to the TRs, and the situations of weak confirmation generated by the lack of the adequate means of expression in the TLC, which will result in unsuccessful translations missing the effect and the play upon words, "the salt and pepper" of the original. In other words, mere adequacy is not sufficient in translating humorous prose, in general, and jokes, in particular, for the end users' delight who expect top quality translations.

On the other hand, negative disconfirmation is caused by the inability / lack of comprehension, misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the original, all these leading to mistranslation, hence to the TRs' missing the point and, finally, to their indifference. Mention should be made that such situations show lack of competence which leads, on a higher level, to lack of performance, hence to unsuccessful translations and do not provide any satisfaction at all to the TRs.

In our opinion, the aspects we included in the middle column (from missing the point to weak confirmation), whose starting points, i.e. causes, are inability/lack of comprehension, misunderstanding and misinterpretation which finally lead to the TRs' indifference (generated by mistranslation and by the TRs' missing the point), seem to be related to the third type of an individual's reaction, i.e. weak confirmation. However, they may also be related to the fourth type of an individual's reaction, i.e. negative disconfirmation, accounted for by the causes mentioned above.

Conclusions

Partly universal, partly individual, yet rooted in a specific cultural and linguistic context, translating humour is a real challenge for translators. When undertaking such a task, a number of factors need to be taken into consideration. First and foremost, the translator has to decide whether the TRs will understand the humour. Secondly, what is most difficult to do is to render the humour-inducing effect of the ST. To put it differently, (s)he has to make the SLC humour function as humour in the TLC. In this respect, it is a real fact that the translator's ability to make creative choices and decisions is often tested by culturally bound elements and language-specific devices.

Thus, the main conclusion to be drawn is that humour is translatable and its translatability depends on the language-specific devices, on the means of expression specific to each language. In other words, the target text may not be as humorous as the original. More often than not, it is even less humorous, or, sometimes it may even miss the right point in various degrees. The idea is to be constantly aware of the cultural context, to grasp the humorous aspect in the ST, then to explain, rethink and, when

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needed, reconceptualize it in order to ensure the transference of humour into the TL. If the TLT is not amusing, or if it is even less humorous than the SLT, the translator will have to write a new TLC-based joke in order to be accepted and "tasted" by the TRs. Consequently, the basic aspect in translating humour is the *effect upon the TRs*. Thus, the translation of such texts is *effect-oriented*.

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