# SUBTITLING HUMOUR – A JOURNEY ACROSS CULTURES

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*Abstract: Humour, a multidisciplinary field of study, has been the focus of interest of many academics, ranging from Anthropology to film studies. Audiovisual translation (AVT) and most notably subtitling is one of the branches of Translation Studies that has seen dramatic developments in recent years, at least as far as the theoretical background is concerned. Subtitling is in its own a challenge for the translator, first of all because it proposes a different type of text: the audiovisual text entails inter-semiotic elements in a triadic structure: image / word / sound. In AVT humour management is limited by technical, linguistic and cultural constraints. Moreover, the subtitler has to make proof of humour awareness and humorous complicity, that is to understand the joke in its source culture context and obtain a roughly similar humorous effect upon the target culture audience by overcoming all the 'impossibilities' he might come across during this journey from one culture to another. Humour is universal when regarded as a cognitive and psychological process, yet it is definitely culture-specific, hence the translator/subtitler has to manipulate culture-specific references in such a way as to ensure dynamic equivalence. Whether domesticating or foreignizing in its approach, any form of AVT is organically related to both national identities and national stereotypes. The transmission of cultural values in screen translation remains one of the most pressing areas of research at the border between Translation Studies and Cultural Studies.*

*Key words: audiovisual translation, culture specific references, humour, dynamic equivalence, vulnerable translation*

Although commonplace in everyday life, as a theoretical concept humour has been the starting point of endless debates. Trying to propose an all-embracing definition of humour, or at least of verbal humour, would be a utopian task, due to the multitude of disciplines concerned with its production and reception mechanisms, ranging from Anthropology, to Psychology, to Philosophy, to Linguistics and so forth. All these disciplines operate with different terminology and methods, and the attempt to establish an all-comprising definition would undoubtedly result in "epistemological hair-splitting" (Attardo 1994:1).

Any definition of humour ultimately depends on the purpose for which it is used. Each of the constituents of humour production and reception would, in its own right, demand deeper analysis. However, what is at stake in this study is to signal the increasing interest for the translation of humour with a special view on a relatively new field of expertise in Translation Studies, namely the audiovisual text**.** In Translation Studies the emphasis has gradually shifted towards cultural issues, which have profound implications in the translation of humour as well. As a cognitive and psychological process, humour is universal, yet it is at the same time culture-specific. Consequently, the role of the translator is to mediate between the two cultures, making sure both that the target language receptor understands the humorous utterance and that humour functions as humour in the target culture. This is to say the translator has to manipulate culture-specific references in such a way as to ensure dynamic equivalence.

Salvatore Attardo (2003) noted that 'linguistics had mainly stayed away from humour, with the notable exception of puns". This mainly happens because, even if the problem of linguistic untranslatability has been exhaustively addressed, cultural untranslatability is still a much debated issue.

The media play a crucial role in this age of globalization and global communication. Satellite television and the internet have made the world a much smaller place. The screen is



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a primary vehicle for intercultural interaction, consequently the audio-visual translator has an increasingly important role in the intercultural exchange. The translator is seen metaphorically as a bridge-builder for communication who has to prove a double competence: translating competence and moreover bicultural competence, that involves readiness to learn and a keen ability of critical evaluation of the culture-specific references to be rendered in translation.

Katarina Reiss (1989:107) states: "The normal function of a translation service is to include a new (TL) readership in a communicative act which was restricted to the source language community." We can apply Reiss' considerations to the subtitling of humour, where the translator is not only text receiver and producer, but also humour recipient and producer, acting as a cross-cultural mediator and playing an active part in "attracting" and educating the audience by means of humour.

Another well-known metaphor for the translator is that of a navigator who takes the world freight on board on one side of the shore and transports it to the other side of the shore, defying all the dangers he might come across. And there are indeed plenty of dangers and impediments. In his journey from one culture to the other, as any navigator, the translator needs experience, technical skills, good instincts and most often a lucky star, too. Once he reaches the other shore, he becomes a negotiator of two models of reality he has to make logically and culturally compatible.

According to Venuti (1995:306) "a translated text should be the site where a different culture emerges, where a reader gets a glimpse of the cultural other." The translation of "cultural" terms is one of the most thriving areas within the wider discipline of Translation Studies. In order for the target reader/audience to get "a glimpse of the cultural other" a translator is required to possess both linguistic competence and intercultural sensitivity that would help him/her create in the target text a level of perlocutionary effect that is roughly similar with the one in the source text.

In the case of subtitling, the text is actually 'written to be spoken as if not written' (F. Chaume, 2004) and the spoken word is notoriously difficult to transcribe. The challenging mission of the subtitler becomes even more straining when it comes to the subtitling of humour. In AVT humour management is limited by technical, linguistic and cultural constraints, yet the subtitler has to equally face the challenges of self limitation, as he has to make proof of humour awareness (i.e. understand the incongruity) and humorous complicity (i.e. produce humour) and to be able to obtain dynamic equivalence which would sum up pragmatic equivalence, perlocutionary equivalence and ideally illocutionary equivalence. In other words, the subtitler has to be intelligent enough to understand the joke in its source culture context and ideally obtain a similar humorous effect upon the target culture audience. This is not an easy job, but challenges of either technical, cultural, or linguistic nature can be overcome if the subtitler acts as a mediator, with an active role in both humorous reception and production.

Humour subtitling has shown that there are specific translation competences to be considered. Besides technical constrains and spatial and temporal limits (normally a maximum of two lines of text, each of a maximum of thirty-seven Roman characters and a duration of approximately sic seconds for each caption), the subtitler has to overcome difficulties related to the fact that certain words are more jocular and humour-productive in one language than another. Cultural conventions dictate which humorous routines and stylistic manipulations are acceptable. The spatial and temporal confines of the subtitled text make lengthy compensation or explanatory techniques quite rare. Extra-textual elements, such as visual and auditory markers that the target audience is exposed to are often charged with plenty of cultural references, partly dictating the subtitler's choice of translating techniques and bias towards domestication or foreignization. Body language, gestures,



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postures, outfits and any other form of physical expressiveness are culturally determined. Cultural references might also be spotted in sceneries, landscapes, filming locations, architectural or geographical symbols that indicate specific cultural or social backgrounds. Subtitlers may sometimes have to alter their translation in accordance with the non-verbal information appearing on the screen, in the attempt to make the dialogue in the target language and the original image as naturally fit together as possible. However, in most cases culture-specific visual information is left for the audience to interpret.

AVT is labelled as 'vulnerable translation' since the audience (particularly that segment of the audience that has a certain command of the source language) has the possibility of comparing soundtrack and subtitles and tend to become critical whenever discrepancies, omissions or unexpected equivalents are perceived. Subtitling humour is therefore as vulnerable as can be, especially in the case of sitcoms, where the audience expects to be offered continuous reasons for laughter. There are numerous discussions about the sources of humour and the cognitive processes responsible for producing a humorous effect upon an audience. At the same time, there are several forms of verbal humour that constantly occur in sitcoms: jokes, running gags, wise cracks, epigrams, puns, spoonerisms, irony, satire, caricature, parody, impersonation, sarcasm, etc.), often overlapping and challenging the subtitler to discern between various translation techniques. Moreover, the presence of canned laughter triggers an increased level of expectation from the audience, imposing at the same time even more constraints upon the subtitler. The audience profile must be considered as well. Usually sitcoms tend to be associated with a possibly high-brow audience, demanding thus relevance and adequacy of the linguistic and cultural transfer.

We must admit that the subtitler is not challenged by every single uttered word. But when culture-related translation issues come along, even when the subtitler comes up with the best possible solution for a pun or any other element of incongruity that triggers the joke, he has to show surgical precision in inserting his TL equivalent for that joke in a dynamic, confined text, and match it with the canned laughter instance, so that cohesion and coherence are ensured not only for the text, but for the whole polysemiotic context.

Given all these sometimes contradictory elements, patterns, norms and recipes are difficult to prescribe. It seems the translation of humour is neither teachable, nor learnable. Humorous awareness must be doubled by the ability to produce humour. Solid translation skills and practice are nevertheless required. Ethics and social impact are not to be neglected, either. Good humour requires wits, from both the subtitler and the audience. The audience needs to be trained, as well. A successful translation of good-quality humour increases the demand and appreciation of good-quality humour.

We all laugh in basically the same manner. Laughter is universal. When successful translation of humour builds a bridge between cultures and we all laugh at the same jokes, intercultural communication has one less barrier to overcome. That is why, in the context of intercultural communication, humour is to be taken seriously.



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