IT TAKES THREE TO GET THE JOKE ACROSS: COMEDIAN, SUBTITLER AND AUDIENCE

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Abstract: Humour has been discussed from various perspectives over the years. When attempting to define it, philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists and linguists alike seem to come up with a similar conclusion: providing a complete, all encompassing definition of humour is an impossible task. Although universal in its nature, humour is deeply culture-specific and has constituted one of the main points of interest for Translation Studies scholars in the past decades, due to its role in establishing the position of the translator as a mediator between cultures, as well as to the many challenges it brings to the translation process.

This study aims at analyzing a few aspects related to the translation of humour in a specific text type, namely the audiovisual text, by focussing on stand-up comedy, a type of audiovisual product that is extremely rich in culture-bound references.

Keywords: humour, stand-up comedy, audiovisual translation, subtitler, culture-bound references

Interdisciplinary perspectives upon humour

Humour occurs in all types of social interaction, is part of our daily lives and serves a number of very serious social, cognitive and emotional functions.

The attempt to provide a complete, all encompassing and widely accepted definition of humour is often likened to the process of putting socks on an octopus. The interdisciplinarity of the concept makes efforts to define it a nearly impossible task because each discipline starts from a different set of preconceptions. Humour has fascinated scholars of all disciplinary backgrounds from the ancient times, yet most of the approaches of psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, linguists and philosophers alike start by stating that research on humour in their specific field is sporadic, uneven or marginal. Although a fascinating subject of study, humour seems to be elusive, too simple and too complex a notion at the same time. Despite being regarded as universal, humour is definitely culture-related and depends on the individual perception, is able to consolidate social relationships and bring cultures and individuals together, but also to bring worlds apart, being perceived in terms of aggressiveness and ethnic and gender discrimination. Humour creates mirth and is related to a sense of happiness, yet it encompasses the idea of victim and sadly, in recent times, it has produced real victims, controversy, social movements and it has been distorted to the point of being used as a motivation and justification for crime. All these dichotomies and the paradoxical nature of the concept of humour invite to deeper study and broader perspectives.

Without attempting to provide a new or different definition, it is worth analyzing a few definitions coming from different fields and extracting the elements that would best suit the analysis of humour from the perspective of Translation Studies.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines humour as "the quality of action, speech, or writing which excites amusement; oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun", adding that humour is also "the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing or other composition; jocose imagination or treatment of a subject."

Rod A. Martin (2007:5), reputed professor of Psychology, describes humour as "a broad term that refers to anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an

amusing stimulus, and also the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it", adding that from a psychological perspective, the humour process can be divided into four essential components: a social context, a cognitive-perceptual process, an emotional response and the vocal-behavioural expression of laughter.

Mahadev L. Apte (1985:14) offers a perspective upon humour from the anthropologist's point of view. Instead of defining it in dictionary-like terms, Apte explains that from an anthropologist's perspective, humour refers "first, to a cognitive, often unconscious experience involving internal redefining of sociocultural reality and resulting in a mirthful state of mind; second, to external sociocultural factors that trigger this cognitive experience; third, to the pleasure derived from the cognitive experience labeled 'humor'; and fourth, to the external manifestations of the cognitive experience and the resultant pleasure, expressed through mirthful laughter and smiling".

From a philosophical perspective, humour is defined according to the principles and mechanisms accounted for in various theories of humour: the superiority theory, the theory of incongruity, the theory of aggression, the theory of relief, the misattribution theory. Social theories of humour are based on the philosophical writings of Tomas Hobbes, Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, Herbert Spencer, etc. and define humour in terms of 'superiority', 'hostility' and 'aggression', being centred around the idea that the humorous effect is caused by ridiculing a 'victim' or a 'target' of the joke, the ones understanding the joke enjoying a feeling of superiority.

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. From the translator's perspective, each of the above definitions and directions provide useful directions for research. The philosophical theories of humour offer a broader and more profound understanding of the mechanisms of humour production and reception. The anthropological perspective involves exploration by cross-cultural comparison and studies the ways in which humour is linked to and interdependent of socio-cultural factors.

Translational hurdles in approaching humour in stand-up comedy

When discussing the translation of humour, specialists and researchers in Translation Studies often touch subjects such as the untranslatability of humour or the difficulties the translator is challenged with when attempting to create in the target language the same perlocutionary effect a humorous utterance produces in the source language. This study focuses on the subtitling of stand-up comedy – a particular translation mode of a particular type of text, which is an ideal candidate for research precisely because it challenges the translator with all imaginable hurdles.

The audiovisual text is a polysemiotic type of text, subject to code-switching. The subtitling process consists of turning the oral output of the original monologue/dialogue into written captions. The transition from the oral to the written code results in condensation, as subtitles are prone to time and space constraints: they usually consist of one or two lines of an average maximum of 30 to 40 Roman characters (including spaces). Captions are placed at the bottom of the screen, either centred or left-aligned and last for about 6 seconds. The difficulties arising from the technicality and constraining nature of the subtitling process add to the extra-challenge of translating humour. The subtitler has to make proof of both humorous awareness and humorous complicity, that is to get the joke and to be able to transfer it in the target language, producing basically the same effect upon the target audience that the original joke has upon the live audience. Stand-up comedy routines are notoriously over-abundant in puns, wordplay, taboo language and culture-bound references. The rhythm

of speech is extremely high, and elements such as hesitators, false starters, repetitions, slips of the tongue, interjections, etc., which are normally omitted in audiovisual translation for the sake of text economy, are often part of the punch line and thus mandatory for the comic effect. On the other hand, extratextual markers that usually help the audiovisual translator in his mediation between the source and the target language are reduced to the comedian's facial expression, gestures and posture. The canned laughter produced by the live audience is part of the soundtrack to which the target audience is constantly exposed and consequently the translator has to insert the subtitled joke with careful precision, so that the canned laughter sequence follows right after the punch-line rendered in the captions. If s/he fails to do so, the target audience might get a sense of frustration and regard the subtitler's choice as a case of mistranslation.

The equation containing all the elements enumerated above (need for textual condensation, the dynamic nature of the text, the density of culture-bound references, the high occurrence of taboo language and puns) does not appear to be a simple one. No matter how amazingly skilled the subtitler is, s/he cannot solve it unless s/he teams up with the audience whose profile is actually crucial in the process of translating stand-up comedy. This is not to say that the subtitler has the choice to 'select' the audience, but it is to suggest that in the search for the best translation solutions or 'possibilities' (as opposed to 'impossibilities' of translation) s/he should bear in mind that stand-up comedy addresses a specific audience profile. I would imagine that regular *Comedy Central* Romanian viewers have at least basic knowledge of English, are familiar with stand-up comedy routines, display a good sense of humour, are willing to 'get the joke' despite cross-cultural barriers and are prepared to hear/read taboo language and confront stereotypes without getting easily offended. They also have to share "factual knowledge" with the comedian (Nash, 1985:4), and be fairly intelligent. As Walter Nash puts it, you do not "have to be Wittgenstein before you can grapple with a pun: only that if you are to converse with wits, you must have your own wits with you." (ibidem)

The script-based theory of humour, proposed by Raskin and Attardo (*in*: Vandaele, 2002: 173-194) is specifically useful in the following analysis. It defines the script as an organized chunk of information about an object, an event, an action or a quality. Jokes are mainly based on script-opposition or incongruity, i.e. the use of words that trigger separate readings. A joke involves six parameters, called Knowledge Resources: script opposition, logical mechanism, situation, target, narrative strategy and language. Any of these, alone or separately, can trigger the joke. On the other hand, according to Attardo, a translated joke is ideal when it shares the same knowledge resources as the original joke, with the exception of the language, which is automatically changed through translation.

Taboo language

Palmer (1994:4) states that one of the principles fundamental to humour is "that a joke must not only be recognized as such, but also permitted". In the case of sitcoms and stand-up comedy, most jokes are not only permitted, but expected and required. The audience are aware of the fact that they are there to be constantly entertained, and they expect the actors or comedians to provide entertainment. They did not come to the show to follow the action or the plot (although these can also help in creating or reinforcing the humorous effect), but simply to laugh. Sitcoms are seldom criticized for making use of racial or ethnic jokes, or any kind of humorous utterances/instances that would be considered as inappropriate, abusive, offensive, taboo, etc., yet stand-up comedians often actually make a point of intentionally crossing all these borders.

The fact that jokes are already 'permitted' makes the use of taboo language a common feature of stand-up comedy. Sometimes it is used to shock, to challenge the audience, even to test their limits. It is also used to make the comedian's impersonation of a certain character or typology even more credible. It may label an ethnic feature either of the comedian him/herself or of the character s/he impersonates or mocks, it can often be used as the punch line, or it is simply a verbal habit. However, regardless of what justifies the amount of taboo language used in stand-up comedy, this specific justification is of little, if any, help for the translator. On the one hand, the notion of taboo language is culture-bound and culturally determined, in the sense that what the target audience might perceive as taboo it might pass unobserved by the primary studio or live audience. Over usage or repetition of swearwords and taboo language in the source language might reduce their effect and make them sound 'normal' to the live audience. If the show is subtitled, the target audience is exposed to the original soundtrack and taboo language is easily detectable for those members of the target audience who are familiar with the source language. The recognition of swearwords does only require a minimal knowledge of the source language. Subtitling taboo language is problematic from a double perspective. On the one hand, the written word has a stronger impact on the target audience than the spoken word. On the other hand, for various reasons, which are historically, socially and culturally justified, the translation of taboo language is treated with conspicuous caution in Romanian, being usually either undertranslated or omitted altogether. When deciding how or how much to translate of taboo language, the subtitler has to be fully aware of the cultural background of the audience. Being constantly exposed to the original soundtrack, the audience might not need to read the taboo words in the captions, they might actually check the subtitles only to make sure they got the joke, and thus too much 'fidelity' of the subtitler might make them feel under-stressed and patronized. Stand-up comedy is actually intended for a specific audience profile and has its loyal consumers, who are familiar with humour production and perception and do not rely entirely on the subtitles to enjoy the show. Stand-up comedy routines are usually rendered in a very fast pace, and the subtitler is anyway constrained by the time and space limitations of the subtitling process itself. In this respect, omission of taboo language or at least of the repetition of taboo language is perfectly justified as a translation technique. The fact that written taboo language is not easily digested by the Romanian audience does not make its undertranslated version any easier to digest, either. On the contrary, it can create an unwanted comic effect derived from the endless game of 'spotting the error' played by that segment of the target audience with a certain command of the source language, or even a sense of frustration, as trying to 'tame' the joke might actually kill it. There are of course limitations and censorship imposed by the company that broadcasts the show which depend of the age segment of the audience, the broadcast time, and the so on.

My intention is not to suggest that translation of taboo language and swearwords is not problematic when it comes to stand-up comedy, and I do not want to discuss the impossibility of translation related to this specific segment. Accurate rendering in subtitles of taboo language is, of course, possible. Yet one may wonder if it is necessary or even accepted by the audience, since it might actually shift the focus from a joke directed at a specific event, subject, butt or victim towards the taboo language itself.

Culture-bound references

Culture-bound references, on the other hand, challenge the subtitler of stand-up comedy in various ways. In order to be able to mediate between the two cultures s/he actually brings together, the subtitler must have a subtle and extended knowledge of the source culture and of

the historical, social, economic and political life of the source audience, for which the routine is primarily intended. Additionally, s/he has to have an equally good knowledge of the profile of the target audience for whom the translation is intended. The process of subtitling does not allow the use of explanatory techniques such as footnotes or explanation between brackets. The comedian delivers a stream of jokes whose butts are often politicians, religious leaders, famous people, personalities or institutions belonging to the source culture. The target audience might be totally or partially unaware of these and consequently unable to get the joke. Here is an example from one of Eddie Izzard's most famous routines, from his 1999 "Dress to Kill' show:

> His name changed from Gerry Dorsey to Engelbert Humperdinck. I mean, I just wanted to be in the room when they were working that one through: "Zingelbert Bembledack! Yingybert Dambleban! Zangelbert Bingledack! Wingelbert Humptyback! … Slut Bunwalla!" "What?!" "All right, Kringelbert Fishtybuns! Steviebuns Bottrittrundle –" "No, Gerry Dorsey! I like Gerry Dorsey!" "No, we can't, who we got? Zingelbert Bembledack, Tringelbert Wangledack, Slut Bunwalla, Klingybun Fistelvase, Dindlebert Zindledack, Gerry Dorsey, Engelbert Humptyback, Zengelbert Bingledack, Engelbert Humperdinck, Vingelbert Wingledanck –" "No, no, go back one!"

The translator has little chance in this case. It's almost entirely up to the audience to get the joke. Although it's very unlikely that the average Romanian viewer would know that Gerry Dorsey is an English pop singer born Arnold George Dorsey who, after struggling for several years to become successful, changed his name into Engelbert Humperdink, borrowing this name from a 19th century German opera composer, the information that he is a British singer can be retrieved from the context. The enumeration of German-sounding names is funny in itself, the comedian's pronunciation, facial expressions and gestures are convincing enough for the target audience to have a good laugh, but the word-play and funny references contained in the nonsensical names are completely lost. Any attempt of the subtitler to make use of domestication and try to find funny corresponding Romanian names would be useless, due to the audience's exposure to the original soundtrack. Consequently, the translator has very limited choices: either to transcribe the names as they are (counting on the fact that the audience find the scene funny due to extratextual elements anyway, and some viewers can recognize bits such as *humpty*, *back*, *slut*, *fish*, *bun*, *Stevie*, *fist*, etc. and despite being unable to actually contextualize the names, which are meaningless, they can recognize certain pun-like elements and mentally associate puns with humour) or to partially translate the names, and obtain some sort of hybrid puns (yet this approach has very little chance to result in a successful translation; English morphology has a lot more in common with German than Romanian morphology, so the association between a Romanian word and a German morpheme would not result in what the Romanian viewer would recognize as a 'germanization' of a name).

Here is another example from the same Eddie Izzard show, whose analysis would be relevant as far as culture-bound references are concerned.

> **We stole countries** with the cunning use of *flags*. Just sail around the world and stick a flag in. "I claim **India** for Britain!" They're going: "You can't claim us, we live here! **Five hundred million of us**!" "Do you have a *flag* …?" "What? We don't need a flag, this is our home, you bastards" "No flag, No Country, You can't have one! Those are the rules... that I just made up!...and I'm backing it up with this gun, that was lent to me from the **National Rifle Association**."

This monologue does not actually challenge the translator in any particular way, yet there are a few culture-bound hints that are responsible for its full comic effect upon the target audience. The target viewer is supposed to have some knowledge of the history of Great Britain. S/He should know that India belonged to the British Empire, the largest empire in history. By 1922 the British Empire held sway over about 458 million people, one-fifth of the world's population at the time. The line "*Five hundred million of us*" is an exaggeration, hence its comic effect. The National Rifle Association of the United Kingdom (NRA) is the governing body of full bore rifle and pistol shooting sports, which have become very popular in recent times. Otherwise, firearms are tightly controlled by law in the United Kingdom, are denied even to police officers, and possession of firearms by the general public can lead to severe penalties. Knowing all these aspects, it is obviously funny to hear a fragment of stand-up routine in which historical and contemporary aspects of British life are hinted at in what seems to be a child-like narrative style. The discussion about the sources of humour in this particular instance can be very complex, it is probably enough to say that much of the comic effect results from the pronunciation of the word 'flag', with an excessively British accent. However, at this point, the aim of this study is just to establish to what extent the success of the translation depends (as well as the success of the audiovisual product) on the pre-existent knowledge the target audience has about the source culture. What the subtitler can do in order to make the text more comprehensible for the target audience is to find the Romanian correspondent for NRA (*Asociaţia Vânătorilor şi Pescarilor Sportivi*, for instance), otherwise it is again entirely up to the target audience to get the joke(s).

The next example clearly proves that while the fragment is perfectly translatable, the understanding of the joke mainly depends on the audience's previous knowledge of the source language and culture (this time, a good command of the source language is actually a must for the full understanding of the punch-lines). This is another Eddie Izzard routine, in which he talks about the differences between British and American English:

> "What? Now I just wanna talk quickly about language, and then we can all go. Yeah, language. They do say Britain and America are two countries separated by the Atlantic Ocean, and it's true. No, they say, "two countries separated by a common language," that's the line; it's an Oscar Wilde line, I think..and we do pronounce things in a different way, like you say "caterpillar" and we say "caterpillar," and… You say "alu*mi*num" and we say "alu*mi*nium." You say, "cen*tri*fugal" and we say "centri*fu*gal." You say, "leisure" and we say "*lizuray."* You say "*baysil"* and we say "*bah*sil." You say "*'erbs*" and we say "*h*erbs," because there's a f'king "H" in it… But you spell through *THRU,* and I'm with you on that, 'cause we spell it *"THRUFF,"* and that's trying to cheat at Scrabble."

Again, the subtitler can do very little to make the text fully comprehensible for a non-English speaker. Yet, even if a member of the target audience has no knowledge of English whatsoever, s/he is still likely to know that English is spoken in both Great Britain and the United States, and that there are differences in the pronunciation of certain words. The original soundtrack can also be of help in exemplifying these differences. The first punch-line "*you say 'caterpillar' and we say 'caterpillar'*," that actually triggers a few good seconds of laughter from the live audience (the incongruity here being that the first example in a row meant to exemplify differences in pronunciation in certain pairs of words consists of a pair pronounced identically in the two languages) is probably lost for our potential non-English speaking viewer if the subtitler does not come with an explanation. On the other hand, an explanatory technique (in the form of a caption saying "pronunţăm 'caterpillar'/'omidă' ca şi

voi" which would be awkward, to say the least) would kill the joke, since the comic effect is triggered by the incongruity between the audience's expectation to hear words pronounced differently and the example containing identical pronunciation. Another choice the translator has to make is between rendering the pairs of differently pronounced words in English and translating them. The obvious choice that aims at obtaining the perlocutionary humorous effect is to render them in English (and maybe make use of italics to signal the stressed syllable, although this technique is more common in fansubs than in traditional subtitles). This way, the target viewer with a certain command of English can use the subtitles just for reassurance. While 'aluminium' and 'centrifugal' are easily recognizable by the Romanian viewer, since the Romanian equivalents are similar in spelling and pronunciation, for 'leisure', 'herbs' and 'through' in order to get the joke s/he should have a mental picture of /ˈlɛʒə/ vs. /ˈliː.ʒɚ/, /hɚːb/ vs. /(h)ərb/ or **thru** vs. **through** and also know that the group of letters 'ough' is phonetically rendered by the sound 'f' in certain words (like tough - /tʌf/, for instance). To all this linguistic knowledge, the target viewer should add the knowledge of a passionate Scrabble player, who knows that in Scrabble, an F is worth 4 points, as compared to an U, which is only worth 1 point. In addition, in order to enjoy the feeling of mirth resulting from the successful decoding of humour, the audience should also have some specific knowledge of literature and supposedly remember that in *The Canterville Ghost* (1887), Oscar Wilde wrote: "We have really everything in common with America nowadays except, of course, language", as well as the statement "The United States and Great Britain are two countries separated by a common language" which is widely attributed to George Bernard Shaw, although not found in his published works. References like these are actually meant to help the audience get that 'feeling of superiority' specific to the perception of humour. The feeling is enhanced by the simple recognition of the writer's name, whether or not the audience are able to identify the exact quotation is less important in this respect.

Conclusions

The analysis above brings arguments in favour of the initial suggestion that the profile of the target audience and their previous knowledge of the source culture, as well as a certain command of the source language are essential in the process of successful translation of stand-up comedy. It takes thus a team of three to get the joke across: the comedian (the producer), the subtitler (receiver and producer at the same time) and the target audience (the receiver). The fact that the target audience should have a certain profile in order to qualify as consumers of stand-up comedy does not in any way render the subtitler's mission easier or pointless. The subtitler is still there to bridge between the two cultures, by surpassing barriers that are more numerous, diverse and deeply rooted than in many other types of texts. Nevertheless, s/he should carefully consider the risks of over-translation, unnecessary domestication and understressing the audience and make sure his/her fidelity is expressed in terms of dynamic rather than textual equivalence. **Acknowledgements**

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