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# TRANSLATING HUMOUR IN AUDIOVISUAL TEXTS



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## Foreword

### Humour and audiovisual translation: an overview

Audiovisual translation (AVT) is a long established practice. It can be traced back to the origins of cinema, i.e., to the silent era, and it grew more complex during the transition to the sound era, when intertitles transformed into subtitles, early dubbing arose, and multiple-language versions as well as multilingual scripts had to be handled. For over 80 years now AVT has played a major role in satisfying the ever growing need to make film products readily available in numerous countries around the world. There are several known modes of AVT. They include the more common dubbing and subtitling (in its inter- and intra-lingual forms), and the less widespread voice-over, narration and commentary, and they now also embrace audio description for the blind. It is known that historical factors, financial means, cultural background, political orientation, linguistic choices and geographical dynamics have influenced countries around the world in choosing the form which better suited them, and most of them still stick to them (Perego & Taylor, 2012).

Once established, AVT soon aroused intense interest on the part of practitioners and scholars who started to feel the need to understand its inner mechanisms. Orero (2009) sets 1932 as the earliest date for research on AVT, which however began to be considered as part of the discipline of *Translation Studies* only around the 1980s, after considerable stiff resistance. Indeed, as Chaume (2004, but see also Kozloff, 2000; Pardo, 2013) points out, audiovisual texts had long been scorned and considered aesthetically inferior to literary works, which is the reason why AVT had been excluded as a discipline till relatively recently. Gambier (2003) claims that 1995, i.e., the date of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of the cinema, is when AVT really started to flourish, perhaps due to the fact that the 90s was a period of great advance in new

technology. Díaz Cintas (2009) agrees, and sees in the close of the 20th century the moment of major expansion of interest in the topic.

Since AVT has been ascribed a clear role within the field of *Translation Studies* and as a university discipline (at least in some countries, e.g. Gottlieb, 1992), many scholars have begun to dissect its various properties. Initially, interest converged on very broad linguistic, technical, and translational aspects. Very soon however a strong need arose to tackle more specific and particularly challenging areas. Humour is one of them. Nowadays, as all the contributors to this volume point out, the literature on humour in AVT is abundant.

Most studies published on the subject are case studies and they consider the rendering of humour in dubbing and in subtitling, virtually excluding the analysis of this complex event in other forms of AVT (with some rare yet notable exceptions: Martínez-Sierra, 2009, 2010, for instance, has recently made the first attempt to study humour in audio description for the blind). In line with this tendency, this volume includes ten papers focussing specifically on dubbing, five papers focussing specifically on subtitling (standard subtitling, with the exception of Buffagni, who considers German intralingual subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing), and four papers which consider and contrast both modes. The translation into Italian of US English videogames is also tackled in two contributions (Lepre and Iaia). A more general and theoretically grounded picture of humour and AVT is offered by Chiaro in her preface and by Zabalbeascoa, whose introductory contributions open the volume and set the ground for the works that follow.

The case studies presented in the volume all attempt to analyze and to describe the strategies used to render specific aspects of such a complex phenomenon in languages and cultures that are different from the languages and the cultures in which the products in question had originally been conceived. All of them are descriptive papers attempting to explain what it means to deal with humour in translation, and to understand the reasons for those translation tendencies and choices that have determined the success or failure, the appreciation or the disapproval of a given product abroad.

In terms of genres, the range of products analyzed in the volume is wide but it understandably focusses on humour-based genres, which tend to feature (verbally and nonverbally expressed) humorous instances. Consequently, it is most often comedy that appears to be chosen for

analysis (as in the papers of Colaci, De Bonis, De Laurentiis, Lupetti, Rollo, Schröter). After all, comedy, which is a hybrid film genre, “merges together a series of narrative functions linked to humorous effects” (Bruti & Perego, 2008: 16, but see also Brancato, Denunzio & Frezza, 2001, and Dirk, 2006) – in a nutshell, in comedy language exaggerations and laughter-provoking, light-hearted plots are carefully contrived to amuse and entertain the viewer. Similar genres and sub-genres are likewise chosen. In particular, animations (aka cartoons and animated comedies, and analyzed by Bianchi, Bruti, De Rosa, Minutella, Mudriczki) which are entertaining products, but also US serial comedies and serial animations (Di Pietro, Martínez-Sierra), which typically portray hilarious situations and exploit verbal humour to amuse their audiences (Bruti & Perego, 2008: 31). Instances of humour have been detected and analyzed also in dramas and comedy-dramas (Buffagni, Garzelli, Maher), in spite of their being typically intense, plot-driven, realistic portrayals of life and character relationships (Dirk, 2006). The pervasiveness of humour enables it to infiltrate also in musical and dance films (Cipolloni) and in thrillers (Rosendo), and to be functional even in videogames (Iaia, Lepre), which are special types of highly interactive and engaging audiovisual texts, often exploiting comedic purposes to involve the player.

The humorous effect of games and that of different film genres is achieved through an infinite number of resources. In fact, universally humorous situations are very rare. The fact that the means to achieve comic effects are countless and not always shared, and the fact that they depend on the languages and the modes of AVT in question, certainly challenges the translator in several ways, as all the case studies gathered in this volume meticulously show.

In particular, the range of both source and target languages taken into account by the authors is considerably wide. The former include US English (Bianchi, Bruti, Cipolloni, De Bonis, De Rosa, Di Pietro, Iaia, Lepre, Martínez-Sierra, Minutella, Mudriczki, Schröter) which dominates the scene and is accompanied by the Australian variety (Maher), but they also include fewer instances of other languages: French (Lupetti, Rollo), German (Buffagni, Colaci) and Spanish (Garzelli, Rosendo), Italian (De Laurentiis) and European Portuguese (Tocco). On the other hand, the target languages that are considered are dominated by Italian (Bianchi, Bruti, Cipolloni, Colaci, De Bonis, De Rosa, Di Pietro, Garzelli, Iaia, Lepre, Lupetti, Maher, Minutella, Mudriczki, Rollo) but also

include Spanish (Cipolloni, De Laurentiis, De Rosa, Martínez-Sierra), English (Rosendo, Tocco), German (Buffagni, Mudriczki), French (Tocco), Brazilian and European Portuguese (De Rosa), Mexican Spanish (De Rosa), Hungarian (Mudriczki) and Swedish (Schröter).

As mentioned earlier, the modes of AVT that have been taken into account are dubbing and subtitling. The analysis of the translation of humour in such a wide combination of languages and AVT modes enables us to identify at least some trends and preferences. Most papers, for instance, show that compensation in the most diverse forms is regularly resorted to when translators have to handle humour, and a dynamic (vs. formal) equivalence (Nida, 1964) is typically opted for to overcome the hurdles. Handling the infinite humour-making resources that different languages use is challenging. However, losses can be mitigated, humorous instances can be relocated, and further layers of meaning can be added in the target texts. However, if it is true, as most papers highlight, that the role and the skills of the translator as creative problem-solver and adapter is central, and if it is true that granting him/her more working time and better working conditions might improve the quality of the end-product, it is also true that the audience need to be active and collaborative: interpretative creativity is a prerequisite, and a responsibility, for both translators and audiences. But in the final analysis it is the audience's ability to (re)interpret the translated product that plays a major role in its final appreciation and enjoyment, especially as regards the humorous nuances of the film he or she has decided to watch.

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