

Verbally Expressed Humour on Screen: Reflections on Translation and Reception

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ABSTRACT

As is well known, the translation of Verbally Expressed Humour (VEH) is an especially thorny issue both practically and theoretically. This paper sets out to discuss the sphere of VEH on screen and how it is received by audiences who are exposed to instances which are mediated linguistically by means of dubbing.

KEYWORDS

Dubbing, quality, reception, Screen Translation, Verbally Expressed Humour.

BIOGRAPHY

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1. Humour and Screen Translation

The results of an interview survey carried out in 120 companies involved in the Italian dubbing industry and based in Rome and Milan shows that operators unanimously consider Verbally Expressed Humour (VEH) the most challenging factor in producing good quality translations for the screen (Benincà, 1999: 58-59 and 83-86). This of course fits in perfectly with the wider issue of humour and translation which has traditionally been considered to be a problematic area both from the perspective of its practical translation, in the sense that VEH is notoriously difficult to translate, and from a theoretical point of view owing to the fact that it is at odds with the very tenets of translation theory, the concepts of equivalence and translatability (Vandaele, 2002; Chiaro, 2005). However, no matter how complex issues concerning the translation of written and spoken instances of VEH may be, they are relatively simple when compared to the intricacy of having to translate them when they occur within a text created to be performed on screen. Films are multifaceted semiotic entities simultaneously communicating verbal signs acoustically (dialogue, song lyrics, etc.), visually (written texts, such as letters, newspaper headlines, banners, etc.), non-verbally but acoustically (music, background noises, etc.), and non-verbally but visually (actor's movements, facial expressions, setting, etc.). Yet, the translator's intervention is limited to only one of these aspects, i.e. the dialogue, leaving all the other features unchanged. In a comedy, which may well

rely on several of these features concurrently in order to create the desired effect, if the verbal code is the only dimension which can be manipulated to aid the target culture in capturing the humour, the translator's job is a delicate one. Thus, while many translational problems which regard VEH on screen are similar to those also found in written texts, namely conveying extreme lingua-cultural specificity interlingually, often they turn out to be multiplied several times over owing to the very restrictions which the visual code imposes upon the translation. As stated by Müller (quoted in Whitman-Linsen, 1992: 141).

Selbst jene Übersetzer, die in der absoluten Treu zum Original (wie auch immer definiert und praktiziert) ein Dogma sehen, müssen in solchen Fällen entweder kampflos das Feld räumen (und damit auf Komik verzichten) oder ihren Prinzipien untreu werden und selbst neue, andere komische Elemente erfinden und einbringen, über die auch das ZS-Publikum lachen kann. (...) Gerade bei der Bearbeitung gemacht worden ist, sollte die vielbeschworene 'treu zum Original' hinter dem Bemühungen zurück stecken, auch das Zielpublikum lachen zu machen.

[Those translators who see absolute translation as a dogma must, in such cases, either abandon the field (and give up translating comicity) or betray their principles and find humorous ideas elsewhere in the text so that the target audience can laugh too (...) it is indeed in the elaboration of a screen text, created to amuse the public that 'fidelity to the original' should be relegated to second place behind attempts to make the target audience laugh.] (My translation)

2. Translational norms of VEH on screen

Let us begin by considering an example taken from the British comedy *A Fish Called Wanda* (1988). The instance of VEH in question is straightforward with regard to translational complexity given that it is totally independent of the visual code. In this sense, the example presents the same difficulties in translation as an instance of VEH occurring off screen in written or in oral form. In a scene of the film, Wanda, (Jamie Lee Curtis) commenting on the stupidity of her 'brother' Otto (Kevin Kline) declares:

He's so dumb he thought that the Gettysburg Address was where Lincoln lived.

Understanding this quip is totally dependent on audiences' recognition of both linguistic and cultural features contained in the utterance which cannot be translated retaining the same references because Italian has no polysemy attached to the term 'address'. Not only that, but we can be fairly certain that Italian audiences may be unaware of the episode in the American Civil War with which British and American audiences are familiar. Obviously, equivalence will need to be relinquished in favour of skopos which in this instance is presumably to amuse. Thus, in the Italian version we find:

È così stupido, credeva che Piccadilly Circus fosse un circo equestre.
[He's so dumb, he thought Piccadilly Circus was an equestrian circus.]

The core component of Otto's stupidity is maintained through the reference to an internationally recognized landmark while, at the same time, the pun on 'Circus/*circo*' is, in a way, similar to the pun on 'address'. However, as we said, this is a relatively simple translational problem to solve as the visuals on screen simply present the characters conversing hence making lip synch the only serious difficulty.

Chiaro (1992: 85-87) provides an example of the kind of mismatch which may typically occur in translation when a joke or a quip totally depends on the visual code. In a scene from *The Big Chill* (1983), Sam, played by Tom Berenger, typecast as a good looking imbecile, is asked by Meg (Mary Kay Place) to father her child. Sam is puzzled and asks her why she has chosen him, to which Meg replies 'You've got good genes!'. At this point, Sam looks down, strokes his trousers and stares at them in bewilderment. The Italian version becomes *perché hai dei buoni geni* [because you have good genes] but, unlike English, the Italian word for 'genes' is not homophonic with 'jeans'. *Geni* refers to chemically patterned information and not also to denim trousers thus creating an infelicitous mismatch between visual and verbal code, rendering Sam's ignorance no longer apparent. The example typifies the way in which the complexity inherent to the translation of VEH increases when, over and above lingua-cultural specificity, we add its obligatory dependence on the visuals we can see on screen.

In the case of VEH on screen, whenever possible, it is most likely that one of the following three translational strategies is adopted (Chiaro, 2004: 42):

- (1) The substitution of VEH in the Source Language (SL) with an example of VEH in the Target Language (TL).
- (2) The replacement of the SL VEH with an idiomatic expression in the TL.
- (3) The replacement of the SL VEH with an example of compensatory VEH elsewhere in the TL text.

2.1. Substitution of VEH in the SL with an example of VEH in the TL

Given that it is highly unlikely to find the same words, sounds, forms and concepts in two different languages which must also happen to possess the same ambiguity that can be exploited for humorous means, this solution is extremely difficult and very much dependent on the dexterity of the translators and dubbing-scriptwriters. However, if even just a partial aspect of the original VEH can be captured this can lead to a satisfying solution for audiences.

2.1.1. Preserving partial meaning of SL VEH

In a scene in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) US future mother-in-law presents her Greek counterpart with a bunt, a word which she confuses with the term 'bonk' and then repeats over and over in a questioning tone. In the Italian version, the Greek mother-in-law is presented with a *cassata* which is misunderstood to be a *cazzata*. Again, the word is repeated over and over. Both bunts and cassata are types of cakes and both 'bonk' and *cazzata* are slightly taboo words with sexual innuendos in their respective languages. Of course, a bunt looks nothing like a *cassata*, so Italian audiences were likely to be nonplussed, but then, British audiences too are unlikely to know what a bunt is, although it is pretty obvious in both versions that they are talking about a cake.

2.1.2. Preserving SL form

An example in which VEH is translated using the same linguistic technique of the SL occurs in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), when novice priest (Rowan Atkinson) botches one of the four ceremonies by mixing up certain sounds in the litany. The Italian dubbing-scriptwriters solved the problem by adding syllables to the Italian litany thus creating an equally irreverent effect:

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Goat...

Nel nome del Padre, del Figlio e dello spiritoso Santo...

[In the name of the Father, the Son and the lively Ghost...]

...to be your awful wedded wife...

...la tua illegitima sposa...

[...your illegitimate wife...]

As the probability of finding the same room for humorous manoeuvre between 'goat/ghost' (*capra/spirito*) and 'awful/lawful' (*terribile/leggitima*) would have been highly unlikely in Italian, the dubbing translators chose to retain a vaguely similar category of wordplay as the SL, i.e. toying with sounds. Interestingly, where in the SL a sound is removed from 'ghost' to get 'goat', in the Target Text a syllable is added onto *spirito* [spirit] to get *spiritoso* which means lively. Again, with the play on 'awful/lawful', English drops a sound while in the Italian a sound is gained *leggitima/illeggitima*. This is an especially successful translation because, as well as form, a partial core meaning of the original is maintained.

2.1.3. Preserving (partial) meaning of SL VEH and SL form

In *Horse Feathers* (1932), dean of faculty Groucho Marx is signing a document when he asks someone to give him a seal. Harpo, quite typically, produces an animal. In Italian the item 'seal' (*sigillo*) is monosemous so the film's dubbing-scriptwriters were faced with running the risk of puzzling spectators with a word-for-word translation. Long before the days of digitalisation, the visual code could not be modified in any way and the dubbing director came up with the verb *focalizziamo* as a solution meaning literally, 'Let's focus on it'. Although slightly different in formal terms – we have two imperatives but they are strictly dissimilar – a claim for close equivalence can easily be made not only in terms of communicative function (i.e. it is clearly a joke) but also because a large portion of the ST core meaning is retained through the stem *foca* which in Italian denotes the animal 'seal'.

2.2. Preserving the VEH in the SL with an idiomatic expression in the TL

The Marx Brothers again offer an interesting example in *Duck Soup* (1933). Groucho (Firefly) is president of Freedonia and Chico and Harpo are two incompetent spies:

Trentino (President of Sylvania): But I asked you to dig up something I could use against Firefly. Did you bring his record? (Pinky pulls out a gramophone record from his coat).

Trentino: Volete rispondermi a tono una volta per tutte! Cambiate disco per Bacco!
[Trentino: Will you answer me once and for all! Change the record/subject for Goodness' sake!]

As the object of the joke is clearly visible to audiences, ignoring a reference to a record would simply create a non sequitur. The problem was resolved in Italian by replacing the polysemous 'record' with the idiom *cambiare disco* which means 'to change the subject' (literally 'change the record', in which the word *disco* denotes a 'disc/record').

2.3. Preserving the VEH in the SL with compensatory VEH elsewhere in the TT

Dreamworks' production *Chicken Run* (2000) is thick with puns from start to finish which are hardly ever reflected in the Italian version. For example, the main character is a rooster voiced by Mel Gibson who introduces himself as follows: 'The name's Rocky. Rocky the Rhode Island Red. Rhodes for short', creating the pun Rocky Roads. On another occasion, British rooster Fowler (the pun is certainly intended), referring to Rocky, remarks: 'Pushy Americans, always showing up late for every war: overpaid, over sexed and over here'. We also hear quips like 'birds of a feather flop together', 'poultry in motion', and 'it's raining hen', all of

them instances which must surely be a screen translator's nightmare. Italian dubbing scriptwriters, finding themselves in a tight corner, opted for a compensatory strategy which consisted of not even attempting to translate most of the source VEH with VEH in Italian, but rather for endowing Fowler with a stammer which makes him say *Co co co* at the beginning of every utterance, thus creating fresh humour through the characteristic vocal sound of (Italian) chickens and their childish name *Co co co*.

3. Dubbed comedy on Italian screens

Dubbed comedies in Italy tend to receive harsh criticism from ever more discerning audiences who are aware that jokes and quips do not always work in their translated versions. Nevertheless, several British comedies such as *A Fish called Wanda*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *The Full Monty* (1997), *Notting Hill* (1999) and *The Diary of Bridget Jones* (2001), not to mention North American productions such as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, have been huge box office successes despite inevitable linguistic and cultural barriers which tend to make humour so difficult to export and consequently appreciate. Interestingly, these comedies contain very few puns and therefore present fewer difficulties in translation than comedies which are denser in terms of word play. Similarly, US sitcoms such as *Friends*, *Sex and the City* and *Ally MacBeal*, which are successful in Italy in their dubbed versions, tend to rely on good lines rather than puns. Good lines are sharp and clever remarks which are hard to define in terms of VEH. In other words, while a pun is dependant upon linguistic ambiguity, cultural ambiguity, or a mixture of both, a good line is not. Let us label so called 'good lines' as non-specific Verbally Expressed Humour (NSpVEH). Audrey Meadows, in *That Touch of Mink* (1962), consoles her lovestruck best friend, Doris Day, with the following speech which ends in a good line or NSpVEH:

For two thousand years we've had their children, washed their clothes, cooked their meals and cleaned their houses and what have they given us in return? The right to smoke in public. And you don't even smoke!

Of course the last line is ironic. It is in contrast to the chunk of language which immediately precedes it, but in no way is there any linguistic or cultural ambiguity. It thus presents no particular translational problems. Again, in the Hollywood classic *His Girl Friday* (1940), Rosalind Russel delivers the following speech which exemplifies a crescendo of NSpVEH:

Get this, you double crossing chimpanzee, there ain't gonna be no interview and there ain't gonna be no story if that certified cheque isn't leaving with me in twenty minutes. I wouldn't cover the burning of Rome for you if they were just lighting it up, and if I ever set my two eyes on you again I'm gonna walk right up to you and hammer on that skull of yours until it rings like a mighty gong.

Dense with good lines, again would it really cause any translational difficulties? This leads us to raise the issue of whether density of wordplay, and consequently difficulty in translation, could be the reason why so many comedies are destined to flop outside their country of origin. Indeed, the Marx Brothers, whose films were an endless concatenation of what are frequently visually dependent puns, were popular the world over too, although it could be argued that Hollywood monopolized the cinema at the time. On the contrary, Italian film comedian Totò, contemporary of the Marx Brothers and whose style was not so different, did not make it beyond Italy despite perfectly adequate subtitled versions.

On the other hand, it would appear that much VEH on both big and small screen tends to be based on irony rather than punning. Yet, as Zabalbeascoa (2002) observes, if the viewer has no access to the cultural presuppositions behind the irony, despite a straightforward translation which apparently presents no particular culture-specific or linguistic difficulties, the humour involved may well be lost. Zabalbeascoa (*ibid.*) considers the opening monologue of the film *Trainspotting* (1996):

Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking big television. Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players, and electrical tin openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol and dental insurance. Choose fixed-interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. Choose leisure wear and matching luggage. Choose a three piece suite on hire purchase in a range of fucking fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing sprit-crushing game shows, stuffing fucking junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pissing your last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, fucked-up brats you have spawned to replace yourself. Choose your future. Choose life. I chose not to choose life: I chose something else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs reasons when you've got heroin?

Linguistically basic and undemanding in terms of interlingual translation, the irony appears to come across equally well outside the UK. The contradiction in the text does, of course, depend upon the monologue with the constant repetition of the item 'choose' coupled with a gripping visual text in which we witness heroin addicts Renton and Spud firstly being chased by the police and then lying on the ground motionless and drugged in a filthy and squalid environment. The ironic 'choose' – the slogan of countless advertising campaigns and the banner of Thatcherism – jars against the detailed mockery of the middle class British dream which is depicted on the screen. Neither Renton nor Spud has chosen the life they disparagingly criticize, but total squalor instead. Apart from requiring the knowledge of a culture in which homes are furnished with three piece suites and men indulge in DIY at weekends, the viewer needs to understand the opposing script (Raskin, 1985) in which, by choosing

heroin, what is being disparaged by the speaker is replaced by the dismal underworld of drugs. The fact that, in this case, such recognition is not only a linguistic skill but a question of cognitive competence in which the visual code plays an imperative role, may well be the reason why the humour succeeds cross-culturally.

In fact, box office takings prove that the films mentioned previously have been to the taste of audiences world wide. Yet we can never be certain whether audiences appreciate the films in the same way from culture to culture. For example, watching the same film, do Italian audiences laugh in the same places as British audiences? And does this depend on a different sense of humour or could it depend upon the translation? The character of Charles (Hugh Grant) in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* does come across very differently in the Italian version precisely because of the translational choices adopted (Chiaro, 2000). In the original, he is a dithering, overgrown ex-public schoolboy who is unable to get his act together with cool American beauty Carrie (Andie McDowell). His sexual insecurity is reflected in his speech as he stumbles through his lines in a stereotypically British way. A glance at any electronic corpus of spoken British English will reveal a high frequency of hesitations, repetitions and general verbal treading of water. Thus, Charles' speech contains endless examples of vague language such as 'sort of', 'or something', 'and anything', 'and everything', 'you know', etc. In translation this vagueness is lost as dithering Charles is transformed into an assertive Charles, consequently becoming less amusing. The following English dialogue:

Do you think...you might agree not to marry me, and do you think not being married to me may be something you might consider doing for the rest of your life? I do. Do you?

is translated into Italian in a way that portrays Charles as a character far more self confident than in the original:

Tu credi che...tu saresti d'accordo di diventare mia moglie? E credi che il fatto di non sposarmi è una possibilità che potresti valutare, voglio dire per il resto della tua vita? Vuoi?

[Do you think that...could you agree to becoming my wife? And do you think that you might be willing to evaluate the possibility of becoming my wife, I mean to say, for the rest of your life? - author's back translation]

Such subtleties require investigation. Do culturally different audiences laugh in the same places? And if they do not, how far will this depend upon culture-specific presuppositions and how far on the quality of translation? Comic films are successful in many cultures, yet for different reasons. Translation must surely play an important role. However, even if we may quite safely hypothesize that quality of translation can either make or break a comedy, it is only one single factor among many which contributes to a film's success. Even if we could provide sufficient data to

show that quality of translation is a significant variable in the success of a comedy, we cannot forget other variables such as the actors, screenplay, other films on the circuit at a particular moment in time, socio-economic factors regarding audiences, advertising campaigns, and the psychological state of spectators themselves. Hence, it would be quite hard to discern exactly why so many comedies flop in their translated versions.

A matrix such as Fig.1, in which the success of a film in two countries is compared, could be helpful. The variable which is of interest is represented by the arrow which cuts across the graph and in which the constant of quality is clearly implicated.

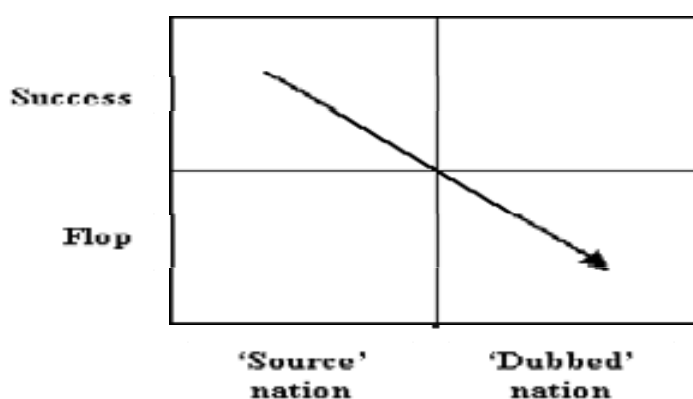


Fig.1

Films which place themselves in the two upper squares would obviously be well dubbed, those in the bottom right hand square are patently flops. What would be interesting to find out is how far the punning variable is responsible for the non-success of a film outside its country of origin. Investigations could show us why, how, and to what extent quality of translation influences the success of a film.

4. Concluding remarks

Being an inter-discipline, Humour Studies could well play an important role in empirically grounded cross-cultural research within the field of Translation Studies. While much cross-cultural research so far has dealt with descriptions of national styles of humour (Davies, 1998) there is no research which investigates humour as an individual difference variable across more cultures (Ruch, 1988). In other words, the question which we might ask now is how far a positive humour response to translated VEH is dependent on cultural differences, individual differences or on the translation itself.

Let us bear in mind that, apart from attempting to understand what different cultures find humorous and why, we are still unaware of exactly what is understood by the term humour in all cultures. A recent pilot psycholexical investigation carried out via the World Wide Web by psychologist Ruch (2002) and his associates sought, amongst other

things, to establish humour-related terms in as many languages/cultures as possible. This laudable first step, however, involved the administration of a questionnaire which was couched in the English language. Linguistic imperialism apart, the pre-suppositions underlying the English term in the first place may well differ greatly from the equivalent term in another language and culture. Psychologists and lexicographers would do well to work hand-in-hand on such projects. Beyond the theories of equivalence and translatability of jokes and quips, perhaps this link with psychology research could represent a new and unexplored area within Translation Studies. All humans are capable of producing laughter, and cross-cultural studies to date reveal the existence of several transcultural common denominators (Ruch, 1998). These results could well lead us to believe that linguistic differences alone are an obstacle to a positive humour response across cultures. If this is true, and to end on a rather provocative note, could this mean that the answer to the appreciation of translated humour on screen might lie in the issue of the quality of translation?

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