

The Translation of Verbally-Expressed Humour on Screen in Slovakia: An Outline of Research Problems

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Abstract

The problems of an academic study of humour have been overlooked for a long time and world-wide, there is only a handful of researchers dealing in this field. In the context of today's transatlantic world, where cultures are exposed to each other as never before, the study of humour and its translation between different cultures becomes a "hot topic". This paper tries to formulate the bases and problems for a research of the translation of audiovisual humour in the Slovak context. It presents certain culture-specific considerations in the taste in humour and the issues connected with its translation. It is meant as an introduction to this problem and provides arguments stressing the importance and possible benefits of such a research to be conducted.

1. Introduction

Due to the regime change in 1989, Slovakia opened up to the western world physically, politically and culturally. A major part of the cultural import that followed and is still continuing today was the import of western audio-visual production. Films and series, especially those produced in the United States, are very popular with Slovak audiences, which is evidenced by the frequency with which television networks include these programmes as a part of their airing schedules and the numbers of US-produced films showed in cinemas. Naturally, this influx of foreign language audio-visual (AV) production propelled the development and growth of the dubbing and subtitling industry and the emergence of private dubbing studios, as before 1989, all dubbing works have been performed by studios which were a part of the national broadcasting network. With growing experience, the quality of the final dubbing efforts has been improving ever since but it still varies, from production to production.

This quality of audio-visual translation (dubbing and subtitling) is a decisive factor in terms of success or failure of a foreign-language production with domestic audiences. Besides the general quality of the translation, it is especially one element, on which the success rests and that is humour. As we are talking about the entertainment industry, entertainment is what the audience is expecting to be delivered. But what has been successful in its home market might not be as successful outside of it. The taste of the audiences may differ quite significantly. For example, Sasha Cohen's *Da Ali G Show*, produced in the United Kingdom, has not been met with positive reviews in the United States, as making fun of politicians is socially accepted and considered humorous in the UK, while it is frowned upon in the US (Chiaro, 2005: 137). This is a specific situation, as America and Britain are both English-speaking countries, but the rationale is the same. What is funny in one culture may not be funny in another, if transferred directly.

This fact makes the translation of humour very difficult for the translator but it is not the only one. Another factor is the nature of AV translation. Dubbing and subtitling, as specialized forms of translation, are limited by the medium they are functioning in. As the name says, audio-visual productions provide the viewer with stimuli via sound and vision, making it harder for the translator to produce an equivalent target language version. If a humorous situation or a joke translated literally within a book is not funny, the translator can replace it with one that is. But on the screen, if the verbal joke is bound to a visual stimulus, it provides less room for the translator to alter the joke.

The third factor is the nature of translation of any instance of verbal humour. The problem with the translation of humour is strongly connected to the generally accepted definition of what translation is. One of the most widely accepted definitions of translation, by Mildred Larson (1989: 3) says that

translation [...] consists of studying the lexicon, grammatical structure, communication situation, and cultural context of the source language text, analyzing it in order to determine its meaning, and then reconstructing this same meaning using the lexicon and grammatical structure which are appropriate in the receptor language and its cultural context.

This definition, like many others, is heavily meaning-based, which renders it unfit to be a good basis for the translation of humour. As expressed, among others, by Vandaele, “humour is not articulated in the sense of conventionally coded linguistic units per se, a semantic meaning attached to a lexical linguistic form” (2002: 151). This basically means that the actual semantic meaning of any instance of verbal humour is secondary to its primary intention to be humorous, i.e. to evoke amusement and/or laughter. As it is with the translation of poetry, it is not only the task of the translator to interpret the meaning of the text but also to capture the mood and evoke in the target text audience the same or similar feelings to those experienced by the source text audience. This, then, requires a high degree of poetic creativity just as the translation of humour requires a good sense of humour. For this reason, as well as because humour has for a long time been considered untranslatable (Vandaele 2002; Chiaro 2005; Delabastita 1994), it is by many considered as one of the most difficult types of translation.

The academic study of humour is a rather young field of research, with the first major work on this subject, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour*, published in 1985 by Viktor Raskin. Humour studies and the description of humour are based in linguistics, psychology, sociology and other disciplines, yet the systematic study of humour has until recently not received much attention. This paper tries to formulate and summarize some elementary considerations concerning the translation of humour, especially verbal humour in audio-visual productions in Slovakia, and stresses the importance of an ongoing academic study in this field, not only in Slovakia. Although by now, good foundations have been laid for this study, research is still needed to determine, how well humour travels across cultures, what counts as humour in particular cultures but also how to practically apply this knowledge in translations, especially AV translations. To this end, an instance of humour needs to be correctly identified, analyzed, categorized and only then translated.

2. What is humour

Even though humour is always present in our lives, be it in day-to-day conversation with friends and family, in advertising, in literature and on television, there is no specific definition of what humour is and scholars in this field have expressed doubt that it is even possible to formulate a valid and all-encompassing definition of humour (see Attardo 1994: 3). For the purposes of translation studies, a very broad definition is accepted, that that text or utterance should be considered humorous, the perlocutionary effect of which is laughter (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1981). This means that humour is whatever is intended to be amusing, even if it is not. Several researchers have used this minimalist definition of humour to construct more specific typologies of humour (Attardo 1994; Raskin 1985).

Humour, in all its varieties is a phenomenon of many forms, which can be only hardly described by a single theory, which is why most of the proposed theories of humour are mixing several approaches from different fields of science – linguistics, sociology, psychology and others. (Krikmann 2005).

The first expressed linguistic theory of humour, as already mentioned, was proposed in 1985 by Viktor Raskin and is based on 'script opposition' and 'incongruity'. Script opposition is defined as an instance when a text is compatible fully or in part with two different scripts (readings), which are mutually incompatible, thus creating an incongruity. This opposition may be for example, between a sexual and non-sexual reading, as exemplified by Raskin (1985: 106) in this joke

An English bishop received the following note from the vicar of a village in his diocese: "Milord, I regret to inform you of my wife's death. Can you possibly send me a substitute for the weekend?"

Later, Attardo developed this theory further and, among other changes, added, that the same text has to contain a part, where one script changes into the other, resolving this incongruity and so producing a humorous effect.

Another theory, that of 'superiority', argues in favour of aggressive humour, aimed against, or expressing a negative attitude towards certain individuals or groups. So, for example, the English have Irish jokes, the West Germans have East German jokes, the Slovaks have Hungarian jokes and many cultures have blonde jokes. For other theories of verbal humour, see, for example, Koestler – *The Act of Creation* or Attardo – *Script Theory Revisited: Joke Similarity and Joke Representation Model*.

As has been said, humour is even that which is intended to be funny but isn't. Therefore, the process of translation should start with the correct identification of instances of humour and the analysis thereof to determine how it works and only then can it be translated.

3. Humour across cultures

Above all, the translation of humour is an intercultural problem. Different cultures structure reality in different ways, create different cognitive schemes, understand and talk about the world differently. Even when the translator manages to identify a joke and finds the equivalent lexical means to translate it into the target language, the humour may still be lost. This is where precedence is given to function over form, adhering to the rules of the Skopos approach to translation, trying to create the same effect in the target-language audience, even if that means sacrificing the lexical meaning of the source-language material, or a part of it.

Zabalbeascoa (1996), identifies seven types of jokes, creating seven different approaches to translation: (1) the *international joke*, the humour of which is not based on linguistic or cultural aspects of the source-culture; (2) the *bi-national-joke*, similar to the previous one; (3) the *national-culture-institutions jokes*, where the translator needs to change or adapt certain aspects of the joke to maintain the humorous effect; (4) the *national-sense-of-humor-joke*, building on culture-specific themes which need not be humorous in the target language and which have to be changed or adapted; (5) the *language-dependent jokes*, which build on specific aspects of the source language itself and are either untranslatable or require to be created anew; (6) the *visual jokes*, which use visual triggers for humour; and (7) the *complex joke*, combining several of the previous aspects. As is apparent, the difficulty of translating humour increases from (1) to (7).

Still, the category of language-dependant jokes (5) may in the end not be as problematic, because on screen, puns tend to be used far less often than other means of humour and so are translators less likely to come to deal with them (Chiaro 2005, 2006). As a rule, though, the translation of verbal humour on screen should be guided by all of the mentioned factors – trying to preserve as much from the semantic, pragmatic and formal aspects of the source-language instance of humour but aiming to evoke a reaction similar to

that of the original. SL and TL humour should be based on the same principle, be it script opposition, superiority, highbrow or lowbrow humour, but using means and strategies which are established as humorous in the particular TL culture.

Understanding the sense of humour of both the SL culture and the TL culture is a prerequisite in this area of translation but comparative studies analyzing humour across cultures are rare and when the translation of humour on screen in Slovakia is concerned, there certainly is a need to identify what Slovaks laugh at and what type of humour is common in this culture.

Therefore, a research project is proposed which would investigate into Slovak culture-specific strategies and preferences in terms of humour, on the basis of which translation strategies for the purposes of AV translation may be analyzed. Rather revealing studies have been published by Kuipers (2006) or Grandio (XXXX), focusing on the Dutch and Spanish sense of humour, establishing culture-specific preferences in terms of humour. Although it is hard to predict what the outcome of such an analysis conducted in Slovakia will be, judging by the humorous television production currently aired, at least some features may be anticipated.

There are programmes like *SOS* or *Uragán*, which build their humour on exaggerated archetypically-constructed characters in costume, with over-the-top accents mimicking the Hungarian or Roma language or various Slovak regional dialects, featuring in sketches with simple points, usually playing, again, on stereotypical traits of the social or cultural groups being mimicked. Even the popular sit-com *MafStory* features this type of characters, although in more complex situations, requiring a more informed audience, even though the humour may still be considered low-brow, i.e. humour which is straightforward and does not require much intellectual activity from the audience. On the other hand, one may be surprised by the overwhelming success of the US-produced sitcom *Friends* in Slovakia. First of all, the premise of *Friends* – the mapping of the lives of twenty-somethings, living on their own, sharing apartments and having families they do not (need to) rely on – does not fit with the Slovak environment, where even current sitcoms unfold their stories on the background of family life (*Panelák*, *Susedia*). The other point to consider is, what the Slovak audience find humorous on *Friends* and why. This question is connected with the fact, that Slovak television producers do not use the type of humour found in friends (highbrow) in domestic productions, despite the fact that it was proven successful. Attempts at highbrow humour are generally found in late-night airing slots (*Sedem, s.r.o.*), which may indicate that they are less favoured by local audiences, with the prime-time slots filled by lowbrow humour programmes mentioned before.

The success of *Friends* in Slovakia (and all over the world, for that matter), then, poses the question, to what degree the humour found in *Friends* is favoured by Slovak audiences and to what extent did the Slovak dubbing aid with this success. The second part of the proposed project, building on the data from the first part, will try and analyze the translation strategies used by the creators of the dubbing scripts. What needs to be answered are the questions of the degree to which the humour had to be altered for Slovak audiences and how culture-specific instances of humour have been reproduced to be understood by this new audience. Ján Gordulič, one of the creators of the Slovak dubbing of *Friends* believes that Slovak audiences do not differ significantly from audiences around the world, when preferences in humour are concerned as is indicated by the success of many imported television series from the United States, where he cites *The Cosby Show* and *That 70s Show* as examples. The success of these shows still does not say much about the cultural specificity of Slovak humour, as, for example, *The Cosby Show* fits rather well into the traditional Slovak family-oriented environment, with its humour largely based on Bill Cosby's extra-linguistic performance. It needs to be established, how much of the humour found in the imported

audio-visual productions is culture-neutral and how much is culture-specific and most of all, which these culture-specific elements are and how they are dealt with during translation. If these shows feature little to no culture-specific humour, and that which is present is not reproduced effectively and not understood by the audience, it may not drastically influence the success of that particular show.

Why *Friends* lends itself best to such an analysis is the fact that it is considered by the public to be the best Slovak dubbing effort so far. (Kočíš 2004). Even the dubbing director of *Friends*, Štefánia Gorduličová, stated that “the translation of the humour in *Friends* has been difficult [... and w]hat may be funny for [the American audience] may not automatically be funny for us” (Gorduličová In Vojtényiová, 2004) . In interviews with some of the authors of the dubbing of *Friends*, they have expressed that they did not consciously use any specific methodology in analyzing and reproducing particular instances of humour and it therefore may be interesting to see, which choices they made and how the humour of the Slovak version differs from the original.

Needless to say, the outcome of any research in translation can never be a set of universally applicable guidelines for a particular type of translation, as it in no way is an exact science. What we may hope to understand, though, are the mechanisms and strategies which are effective in terms of translation of humour, especially in the Slovak environment.

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