The chimera of interpreting humor in simultaneous conference interpreting: improbable, unnecessary or a methodological gap?

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ABSTRACT

EN As interpreting studies advance, research on quality standards, and encountered difficulties to comply with it, abounds. However, one topic has been but fleetingly treated: humour. Translation studies, our next of kin, has been studying the translational problems posed by humour for decades now, and this proves at least two aspects: first, translators are aware they can brush shoulders with humour, and second, research is necessary to (as a minimum) discuss the suitability of the not always coinciding translational options. Is there a reason why we, interpreting teachers, should think this could not be the case for simultaneous conference interpreting? Which are the theoretical approaches, if any, currently existing in our field? Is interpreting humour considered as rare as to be worthless of any theoretical-practical reflection? The present paper supports the hypothesis that if junior students are trained to interpret humour, we might be helping them in designing better management strategies.

Keywords: Humor, simultaneous interpreting, translation studies, interpreting studies, quality, interpreting teacher, pedagogy, GTVH

IT Con il progredire degli studi di interpretariato, aumentano gli studi volti a valutare la ricerca gli standard di qualità e le difficoltà incontrate. Tuttavia, un argomento è stato trattato fugacemente: l'umorismo. Gli studi di traduzione, i parenti più prossimi, studiano da decenni i problemi di traduzione in merito all'umorismo, e questo dimostra almeno due aspetti: in primo luogo, i traduttori sono consapevoli di essere in grado di affrontare l'umorismo, e secondo, la ricerca è necessaria per (come minimo) discutere l'idoneità delle opzioni di traduzione non sempre coincidenti. C'è una ragione per cui noi, interpretando gli insegnanti, dovremmo pensare che questo non potrebbe essere il caso dell'interpretazione simultanea di una conferenza? Quali sono gli approcci teorici, se esistono, attualmente esistenti nel nostro campo? L'interpretazione dell'umorismo è considerata essere priva di qualsiasi riflessione teorico-pratica? Il presente documento supporta l'ipotesi che, se gli laureandi sono addestrati a interpretare l'umorismo, potremmo aiutarli a progettare strategie di gestione migliori.

Parole Chiave: Umorismo, interpretazione simultanea, studi di traduzione, qualità, pedagogia, GTVH.
1. Introduction: clashing with humour

The present paper would have never been written had it not been for a sheer stroke of luck while monitoring a simultaneous interpreting student. This event took place in one of the last mock conferences programmed for the academic year, at the School of Translation and Interpreting of the University of Salamanca (Spain), only two weeks before students qualified. This senior student could only be described as very mature and resourceful, therefore, expectations were not only to oversee a very proficient interpreting, but also to enjoy the result. Unexpectedly, when ironic comments entered the speech, the pupil was left dumbfounded. What had happened? Humour.

This is a small excerpt of the text the student failed to interpret into Spanish—plaguing the rendering with errs and hums, a curt tone different from the speaker’s and offering only partial information—, some comments from an Irish blogger and creator of a webpage called Fluent in 3 months, named Benny Lewis, travelling through the USA:

“Hi, I’m Benny”
“Awesome! I’m X. Where are you from?”
“Ireland”
“Wow! You guys certainly know how to drink!”
“Actually, I don’t drink”
“Oh, you’re not really Irish then, are you?”

What ensued was questioning not only “what” but most importantly, “why” it had happened. According to the four interpreting efforts (listening-analysis/speech production/short-term memory and coordination) identified by Gile (1985), the student suffered from an effort overload when faced with a speech where content and form were equally important. Two hypotheses could be set to explain the underperformance: first, that (probably) the student was not familiar with rendering humour while interpreting in simultaneous modality, and second, the interpreting teacher (the writer) had not clearly presented a layout to manage humour in simultaneous conference interpreting.

Research began by looking up interpreting handbooks and to our surprise we found that specific entries on humour were not usual, and even in those instances where the term could be found, such as in Nolan (2012), there were not any specific interpreting guidelines to apply. Then we proceeded to check first-hand sources, interpreting professionals describing their encounters with humour (Viaggio 1996, Michael 2003 and Liendo 2013). As their anecdotes were descriptive and not prescriptive, the methodological gap remained and it was made apparent that research had to pursue a wider scope: translation.

Interestingly, while studying translation bibliography, we found a scientific paper on humour in conference interpreting by Pavlicec (2002) and Pöchhacker, a fundamental figure of interpreting studies (1994 and 2004), who quantified how often German-speaking interpreters in the EU had encountered humour, as part of a special issue of The Translator journal (Vandaele 2002). Unfortunately, this data referred to a different language combination and pedagogical conclusions were not mentioned.

In any event, it was obvious that literature about humour and translation was available (Santana López, 2005) and it contained numerous theoretical references that introduced us to a field never heard before: humour studies.
2. An overview of humour and its relevance

After finding out, thanks to translation, about the existence of this field called humour studies, whose core mission is to bring to the arena different concerns, needs and hypotheses of humour (as it were a sort of United Nations of humour), one main principle was underlined: experts do not seem to agree on the definition of humour. Far from being a problem, practical analysis shows us we can divide humour into disciplines that work towards the ontological theoretical definition of what it is (what Ritchie (2014) defines as *talking of* humour) and those areas that apply it (what Ritchie defines as *talking about* humour).

Once the researcher knows if their position is as theoretician or as practitioner (the latter being our case), we can begin to shape our views on humour. According to experts there are three psychological approaches to humour: superiority, relief, and incongruity. Superiority refers to the Hobbesian approach, the use of harsh humour to laugh at others and draw a line between “us vs them”. Relief occurs when we use it in the face of uncomfortable situations, such as when a speaker is about to give a speech and starts breaking the ice with a humorous remark. And finally, incongruity takes place when we establish that there is such a wide discrepancy in a specific situation that laughter is triggered, such as when in cartoons we see a hippopotamus dancing *Swan Lake* in a pink tutu. It is our belief that this framework to categorize humour may be of interest to compile teaching material. Burke et al. (1997) present a fundamental work on the history of humour where they prove it is an indivisible part of mankind, its expression and development, despite its different social connotations over time, or how some scholars seem to disregard it as an erudite subject of study.

Translation studies also connected the dots with linguistics, one of the disciplines most concerned with the analysis and systematization of humour (jokes, irony and sarcasm to name a few). The backbone for both humour studies and humour in linguistics can be found it in the 1985 book by Victor Raskin *Semantic mechanisms of humor*. His disciple, Salvatore Attardo, also made a very important contribution several years later with his *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (1994). Both experts together established what is known as the *General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH)* that helps to understand that a joke consists of a clockwork and refined structure. After a joke is heard/read the recipient is compelled to backtrack to find the appropriate key, forcing them to change either the content or the framework to decipher the hidden message. Such hidden message can be variably buried within the joke, and its complexity can also differ. In any case, its unravelling is what allegedly makes the hearer/recipient laugh, and precisely fulfilling this aim can be especially challenging for translators and interpreters alike.

Precisely in translational terms, we would like to stress a fact hardly ever mentioned, Raskin and Attardo are from different nationalities and originally speak different languages, however that does not preclude them from working hand in hand, understanding each other, presenting and providing humour scholars with their principles. To our mind they epitomise the (controversial) idea that humour can travel (maybe in the appropriate vessel). Krikmann (2006)—in an excellent overview of humour theories—refers to Koestler’s *bissociation* concept that explained humour as a two-part construct; what it is said, and what it is actually meant; not surprisingly, Raskin and Attardo come to a
similar conclusion starting from a different approach. Ruiz Gurillo (2012) also supports her premises on the theories of both authors, to analyse peninsular Spanish examples of great cultural interest.

To conclude this non-exhaustive section, psychology and anthropology are two other areas that prove the relevance of humour, as more and more is studied about the mental mechanisms and cultural association of ideas that lead people to resort to it. Willibald Ruch is the creator of some fundamental psychological classifications for humour understanding and categorization as seen in Raskin (2008)—other attempts could date back as far as to both Freud (2012) and Bergson (1961). Finally, Christie Davies (1990) is the great erudite on humour the world over who performs a meticulous and thorough account of the humorous cultural stereotypes. It is precisely this connection between culture and entrenched humorous stereotypes that can be of interest for our interpreting purposes: he would be pointing at recurring and plausible jokes among cultures, a valid parameter to design interpreting material.

3. Translation studies and humour

Eco’s Il nome della rosa (1981) is a beautiful fictional account on the lost humour book by Aristotle and the role of translators, a very descriptive image of the power of humour and the importance of translation. Translators have devoted works to describe, review and/or discuss how literary humour has been translated. A good case in point could be Vandaele (2002) where translators explain how they faced the many problems posed by humour in its many forms (Eco and Wardle, for instance, talk about translating Queneau in this same issue, pp. 221-240). We would venture to say that in translation studies there has been a second big wave of theoretical interest about humour, more specifically, in audiovisual and cartoon translation. The need to dub and subtitle humour in a comprehensive approach (language, image, context, content, music etc.) for the film industry first, and now for the booming TV industry (and lately online platforms), has made translators face translational challenges due to the market needs. In this line of thought Zabalbeascoa (2001) stresses the need to categorize humour audiovisual items for translation purposes, Chiaro (1992) points at upgradeable humour translations in audiovisual settings and Tsakona (2009), reflects upon the importance of cultural and political knowledge to translate humour cartoons in newspapers. Categorize, improve translational solutions and to be aware of context seem very productive working guidelines for our pedagogical aim. Other two experts bring their own ideas on the reiterative aspects of translation and humour: Hofstadter (1989) refers to an underlying permanent structure in jokes called the ur-joke, and Ritchie (2004), a world expert in the study of joke patterns and its connection with ITC, is interested in categorizing, defining and finding humorous recurrent patterns.

We have the intuition that to design a plausible interpreting strategy it is not going to be enough (or feasible) to mimic the strategies discussed in translation studies, for obvious reasons, although we can count with them as reference (Espinoza, 2015). To conclude this section we would like to mention Shipley Young’s proposal (2006), specifically designed for students to translate cartoon humour, although in different coordinates its pedagogical aim is of great interest.
4. The humour gap in interpreting studies

Readers may wonder why we constantly refer to other related areas when our aim is simultaneous conference interpreting. At the risk of oversimplification our paper tried to point that we lack a robust literature in comparison with other disciplines. The reason why is out of our depth, we could tentatively point at the idea that professional interpreters tap into their own cultural-referential knowledge and experience to save the day and when humour presents difficulties they are more familiar with avoidance strategies. In any case, we consider of greater importance that training students experience humour and, again, we refer to the need to bridge this gap in categorization and interpreting strategies. Before going any further, only a few lines to remind that our current research involves the pairing of two languages that spread in different geographical and cultural boundaries. According to a 2013 report of the Instituto Cervantes, Spanish is spoken by more than 500 million people, these figures only increase when it refers to English. Our particular perspective limits itself to the Spanish Peninsular variety, therefore it would be of great interest to hear from colleagues who share a different version of this English-Spanish framework (lingua franca, Globish or Eurospeak users, to name some possibilities), as well as from those researchers with different language combinations. Bringing this voices and different perspectives together would lead us into discussions of reiterative patterns in our field. Going back to a possible interpreting methodology for humour, how relevant is it to identify where/when/how often speakers resort to humour? To our mind these intriguing and logical questions would only divert us from our most pressing matter: teaching students how to interpret humour, what we failed to do, as proved by our flabbergasted senior student at the mock conference.

Our working hypothesis is that general interpreting principles (décalage, deverbalization, generalization, padding etc.) could be finessed to suit the humorous encounter in simultaneous interpreting. It would then be up to interpreting teachers, in cooperation with humour researchers, to design specific materials for students to practice (and here the where/when/how often questions previously mentioned could help us to devise a layout) and not doing so would be, to our mind, a methodological mistake. What strategies could these be? Our proposal would revolve around three purposeful strategies to implement only when facing problems: explanation, reference or deletion. By explanation we mean, as with other non-humorous items, to include some extra words or concepts to make humour more understandable for our target audience; by reference we refer to pointing at the user that a humorous item has appeared and in relation to what topic (an upgrade to the useful “please, laugh, the speaker has made a joke”) and by deletion we mean that the interpreter makes the conscious choice of completely erasing the humorous item. This latter option, the least desirable of them, should be soundly based, for example when the humorous item has not caused a visible reaction in the audience sharing the language with the speaker, when rendering it would take too long and we are still struggling to interpret prior information, or when we honestly surrender and admit we cannot offer any solution. It is precisely this last option we would try to avoid at all costs, as we believe students would get more accustomed to managing humour and sharpen their weapons through practice. As experts stress, interpreting humour may have sense for several reasons:
According to many a guide to good public speaking, a joke is the best way to win the audience’s favour and attention. In addition to establishing a rapport between speaker and listeners, jokes also forge an emotional bond among the audience. With listeners sharing their laughter, possibly looking at each other to check if their colleagues are laughing too, they become a more homogeneous group. By using humour, the speaker thus manages to reduce the distance between participants and create a sense of community. (Pavlicek & Pöchhacker, 2002, p.389)

In this line of thought, Viaggio considers that translating and interpreting means mediating among *microworlds* (2006, p.28), that is, our personal parameters of existence which we may share (especially in the context of a conference), and through messages, people deploy what the author calls the *affectus* (2006, p.24) the emotion in their words. It is our belief that when a speaker resorts to humour is a deliberate, free-will and multifaceted choice and interpreters, as a minimum, should take it into account to honestly render it as faithfully and communicatively as possible. But to do so, or so we consider, it is necessary to design an appropriate methodology from the first educational stages of interpreters — interestingly, Kalina (1994) discourages teachers from the use of the mock-conference as a class exercise.

Another factor that may hamper interpreting is that humour does not necessarily have to be a fun experience, we may be required to interpret (or hear) a claim that disgust us or hurts our feelings and that would be another resource-consuming aspect to consider. From our point of view, we should consider two fundamental aspects in the building of an interpreting strategy: the interpreter as the communicative agent, and the text as the working material that teachers can purposefully design to assess different strategies. With this in mind, we would like to close this section posing some possible questions interpreting teachers could bear in mind when designing their working material:

**About the interpreter (the student)**
- Have we heard/understood the humorous item?
- If we enjoy what we hear and we laugh, does not it make us lose concentration?
- Can we curb our laughter? Does it help us to focus and spare energy?
- How time-consuming is to interpret the humorous item?
- Have we explained/mentioned/deleted the humorous item for strategy purposes?
- What kind of difficulties other than language do we find when interpreting humour?
- Do we have the time/ease (resource-wise speaking) to provide a reasonable translation?
- Do we find it satisfying in retrospect? Can we think of better alternatives (in time and/or quality)?

**About the speech (the teacher)**
- Is the text to be interpreted ‘humorous’ according to its context?
- Is it presented by a specific speaker known for resorting to humour?
- Is it appropriate a first division of humour between pun/non-pun?
- Are other classifications necessary? Which ones?
- Is the humour displayed in the speech connected to language/cultural references?
Are there other categories we find useful for pedagogical planning? Our proposal is to present students with humour instances from their early training so that they feel better prepared, in case they have to sort it out in real-life experiences. It does not mean to make of them comedians, in the same manner as one does not need to be a mathematician to interpret figures. It is, quite on the contrary, a call on simultaneous conference interpreting teachers not to look aside to a stylistic and content communicative possibility that may be difficult for our students.

5. Conclusion
It is important to study humour in interpreting studies because it is clear that literature does not abound in the field and that signals a gap to bridge. As any speaker can resort to humour when giving a speech, whether such humour is considered as the content, or the form, or both (or any other combination), students have to be prepared to interpret it as they would in other interpreting instances (i.e. figures or technical jargon). The present paper is focused on the specifics of English into Peninsular Spanish, but other language pairings are of utmost interest. From our inductive research we come to the conclusion that general interpreting principles may not be sufficient for our students when they face humour, or that as a minimum, these principles could be particularly designed to fulfil our aim: empower students when interpreting humour. It is necessary to develop a clearer methodology, and for that purpose we present some (respectful) suggestions that insist on aspects apparently not so clearly designed in the few references available. This is a call on all those teachers and professionals who have also encountered gaps in humour and simultaneous conference interpreting, to bring their ideas forward. After having witnessed there is no fun in remaining dumbfounded when interpreting humour, and provided that interpreting it effortlessly and with perfect faithfulness is probably a chimera in simultaneous interpreting, teachers cannot allow themselves to perpetuate a methodological gap.
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**Bionote**

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