

Interpreting studies: a tessera in the mosaic of humour studies [Studi sull'interpretariato: un tassello nel mosaico degli studi sull'umorismo]

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ABSTRACT

IT L'umorismo è un ambito molto stimolante da studiare da un punto di vista metodologico, come è stato confermato nel tempo dagli esperti. Nonostante ciò, con il passare degli anni alcuni aspetti comuni sono stati identificati, come l'intenzione di rendere l'umorismo un soggetto di studi verificabile. Le fondamentali opere di autori come Raskin e Davies, approfondite in questo articolo, ci forniscono una visione chiara che ci aiuta a capire e compartimentalizzare meglio l'umorismo rispetto ad una specifica area di interesse: dalla superiorità, incongruità e teorie del conforto, fino ad arrivare alla dicotomia di approcci come l'universalista o il descrittivo. Si ipotizza che ciò sia frutto del fatto che l'umorismo possa essere comparato a un mosaico costituito da diversi tasselli, i quali possono essere situati vicini o lontani, ma che alla fine finiscono per essere coesi grazie alla trama comune sottostante. Gli studi di traduzione hanno analizzato i contenuti dei suddetti tasselli per decenni e questo rappresenta una questione fondamentale per gli studi sull'interpretariato.

Parole chiave: umorismo, metodologia interpretativa, psicologia, studi di traduzione, studi interpretativi

EN Humour is a methodologically challenging subject of study, as proved in time by experts. However, with the passing of time some agreed aspects have been identified, such as the intention to make of humour a falsifiable area. Fundamental works by authors such as Raskin or Davies, particularly mentioned in the current paper, provide us with enlightening insights to understand and compartmentalise humour better from our respective areas of interest: from superiority, incongruity and relief theories, to dichotomies between universalist or descriptive approaches. We propound that this is so because humour can be compared to a mosaic made up of different tesserae that may be closer or more distantly placed, but that end up being cohesive thanks to the general lime underneath. Translation studies has been sketching the content of its tessera for decades now, and this is a fundamental pending matter for interpreting studies.

Key words: humour, interpreting methodology, psychology, translation studies, interpreting studies

1. Humour, a slippery material of study

Perspectives around humour are as varied as history shows: Burke, Gurevich and Le Goff (1997) proved it, in anthropological-cultural terms, from Ancient Greece to the 20th century. Therefore, the fact that we also encounter a polyphony of approaches, aims and needs in current scientific research of humour, should not be taken as a surprise. However, there is one constant in the topic: the gradual increase in the number of studies devoted to the subject, especially from the second half of the eighties. One benchmark is the apparition of the work *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* by Victor Raskin (1985). Another feat is the advent of a discipline named *humour studies*, a joint effort that claimed the importance of branding a cross-disciplinary field where scholars could bring their ideas forward. From linguistics to robotics, from psychology to law, from literature to mathematics, this discipline is a sort of United Nations of humour, with all its pros—the interest to join forces for a common good—and its cons—the difficulty to advance on a field of study probably not sufficiently well known, unless for the initiated, where perspectives and aims are very different.

In any event, it can be stated that we have currently abandoned defeatist approaches that seemed to brand humour as a disreputable research topic, an idea overtly refuted by the many quality works available. Precisely, these works have provided visibility to a plethora of important aspects that can be researched and discussed in humour, as Koestler vividly described “humour is an elusive thing, so is the rainbow; yet the study of coloured spectra provided clues to the elementary structure of matter” (Koestler, 1964, p. 22). It is undeniable, however, that a realistic approach to study humour must begin by understanding the unstable nature of the material provided that “(...) another blow humor deals to its researchers is the terminological chaos created by an abundance and competition of such similar and adjacent terms as *humor, laughter, the comic, the ludicrous, the funny, joke, wit* (Raskin, 1985, p. 7). Provided its slippery essence, instances abound when researchers identify a particular research area but it is filled with methodological problems, as it is stated that “most classifications (...) suffer from the absence of any principle or principles of taxonomy. The subject matter, the intention, the technique, are all used indiscriminately” (Raskin, 1985, p. 29). In spite of these clear methodological setbacks, with the passing of time, several agreed and stable aspects have been identified, although for space constraints we are only going to mention some of them briefly.

Firstly, the intention of erudites to write about humour as if it were any other type of science, to be replicated and falsified in Popperian terms, as mentioned by Attardo and Raskin themselves (2017, p. 52). In this sense, experts state that if there is something particular to highlight from Raskin’s 1985 work—even for a research unrelated to linguistics—is that it offered the first complete humour theory that followed this procedure. It is worth noting, however, that in the reviewing process of this article I have been kindly reminded of two key aspects: Popper’s falsifiability opens up a more complex epistemological debate than the one here sketched, and second, for many researchers it is *The Psychology of Humour* by Goldstein and McGhee (1972) the turning point, empirically speaking.

Secondly, a roadmap to begin the research may be devised: either we look for common aspects of humour in different areas, or the specifics of it. Authors have named this dichotomy differently over time—Attardo’s *essentialist* versus *prototypically defined* (as cited in Ritchie, 2004, p. 10); or Ritchie’s *universalist* versus *descriptive* (as cited in Ritchie, 2004, p. 8), to name a few. Otherwise said, we have to know whether we are performing a research *of* humour (ontology) or *about* humour (how it is used in a specific area) (Ritchie, 2014).

Thirdly, the identification and analysis of the three main psychological approaches of humour: *incongruity, superiority* and *relief*. Contrary to appearances, they represent a very fruitful classification—for a complete overview, see for example Krikmann (2006)—for areas other than those directly linked with psychology. In any event, as experts state, this field is one of the driving forces of humour research in modern times, with reputed experts as Willibald Ruch (2008).

Fourth, the identification of several recurrent areas of interest among scholars that provide ground for study even from other expertise areas, such as in literary terms—irony, sarcasm, puns, monologues, jokes, cartoons—or with categories pertaining to specific cultures—e.g. Spanish *greguerías* (humorous free associations in poetic metric by Ramón Gómez de la Serna), or Spoonerisms (metathesis, named after the Oxford don, William Archibald Spooner).

In the coming section we would like to reflect upon this aspect with a fundamental name in the world of humour studies.

2. Davies or the interconnectedness of humour

The importance of the role played by the sociologist Christie Davies is undeniable in the world of humour studies, not only in sociological or anthropological terms, but for the whole field, at least, in the following aspects. First, clearly in opposition with those theoretical approaches stating that humour is methodologically slippery, he conclusively proved the existence of a perfect knowledge container where humour can accommodate: qualitative contradictory pairs. Second, through his own research interest, he also brings forward a new categorization—conceptual dichotomies—to understand, describe, and compare jokes. For example, in his 1990 work entitled *Ethnic Humor Around the World*, he presents, theorises and provides examples of such dichotomies with the following explanatory headings—introduction and conclusion aside—: The stupid and the canny (chapter 2), Who gets called stupid? (chapter 3), The stupid and the dirty (chapter 4), Who gets called canny? (chapter 5), How ethnic jokes change (chapter 6), Militarists and cowards, (chapter 7), Anglo-Saxon attitudes (chapter 8) and Food for thought (chapter 9). Along its over 35 pages of expanded chapter notes, and a section devoted to sources and bibliography, Davies takes stock of a plethora of research sources, from Finnish folklore to Polish-American history.

Another important aspect he discusses and presents is that stupidity versus canniness is the most repeated duality in the category of ethnic jokes, and concludes that there are specific and distinctive groups, constantly turned into their butt. Laughing at others, superiority approach in psychological terms, can be linked with advancement and industrialization, not only in terms of industry or the Industrial Revolution per se—a *Homo erectus* may just as well have laughed at an *Australopithecus* for his inability to make fire at his will—but as the divide between two separate groups: those in the know of technological advancements, versus the “alien”, unskilled and untrained. He also fundamentally stated that anonymity makes of jokes effective and long-lasting communicative and cultural capsules not attached to a specific time or place, with an ability to travel fast and freely. In our mind, Davies, is the perfect embodiment of an expert that through his area of research—although not directly connected with interpreting studies, our study subject—casts a light on the general understanding of humour. For example, for interpreting studies, Davies makes us understand that there is some pace in humour references, which could help us prepare our interpretations better.

In this paper, we would like to identify this connectedness with a visual metaphor, and we hope not to sound too simplistic: if Davies helps us all is because each area of humour study (whether *of* or *about* is not that relevant) is a tessera in the broad mosaic of humour. The specific location of each tessera is not that important for the time being, however, it is undeniable that some tesserae are closer or further apart among one another, which explains why some aspects are fully or partially shared among scientific fields, depending on their proximity. In any event, in spite of distances, we are all linked by the lime that makes possible the placement and attachment of the different pieces that shape said mosaic.

3. Translation studies, a beacon for interpreting studies

Humour is, as a minimum, one of the most intriguing translational areas. A common adage says that, when it comes to translation, humour travels badly because “the concept of what people find funny appears to be surrounded by linguistic, geographical, diachronic, sociocultural and personal boundaries” (Chiaro, 1992, p.5). It goes without saying, however, that humorous literary works have traditionally been translated, but probably not with much theoretical reflection. Chiaro offers a detailed description of the field from that perspective: “As for writings on the translation of humour, until the mid-nineties they were virtually non-existent, and the few studies that did appear were not anecdotal, tended to approach the subject from a literary viewpoint, focusing very much on puns (...) It has only really been since the turn of the new century that studies on the translation of humor have truly ventured beyond the kudos of the literary pun. (...) More recently, translating humour in previously unexplored areas such as advertising, comic books, videogames, and global news has also been explored (Chiaro, 2010; Abend-David, 2014)”. (Chiaro, 2017, p. 415).

One pivotal work excels as a token of the modern scientific reflection of translation studies about humour: *(Re-)constructing humour: meanings and means*. Edited by Jeroen Vandaele in 2002, as a special issue of the scientific journal *The Translator*, it was a joint effort carried out by different professional translators and scholars where they reflected about the decision-making processes of translating (mostly) humorous works. Precisely in this work, Vandaele clearly established the four main analytic elements to translate humour: “First, humour as a meaning effect has an undeniable, exteriorized manifestation (call it laughter or smiling for now) (...) Second, sophisticated research has confirmed the intuition that the comprehension of humour (and its appreciation) and humour production are two different skills (...) Third, (...) the *appreciation* of humour varies individually, which means that a translator may recognize an instance as (supposedly) comic but not really find it funny, and therefore be confronted with the personal dilemma of ‘translating a bad joke’ or going for a ‘real’ funny effect. Fourth, the rhetorical effect of humour on translators may be so overwhelming that it blurs the specifics of its creation; strong emotions may hinder analytic rationalization” (Vandaele, 2002, p. 150).

On the other hand, Vandaele’s work is especially remarkable for our personal research—simultaneous conference interpreting and humour—as it includes a paper by Pavlicek and Pöchhacker (2002) intertwining both fields. It revolves around the results of a survey that attests to German interpreters in official institutions regularly having to interpret humour. This study proves that a majority of the staff has had to interpret humour in the English-German combination which is of great quantitative importance. We consider that one promising aspect, apart from literary translation, that could help those of us in the research of humour and interpreting studies, is to follow on the footsteps of audiovisual and cartoon translation, as we already signalled in Espinoza (2015) and Espinoza (2018).

Experts in both fields, such as Zabalbeascoa (2001), Shipley Young (2006) or Tsakona (2009), reflect upon how to manage humour within these translational boundaries. For instance, they elaborate on the need to define the location of the humorous content, whether it is in the language, or the visual channel, in both simultaneously, or somewhere in between, and what translational techniques would better serve to pass the message from the source language and culture into the target ones (loan, direct translation, naturalization, footnote, adaptation, etc). As for the mosaic of humour, we believe that translation is in close proximity with literature, linguistics, pragmatics, sociology and cultural studies, to name some influential areas of research. We also consider that it is in direct contact with the tessera of interpreting studies, but that unlike ours, the drawing on the surface of the translation studies tessera is more advanced and more clearly depicted.

4. Interpreting studies: what about our tessera?

In Espinoza (2015) we stated: “At present there is a theoretical lacuna in the field of simultaneous conference interpreting regarding how to interpret and manage humour in a wider sense. Such a statement is valid, at least in the English-Spanish combination and viceversa (...) Taking into account humour’s many ramifications—linguistic, cultural, social and communicative, to mention a few—, sketching a first approach based on reflections already made by Translation Studies experts, seems a methodologically sound standpoint” (p. 701). Interpreting studies authors such as Nolan (2005; 2012) and Taylor-Bouladon (2001), that have included humour in their theoretical practising techniques, provide a good example of antagonistic approaches: for the latter, not to interpret humour is something similar to a technical surrender, for Nolan, it is almost impossible to render it from a booth due to timing problems and the irreplicability of certain linguistic and literary forms.

Throughout our particular and ongoing research, unfortunately, we cannot say that literature on practical example abounds, that is why finding reflections about humour encounters in simultaneous interpreting in real life practice, such as those by Viaggio (1996), Michael (2003) or Liendo (2013), among others, are greatly appreciated. As a minimum, because they can provide feedback, and if we had some agreed research items, they would offer some background to start discussing them in a more productive manner. If we look at the most basic modalities of interpreting, we could state that we count with simultaneous (conference or not), consecutive, and sign interpreting. Each one requiring their own technique and limited by different aspects, but provided that sign interpreting escapes our knowledge, we do not affirm that any of our statements can faithfully represent its reality. Generally speaking, when we refer to interpreting we are mainly considering simultaneous conference interpreting, that is, the type of interpreting that scholars are used to experience when they give talks in countries with languages they do not understand, or do not feel comfortable to use in public, among (usually) large audiences wearing headphones to listen to interpreters, at the back of the room, locked in soundproof booths (ideally).

One of the reasons why we consider humour to be an element worth of attention is precisely the very specific context of conference interpreting. In such settings people the world over present speeches following the rules of prosody and rhetoric, and humour is a possible element— either as a means, or an end, or somewhere in between— to convey a message. The reason why we have decided to focus our research in this area is the fact that, contrary to consecutive, in simultaneous we are obliged to offer a quick translational response because we are fighting a battle against time, whilst somehow the lapse provided by the note-taking technique in consecutive may provide extra time to ponder upon, before providing an answer. Also, within the very specific space of conference interpreting we may find people resorting to English when it is not their mother tongue, as Globish, and in such cases, we can also find other derivatives; when speakers directly transpose their own linguistic turns where humour may be incorporated.

Connected with translation studies, as we stated before, we believe that cartoon and audiovisual translation are very close to the reality of having to interpret in simultaneous mode. For example, as for audiovisual translation, *split attention* is a trait particularly shared by both areas, provided we need to respond to several informational stimuli at the same time. Besides, as it happens when audiences watch a dubbed or subtitled film and immediately react, we also receive an instant audience feedback to test if the humorous communication has succeeded. Of course, we do not intend to imply that, for example, a literary translator does not respond to several communicative needs or receives no feedback, we simply try to emphasise *immediacy* as a ruling factor. As for cartoon translation, apart from the immediate response on the part of our users, we share the need to condense content and meaning trying to find the most communicatively relevant form within specific constrains, for them is *space*, for us it is *time*.

What we commented earlier on about humour as a mosaic made up of differently placed tessera, it can be a (hopefully) helpful manner to start discussing which are the aspects we may share with our closest relatives, such as translation studies. But it should also make us reflect about the aspects that are only particular of our field. We believe that *time constraints* are a pivotal difference from which we can start a discussion, for example with the following questions: Is time an element logically linked with interpreting, irrespective of modality? Can humour, under any form, turn into a possible time-consuming element to interpret? Is it then necessary to study their interaction in our field?

Unfortunately, we only have questions, and provided the slippery nature of humour, we ourselves may be falling into the traps we have commented before. In any case, it is up to us, interpreters, to start a debate and propose ideas. Our idea is that we do not need to go in the dark to research on the topic, as our tessera is touching the translation studies one, or the linguistic, however, the drawing that our tessera should present is something yet to be defined.

5. Conclusion

Provided that humour is the research object of different areas, it may not come as a surprise the fact that approaches and results can differ. In this article we have commented that humour is polyphonic but that experts also provide us with stable ground for research. Taking the enlightening work of Christie Davies as an example, we propound the concept of humour as a mosaic, made up of different specific areas, tesserae, and therefore some would be in closer contact to the immediately neighbouring, in contrast with others more distant. It is not then difficult to visualize that translation studies and interpreting studies directly touch one another. Having stated that, interpreting studies is still in the process to delimit its boundaries, to discover what is drawn upon the surface of the tessera we make up. Time, certainly, should be one of the elements included, because unlike other disciplines it is a shaping factor that influences our management of humour, however much work is ahead of us.

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Bionote

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