

THE ITALIAN TRANSLATION OF CULTURE-BOUND JOKES AND CULTURAL REFERENCES IN AMERICAN TV CARTOONS

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1. Theoretical Background

The main realizations of audiovisual translation (AVT), dubbing and subtitles, are different not only from a technical point of view, but also because while the former is considered as an instrument of «colonialism», closer to the TC (Paolinelli, Di Fortunato 2005), the latter is acknowledged to be more faithful to the Source Culture (SC) (Tveit 2009).

Dubbing is a colonial device because of the tendency to produce a sense-for-sense translation (Basnett-McGuire 2002), replacing the original cultural references so that the target version is more easily understood by the recipient, in particular when his/her culture is different from the SC. This process of domestication is common in dubbing and its origins may be linked to the need for adapting and neutralizing foreign contents—in Italy, at least, where dubbing started during the Fascist regime, which saw it as an opportunity to spread the Italian language and to preserve it from foreign idioms. Paolinelli (2005, p. 21) provides several examples, from the sitcoms whose characters talk of places like Cologno Monzese, to the joke from *Airplane* (*L'aereo piú pazzo del mondo*, Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, Jerry Zucker, 1980), where the character refers to the Italian TV show *Superflash*. Yet, even though dubbing lets the audience enjoy the movie, without caring for reading the subtitles, scholars have underlined that in those countries where dubbing is the main realization of AVT, the knowledge of English language and culture is not widespread (Tveit 2009).

Sense of humour is a cultural element, too, in fact it is based on the «knowledge which is shared between sender and recipient» (Chiaro 1992, p. 11) and on socio-cultural parameters shared by a group of people (Guido 1997). Jokes have been broadly divided into prosaic and poetic, which are concerned with, respectively, the world knowledge and the language itself, the latter jokes being more difficult to translate. In particular, the socio-cultural dimension of humour deals with people's background knowledge, their schemata (Carrell 1983), which determines whether a joke is successful or not.

Most of culture-bound jokes in *Family Guy*, representing the case study of this paper, mock pop culture and American TV in particular, for this reason the translator does not find an equivalent expression easily, thus referring to famous people that were not mentioned in the original script, or even to Italian TV shows, in order to reproduce the same effect of equivalence in both versions.

2. Method and Corpus

The analysis shall focus on the translation of cultural references contained in *Family Guy* (*FG*) fourth season as well as of the titles of some *FG* and *The Simpsons* (*TS*) episodes, in order to exemplify that culture-based humour and cultural references are contained not only in each episode, but also in the titles themselves, and that it is not always easy to translate them properly so as to maintain also the Italian title funny and coherent to the plot at the same time.

A corpus of *FG* episodes was examined both in its original and translated versions. Dialogue cues were annotated when a discrepancy between the English and the Italian scripts was identified, marking the start and the end of the scene. The extracts are grouped according to the cultural references contained or the solutions adopted. After each case, a comment will underline those aspects of the Italian translation which are or are not satisfactory, together with the reasons that may justify the translator's choices.

A corpus of episode titles in the original and translated versions was selected among those containing puns, or references to songs or movies, to comment whether the Italian translation may produce an equivalent funny effect on the target audience or not.

3. Different Cultures, Different Versions

3.1 Analysis of the titles of the episodes

Even though the titles of the episodes refer to movies, or books, or other cultural elements that may be successful also in the target country, their translation could not be easy, since the translator has to decide whether the title of the target version could allow the creation of a pun in the target language as well.

For this reason, he/she has to decide which approach to follow, whether to change the original references by looking for different concepts that may reproduce the same effect, or lose the original joke by creating a neutral title for the Target Culture. The following examples are from *FG* third and fourth seasons:

<i>Season Number</i>	<i>Episode No.</i> ¹	<i>Original Title</i>	<i>IT Translation</i>
3	2 (2ACX20)	Brian Does Hollywood	Hollywood a luci rosse
3	3 (2ACX11)	Mr. Griffin Goes to Washington	Il Presidente
3	5 (2ACX22)	And the Wiener Is...	Pene d'amor perduto
3	8 (3ACX02)	The Kiss Seen Round the World	Baciami stupido (aka "Baci via satellite")
3	15 (3ACX07)	Ready, Willing and Disabled	Olimpiadi e dintorni (aka "Andicappati e ritorno")
3	18 (3ACX11)	From Method to	La follia del

¹ The codes between brackets indicate the production number.

		Madness	teatro
4	6 (4ACX09)	Petarded	Genio ritardato
4	14 (4ACX17)	PTV	Abbasso la censura
4	17 (4ACX20)	The Fat Guy Strangler	Se non son matti...
4	23 (4ACX26)	Deep Throats	Nuovi talenti

Some of the titles listed above can be considered as examples of good translations, such as:

- “Hollywood a luci rosse”, that does not respect the original reference to adult movies, but is still good at giving an idea of the episode contents.
- “Pene d’amor perduto”, which maintains the word play (being referred to the title of a Shakespearean play, whereas the original one is referred to the Academy Awards for best performers) and still contains a reference to the plot of the episode as well, even though while the original title is related to Peter’s part of the story, the translation focuses more on Meg’s part of the story. In fact, the main plot of the episode is about Meg’s attempts to be accepted by her friends, while the sub-plot is concerned with Peter being jealous of his son, Chris, because of “virility” matters.
- “Abbasso la censura”, which does not follow the original title, but is significant indeed if compared to the plot of the episode and especially to the Italian version of the show which was censored when dubbed.

On the other hand, there are some titles whose translation does not seem satisfactory:

- “Il Presidente”, which loses the original reference to the movie *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.
- “Genio ritardato”, which contains an oxymoron but loses the direct reference to the main character of the show, Peter Griffin, and the original pun, “petarded”, between “Peter” and “retarded”.

Differently from *FG* titles, which resort less to movies or books and more to its explicit humour and sexual puns, *TS* titles contain more cultural references, as evident in the following examples:

<i>Season Number</i>	<i>Episode Number</i>	<i>Original Title</i>	<i>Italian Title</i>
7	23 (3F20)	Much Apu about Nothing	Tanto Apú per niente
8	4 (4F05)	Burns, Baby Burns	Burns Baby Burns
9	25 (5F18)	Natural Born Kissers	Amore rischioso, pathos focoso
11	16 (BABF12)	Pygmoelian	Boe perde la faccia ²
11	18 (BABF14)	Days of Wine	A tutta birra

² Moe is a tavern owner in the show, and in the Italian version his name has been changed into Boe because of a mistake. What is more, even though it has remained Boe over the years, the two versions actually alternated in the first seasons. In the episode “Duffless” (9F14, “Niente birra per Homer”), for example, in a scene set in the tavern, Homer calls the man “Moe”, while the other people in the bar call him “Boe”.

		and D'ohses ³	
12	8 (CABF06)	Skinner's Sense of Snow	Tormenti di neve
14	15 (EABF10)	C.E.D'oh	Homer fa le scarpe a Burns
17	8 (HABF02)	The Italian Bob	Il Bob italiano
17	19 (HABF12)	Girls Just Want to Have Sums	Le ragazze vogliono solo sommare
18	6 (HABF19)	Moe-n-a-Lisa	Boe-e-una-Lisa
18	15 (JABF08)	Rome-Old and Juli-Eh	Rom-antíco e Giulié
18	22 (JABF15)	You Kent Always Say What You Want	Non puoi sempre dire quello Kent ti pare
19	9 (KABF02)	Eternal Moonshine of the Simpson Mind	Se mi ubriachi cancello i Simpson
19	11 (KABF04)	That '90's Show	Lo show degli anni '90

The titles above (only a few examples) contain lots of witty references and the Italian counterparts are here classified into high-quality translations and lower quality ones. Examples of good translations are:

- "Amore rischioso, pathos focoso", which loses the original reference to *Natural Born Killers* (*Assassini nati*, Oliver Stone, 1994), but it is funny if related to the plot of the episode, which is about Homer and Marge looking for possibilities to put new life into their relationship.

- "Non puoi sempre dire quello Kent ti pare", which is quite similar to the original title, since the correspondence between the pronunciations "Kent" and "can't" is rendered into Italian by the correspondence between "Kent" and "che".

- "Se mi ubriachi cancello i Simpson", which respects the original intentions, since the American title refers to the movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004). The Italian title is not so witty as the original ('moonshine' vs. 'sunshine', for example), even though it refers to the Italian title of the movie, which is *Se mi lasci ti cancello*.

On the other hand, the following titles are not satisfactory:

- "Tanto Apú per niente", which does not keep the original reference to the conventional translation of Shakespeare's play "Molto rumore per nulla" to which the original title refers to ("Much Ado about Nothing").

- "A tutta birra", which comes short of the original not only from a linguistic point of view, but also from a plot-related point of view, even though it is very difficult to find an equivalent title, since the original one refers both to a music album of Dream Syndicate (1982) and to a film by Blake Edwards (*I giorni del vino e delle rose*, 1963).

- "Boe-e-una-Lisa", which does not have the same effect as in the original version.

³ The expression "D'oh" refers to the exclamation of frustration usually pronounced by Homer, which has become a sort of hallmark in the show.

- “Lo show degli anni ‘90”, because the series the title refers to—*That ‘70s’ show*—has been broadcast in Italy with the original title.

3.2 Analysis of Family Guy fourth season episodes

The extracts from *Family Guy* which contain culture-bound jokes focus on American TV or pop culture, but they also mock current affairs such as the War in Iraq or historical events such as Nazism. It is interesting to notice that the Italian translator has followed different approaches according to the object of the jokes.

The first approach is to resort to different concepts or to different ways of conveying the humour of the show when the original references were difficult to render into Italian, as in “Fast Times at Buddy Cianci Jr. High (4ACX02, “Tutto accadde in una scuola), when Stewie refers to a specific product, and a specific brand, which does not exist in Italy ((1): 0:14:14 – 0:14:25), in “Blind Ambition” (4ACX04, “Ambizione cieca”), when Peter informs his family that he is going to establish a new Guinness World Record to become as famous as the world’s fattest twins ((2): 0:12:35 – 0:12:51) and in “8 Simple Rules for Buying My Teenage Daughter” (4ACX11, “Scambio equo”), a reference to the title of the famous sitcom series *8 Simple Rules for Dating My Teenage Daughter* (*8 semplici regole*), where Stewie criticises his mother, who realises that it is difficult to find an appropriate baby-sitter ((3): 0:07:37 – 0:07:43):

- | | | |
|-----|---|---|
| (1) | <p>LOIS: Oh, my God. Oh, my God! Chris is gonna murder Mrs. Lockhart’s husband!
We-- We gotta stop him!</p> <p>STEWIE: Er... Can we stop at the supermarket? I want a “Granny Smith” apple.</p> | <p>Oh, mio Dio. Oh, mio Dio! Chris ucciderà il marito della signora Lockhart!
Be’, dobbiamo fermarlo!</p> <p>Ehi, possiamo passare al supermercato? Voglio assaggiare una mela, anzi meglio: due!</p> |
| (2) | <p>PETER: Everybody, you’re looking at a guy who’s gonna set a new world record. I am gonna eat more nickels than anyone has ever eaten before.
Setting this World Record is gonna make me famous, just like the world’s fattest twins over there.</p> <p>FAT TWIN 2: Did I tell you that I’m doing Atkins?</p> <p>FAT TWIN 1: Oh... That’s not good for you.</p> | <p>Notizia per voi! State guardando l’uomo che stabilirà un nuovo record del mondo. Il sottoscritto mangerà più nichelini di quanti ne abbia mai mangiato un umano prima d’ora. Stabilire questo record mi farà diventare famoso come i gemelli più grassi del mondo lí davanti.</p> <p>Te l’ho detto che faccio la dieta delle patate?</p> <p>Non è che poi ingrassi troppo?</p> |
| (3) | <p>LOIS: I didn’t think it was gonna be this hard to choose a baby-sitter.</p> | <p>Non credevo fosse così difficile scegliere una babysitter.</p> |

STEWIE: Yes, if only **you were this discerning when you picked that happenin' Bruce Jenner hairdo!** Sí, ma tu **non sei stata perspicace neanche quando hai scelto il colore di capelli alla Wilma Flintstone!**

The jokes above deal with brands or famous characters that are not known in Italy, so the translator has avoided the risk of creating non-jokes by resorting to different references that have a similar value for the TC. In particular, it is true that the translation in (1) seems weaker than the original version, but the translator has decided to focus humour on Stewie's character, on the fact that he does not care for his family, so that while Lois is worried about helping Chris, Stewie just wants to buy some apples. In (2) the translation may be funny because one of the world's fattest twins does not want his brother to be fatter, but the actual joke is lost, since it refers to Atkins, a controversial diet known in America about which one of the twins is really worried. Finally, it is difficult to find a proper translation for Bruce Jenner (3), and if the translator had left the same reference, the joke would have been transformed into a non-joke. So, Stewie refers to Wilma Flintstone's hair colour and even though the body of the joke shifts from Lois's hairdo to her hair colour, by choosing Wilma Flintstone, the translator maintains the same effect, resorting—voluntarily or involuntarily—to one of the references of the show, which usually mocks *The Flintstones*.

As for the references to Iraq war and Nazism, the Italian translator's behaviour changes, since most of these elements are lost, as in the following extracts from "Model Misbehaviour" (4ACX13, "Top model", (4): 0:00:38 – 0:00:45 and (5): 0:11:45 – 0:11:50) and "Untitled Griffin Family History" (4ACX30, "La storia sconclusionata della famiglia Griffin", (6): 0:16:49 – 0:16:56):

- (4) SPEAKER: Newport would like to extend a special welcome to all those here today who have **children stationed overseas in Iraq.** [THE VOICE STOPS] [LAUGHS] Just kidding!
- La nostra città vorrebbe dare un caloroso benvenuto a tutti coloro che sono qui oggi e che hanno **figli impegnati in missioni di guerra.** [LA VOCE SI FERMA] [RIDE] Stavo scherzando!
- (5) COOKIE **YOU GUYS ARE NAZIS,** SIETE UN BRANCO DI
MONSTER: **MAN! YOU'RE FREAKIN' NAZIS!** **TERRIBILI DITTATORI!**
- (6) HITLER: Peter, can't you see I'm busy?
- PETER: Hey, what are you doing? **Stuff?**
- HITLER: Yes.
- PETER: **Nazi stuff?**
- HITLER: Yes, Peter: **nazi stuff.**
- Peter, non lo vedi che ho da fare? busy?
- Ja!* Che stai scrivendo? **Un discorso?**
- Sí.
- Un proclama nazista?**
- Sí, Peter: **un proclama nazista.**

Differently from (6), jokes (4) and (5) do not translate the references to Iraqi war and Nazism. It is interesting to guess the reason for such a choice. Perhaps, joke (6) is considered funnier than (4) and (5), which aim at being comic while criticising two controversial historical events: the war in Iraq and the Nazi period. Furthermore, the

presence of the Cookie Monster (one of the characters of TV shows for children) in (5) increases the opposition between the cruel behaviour of the doctors and the Monster's behaviour, typical of a drug addicted person. These reasons make the respect of the original joke difficult, especially if it is considered that *FG* is usually aired in the early afternoon, when children can watch the programme as well. Finally, it is also worth considering that (6) has the tone of a parody, even though the original is less respectful than the translation: Peter mocks Nazism also by referring to what Hitler is writing with the generic term "stuff", which the Italian translation replaces with the more neutral and specific "proclama", 'proclamation'.

Finally, here are two examples that are different from what has been analysed so far. In the first extract there is a good translation that creates an equivalent sense in both versions. In the episode "Brian the Bachelor" (4ACX10, "Brian lo scapolo"), Brian takes part in a reality show and he uses a pun to say that Brooke, the girl he likes, is both beautiful and intelligent ((7): 0:11:04 – 0:11:07):

- (7) BRIAN: I guess **you can't judge a Brooke by its cover!** Be', **addosso a Brooke l'abito non fa il monaco!**

The proverb in the Italian translation is similar to the original, so that it reproduces an equivalent effect for the target audience, which means that the joke is maintained.

On the other hand, the following extract exemplifies the self-centred attitude of Italian commercial television. Before the episode "The Cleveland-Loretta Quagmire" (4ACX08, "Amicizia tradita") finishes, a man kicks Peter. Perhaps it is a reference to a candid camera TV programme, or perhaps it just respects the non-sense humour of the cartoon, but the Italian version directly refers to a well-known TV show ((8): 0:19:37 – 0:19:41):

- (8) HOST: My friend, my friend! [HE KICKS PETER] Amico, amico, senti! [DÀ UN CALCIO A PETER]
 PETER: What? Cosa?
 HOST: You've been **kicked in the nuts!** Sei su *Scherzi a parte!*

There is no need to comment on this translation, but it is a good example to see the different levels of *Family Guy* Italian dubbing, which ranges from good translation, to changes and omissions that cannot be easily explained, to direct references to Italian TV shows, following the rules of the domestication process.

4. Conclusions

Humour is based on the "shared knowledge", which is what both the sender and the recipient know. This shared knowledge is involved in the creation of the jokes, because humour is based on people's mental schemata, which represent the way one perceives reality. Mental schemata are obviously linked to each culture, so it is difficult to find a proper equivalent effect while translating, in particular when cultural references differ between the source and the target cultures.

AVT is the branch of translation that deals with the rendering of audiovisual texts and its constraints—both technical and cultural—make the translation process difficult.

For this reason, the two realizations of AVT, dubbing and subtitles, have been analysed and labelled the former as being closer to the target culture, whereas the latter stresses and maintains the distance between the two cultures.

Over the years, scholars have been interested in AVT, and it has been argued that the quality of the translations is not always good, due to several reasons, such as the lack of time for the translators, in particular after the increase of TV channels and of the imported series and movies, and to the low level of some translators' skills. In this paper, a corpus including some titles of two American animated series, *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons* has been analysed, focusing on the comic effect triggered by references to movies, or famous people, or TV shows which may or may not be known by the Italian audience too. This paper has analysed those difficult cases first of titles and then of extracts of *FG* episodes, where the presence of cultural references challenges the translator and the search for the crucial, equivalent comic effect. The analysis has exemplified that there are good translations that succeed in creating an equivalent effect, sometimes maintaining the original references, sometimes adapting them, together with examples of bad translations, sometimes caused by the Italian self-centred attitude, which leads translators to completely change some references, replacing them with titles of Italian TV shows, thus creating versions that are more accessible to the Italian audience, but which do not respect the original intent of the show.

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