

MARIA GRAZIA GUIDO
The Acting Translator: Embodying Cultures in the Dubbing Translation of American Sitcoms
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In *The Acting Translator: Embodying Cultures in the Dubbing Translation of American Sitcoms* (2012), Maria Grazia Guido offers an innovative approach to the study of the dubbing from English into Italian of humorous discourse in the context of American television situation comedies; in particular, she investigates the way that humorous discourse, which is often deeply embedded within the source culture and thus constitutes a further obstacle to the translator, is dealt with during this fraught process.

Audiovisual translation (AVT) is a particularly interesting area of translation studies as it deals with the diverse forms of adaptation of multimodal texts (see van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001; van Leeuwen 2005; Kress and van Leeuwen 2006), the semantic dimensions of which are manifested by the complex interplay between the linguistic, acoustic and visual elements. With the diffusion of electronic media, AVT is naturally becoming the object of increasing interest among scholars, as shown by the high number of conferences, academic papers, publications and university courses on the topic; this book is an interesting treatment of one key aspect of the subject, that of dubbing.

Analysis of dubbing and of humorous discourse has been attempted by others before this book but the results achieved have been mixed often because authors get lost in the detail of specific instances of humour and the various avenues of potential humour that even a quite simple joke or quip may contain. This work succeeds where others have failed because it does not only concentrate on what can go wrong in translation but seeks remedies that are not restricted to individual instances of failure. Instead, it proposes a whole new approach, a whole new mentality almost, that targets the cognitive processes in the mind of the translator that cause such errors in the first place.

Guido is disciplined in her treatment and views the subject from a sound theoretical perspective which permits her to keep focused on the bigger picture. The result is a book that leads the reader along a clear path through a wide variety of examples, starting with an informed and informative overview of existing research.

This comprehensive work is divided into two parts: the first concentrating on the theory, the second on its application. This division works well also because everything is cross-referenced and the chapters build upon each other and follow a readily discernable logical order.

In the first chapter, Professor Guido offers an interesting and fairly exhaustive discussion of the discourse of humour, dealing in turn with its cognitive-linguistic and socio-cultural dimensions. Entire books have been written on this subject without reaching clear conclusions. In her relatively short discussion, Guido sticks to what is pertinent to her subject matter without resorting to simplification, or omission of some of the more complicated issues.

In the final sections of Chapter 1, she offers the Cognitive-Experientialist Model of the Acting Translator which is the foundation of her approach. In this, the practitioner as actor is a concept that she also explores in some of her other books which use a similar construct to examine the discourse of poetry, of metaphysics and of television comedy and, most recently,

of embodied stylistics (Guido 1999, 2005, and 2013). This model is founded on the premise that activity (being physically involved in the text, so-to-speak) is fundamental to the achievement of a total experience of a text. In the case of sitcoms discussed in this book, this is only possible if dubbing translators “embody” characters and “inhabit” sitcom situations within a “physical space of representation”. To do this, Maria Grazia Guido advises that they should first improvise and, then, reflect on the patterns of humour found in the text and thus produce pragmatically equivalent versions in the target language through “action”.

The object is for dubbing translators to become more than merely linguistically proficient but to become “acting translators” thereby encompassing all the roles involved in the dubbing-translation process: the linguist, the actor, the translator, the script adaptor, the dubbing actor, and the dubbing director.

In the second chapter, there is a detailed genre analysis of American sitcoms and the model is illustrated with the comparative analysis of some source and target versions of American sitcom humour, looking in particular at the way that non-standard forms and varieties are dealt with in target versions and the way that a “dubbese” has emerged in Italian to render lingua franca variation (the latter being an area of special interest to Professor Guido, who has also published widely on this specific topic).

In Chapter 3, the final one in Part One, she applies her Acting Translator Model to conversation analysis in both source and target versions of a number of scripts from five American sitcoms (“The Nanny”, “Roseanne”, “Dharma and Greg”, “Friends”, and “Will and Grace”). In doing so, Maria Grazia Guido highlights certain translation shortcomings in the dubbed versions commissioned for television in Italy. She does this by comparing them with the more pragmatically equivalent versions provided by acting-translators trained using her method (university students). These translations represent instances of what Professor Guido terms “product naturalization” and reflect the spontaneity of conversation, which the commissioned versions often fail to do.

Part Two is divided into three further chapters which deal respectively with dubbing translation as product localization, as product neutralization and as product globalization. The allusion to marketing is perhaps no accident. It would certainly highlight an important aspect of dubbing and translation in general, namely that translation choices are not only informed by linguistic or cultural factors but also by commercial ones. Nowhere is this perhaps more evident than with television sitcoms.

In particular, in Chapter 4 Maria Grazia Guido shows how in the official dubbed version of “The Nanny” used by Italian television there is a top-down “sociopragmatic transfer” of Italian stereotypes to the cultural, multiethnic, contextual and linguistic patterns of the original American version thus constituting a distortion and misrepresentation of it. She explains how dubbing translators can singularly fail to embody characters or inhabit locations, preferring instead to let their own views and experiences cloud their interpretation of the text. Once again, Professor Guido illustrates how university students, coached in the acting translator methodology, produce more “natural” and alternative equivalent versions of the same script in Italian that reflect better the characters and situations represented in the original.

Chapter 5 applies Martin and White’s Appraisal framework (2005) to comparative conversation analysis of the original scripts and of Italian television dubbing translations of two extracts from the sitcoms “Roseanne” and “Dharma and Greg” focusing on the problems that non-standard dialects, typical of the genre and the representation of characters within it, pose to dubbing translators.

“Roseanne”, in the Italian television version, is characterized by a top-down “pragmalinguistic transfer” of a standardized Neapolitan variety of Italian onto the original

white-American working-class Illinois variety of US English. Guido argues convincingly that the inappropriate transfer of typical Neapolitan conversation strategies to the American context of the sitcom produces a mismatch between the pragmalinguistic dimension of the dubbed sitcom and the fact that, visually, the sitcom is clearly set in an American context that contrasts sharply with what a Neapolitan one would look like. Even more seriously, the original dynamic between the characters' attitudes and judgments is altered as it undergoes the process of adaptation.

On the other hand, in "Dharma and Greg", dubbers resort to the invention of a fictitious Italian accent to replace a real American diatopic accent. This is unsuccessful in that such a strategy neutralizes the socio-culturally marked implications of the accent in the original. Again, Professor Guido is able to show how adopting an acting translator approach and embodying the script enables university students to produce more natural and more equivalent alternative versions than those actually aired on television.

In Chapter 6, some extracts from the sitcoms "Friends" and "Will and Grace" are analyzed. In contrast to previous examples, here, the dubbing translation is instead characterized by what Guido calls a bottom-up "sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic reverse transfer" of the American conversational styles and idiomatic expressions. As such, they cause the original version of the sitcom to be almost literally rendered into Italian. While not attempting to hide the foreignness of the original to an Italian audience (to do otherwise would, as Chapters 4 and 5 show, be, in any case, almost futile), the resulting commissioned version is not entirely satisfactory. This is because the target Italian text turns out to be characterized by unnatural stylistic distortions which also affect the spoken rhythms and intonations of the dubbed version. Furthermore they do not resemble any of the linguistic varieties used by equivalent groups of young Italian speakers. Again comparison with translations produced by students coach in the acting translator methodology shows that the latter are more successful precisely because the dubbing translators have succeeded in embodying the "original voices" through their own experience thus permitting them to empathize and better perceive and appreciate the original patterns of humour.

In her conclusions, Maria Grazia Guido re-defines the notion of intercultural communicative competence in the field of dubbing translation. She takes the stance that it is a cognitive process through which the acting translator may develop "embodied" sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic representations of both source and target cultures. In this process, it is important that the acting translators are aware of both "moves and acts" in sitcom dialogues through a process of "experiential appropriation" of the humorous script. This she argues, facilitates its rendering into a target language in a way that would sound natural and spontaneous to the target audience, but remains true also to the source culture.

The Acting Translator: Embodying Cultures in the Dubbing Translation of American Sitcoms is an ambitious book looking at a difficult subject that poses both theoretical and practical questions that have no easy answers. Professor Guido's solutions are well worth considering not least because they constitute an entirely new approach which, her case studies show, can be put to practical use. If nothing else, they encourage translators to explore their own role and their own relation to the text, rejecting a more passive view and adopting a more pro-active stance which will increase their own understanding and make it easier for them to communicate this to the target readers of the translation.

This book would certainly make a useful addition to any translation studies course dealing with AVT. The combination of theory and practice makes it attractive in all kinds of teaching contexts including discussion of theory and for practical application in workshops. Many of the chapters could be used as stand-alone items on reading lists although a better appreciation of the whole approach would be acquired by reading the entire book.

To sum up, this is a work that offers a new approach which even many experienced dubbing translators may benefit from reading. By challenging conventional wisdom as embodied in commissioned translations for Italian television and going into detail about the processes that produce better alternative versions, Maria Grazia Guido offers students of translation a clear methodology to follow and gives existing practitioners a rationale and a motive to seek greater empowerment for themselves by embracing the role of acting translator. Indeed, if dubbing translation is to improve in the future, it will probably not come from new technology as some may hope, but it will be due to a change in the way that translators are trained and how they are taught to see their own relationship with the text, that is to say it will come from a transformation of the translator's mindset, which, in essence, is what Maria Grazia Guido is proposing in this highly interesting and readable work.

References

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MAURIZIO GOTTI