Humor and Translation
Mark Herman

Another Book about Humor and Translation

Translation, Humour and Media is the companion volume to Translation, Humour and Literature, the book discussed in the July column. Both were edited by Delia Chiaro and published in 2010 in Great Britain by the Continuum International Publishing Group, now part of Bloomsbury Publishing.

The very first introductory article by the editor describes some of the drastic changes that can occur when a TV show undergoes cultural as well as linguistic transformation. For example, in the TV show The Nanny, the title character was a Jew from Queens, New York, but in the dubbed Italian version she became a Catholic immigrant from Italy with an accent marking her as a native of the Lazio region south of Rome.

Thorsten Schröter, in an article titled “Language-Play, Translation and Quality—with Examples from Dubbing and Subtitling,” gives what he calls the “most successful English-language pun in terms of structure … and surprise effect that I have encountered so far”:

Time flies like an arrow.
Fruit flies like a banana.

This pun, attributed to Groucho Marx, features two words, each with two different meanings and two different grammatical functions. When spoken, the differences in grammar can be indicated, or not, by stress and pitch. Unfortunately, as for many other jokes in the book, no translations are given.

Speaking of Groucho, there is an entire article, “On the (Mis/Over/Under) Translation of the Marx Brothers’ Humour,” by Adrián Fuentes Luque. This topic was previously discussed in the April 2013 column. Here is a typical speech, cited by Luque, made by Groucho in Animal Crackers (1930), “loaded with puns and cultural references”:

I bagged them [six tigers]. I … I bagged them to go away, but they hung around all afternoon. They were the most persistent tigers I’ve ever seen. The principal animals inhabiting the African jungle are Moose, Elks, and Knights of Pythias. Of course you all know what a moose is, that’s big game. The first day I shot two bucks. That was the biggest game we had. As I say, you all know what a moose is? A moose runs around the floor, eats cheese, and is chased by the cat. The Elks, on the other hand, live up in the hills and in the spring they come down for their annual convention. It is very interesting to watch them come to the water hole. And you should see them run when they find that it’s only a water hole! What they’re looking for is Elko-hole.

Once again, no translations are given. Luque does give the dubbed Italian translation for the visual pun occurring in Horse Feathers (1932) when Groucho looks for a seal to stamp a document and Harpo brings him a seal, the animal. Instead of looking for a seal, the Italian translator had the brothers trying to concentrate: Dobbiamo focalizzare; the visual pun then relies on the fact that the Italian word for “seal” is foca.

The Marx Brothers’ movies were subject to much censorship, from foreign distributors and sometimes even from their own film studios, because of sexual innuendo, political satire, and Jewish humor considered to be controversial or simply incomprehensible. One way the foreign versions were censored was to omit subtitles from controversial material and to rely on the inability of non-English-speaking audiences to understand the dialogue.

In addition to an article about the films of the Marx Brothers, Translation, Humour and Media includes one on the films of Woody Allen and their many cultural references. One example in “Woody Allen’s Themes through his Films, and his Films through their Translations,” by Patrick Zabalbeascoa, is a line from the film Husbands and Wives (1992): “Triumph of the Will was a great movie despite the ideas behind it.” Zabalbeascoa cites with approval the dubbed Spanish version, “El Triunfo de la Voluntad era una gran película aunque se desprecien las ideas nazis que contiene;” because it incorporates a footnote as to

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which ideas are being discussed. He cites with disapproval the subtitled Spanish version, “Triumph of Will [sic] era una gran película a pesar de su ideología,” both because there is no such footnote and because there is no reason to maintain the English title of the film because it is a translation of the German Triumph des Willens.

It is hard enough to translate from one language into another, but what if the audience is bi- or even tri-lingual, and certain material is best translated into one language and other material into another? “Translating Audio-visual Humour: A Hong Kong Case Study,” by Yau Wai-Ping, discusses dubbing and subtitling for Hong Kong audiences, many of whom know at least a smattering of three different languages: English, which is a prestige language; standard Chinese, which is also a prestige language; and Cantonese dialect, which is not a prestige language. Colloquialisms and sex jokes are often translated into Cantonese even when most of the translation is into standard Chinese.

No book about media would be complete without articles on advertising and comics, and Translation, Humour and Media includes both. “That’s Not Funny Here: Humorous Advertising Across Boundaries,” by Charles S. Gulas and Marc G. Weinberger, cites an ad for Absolut Vodka for which the Swedish manufacturer later had to apologize. The ad showed an 1821 map of North America, with the entire Southwest, from Texas to California and several points north, still part of Mexico. Though the ad ran only in Mexico, many people in the U.S. saw it and were infuriated that the ad seemed to be advocating a return to Mexico of land that many Mexicans, and even some U.S. citizens, still consider to be stolen.

In “Humour in Translated Cartoons and Comics,” Federico Zanettin shows, among other examples, a cartoon in which a man looks into the suction end of a vacuum cleaner and states, as if speaking to someone inside it, “You’ve got to stop living in a vacuum.” A proposed Italian translation is, “dovresti aspirare a qualcosa di meglio [you should aspire to something better],” which plays on aspirare [to aspir] and aspirapolvere [vacuum cleaner]. Zanettin, like Christie Davies in the book discussed last month, largely dismisses theory as a guide to actual translation, but, unfortunately, only after devoting several pages to theory.

And then there is sex, a subject which can come up in various contexts. For example, Carmen Mangiron, in “The Importance of Not Being Earnest: Translating Humour in Video Games,” describes Quina, a character in a video game in the Final Fantasy series, as “some sort of strange looking two-legged hippopotamus wearing a chef’s hat and a big apron,” whose “long tongue is always hanging out of its mouth.” In the original Japanese, Quina’s gender is unspecified, and in English Quina is “s/he.” In Spanish this would not work, as every noun, pronoun, and adjective would require both masculine and feminine endings. And so, in Spanish, because of Quina’s appearance and the fact that Quina ultimately marries a male character, Quina becomes female.

Since one of the themes of the American TV series Will & Grace is sexuality, a translator, and also someone who writes about the show, can reasonably expect to find sexual content. But if they look too hard, they may find it where it does not exist. For example, Roberto A. Valdeón, in the article “Dynamic versus Static Discourse: Will & Grace and its Spanish Dubbed Version,” cites the line, “Jack, C-3PO is not gay, he’s British.” This is a funny line. The robot C-3PO from the Star Wars movies frequently acts in a mannered, overly fussy way that vaguely resembles a stereotype of homosexuality, and for this behavior to then be identified as foreign (i.e., non-American) rather than homosexual is funny because it stereotypes Americans, not homosexuals or the British. Nonetheless, the Earl of Grantham and his family and the many American viewers of Downton Abbey to the contrary notwithstanding, Valdeón asserts:

In American English, at least, the standard British accent is perceived as affected and used to characterize gayness.

Later in the same article, Valdeón cites the sexless line, “Who knew I could do that?” which Jack says after he has thrown a ball in a game. Somehow, in Spanish the line becomes “¡Pero qué bien se me dan las pelotas!” in which the balls in the game have turned into testicles.

I will close with a bilingual pun from the introductory article by Delia Chiaro:

Why do the French have only one egg for breakfast?

Because one egg is un oeuf.
Humour translation and theory 1.2.5. Translation strategies and techniques in humour translation 1.3. Audiovisual translation 1.3.1. Definition of audiovisual translation 1.3.2. In his study of humour and translation Vandaele emphasizes that: “Humour is used in everyday parlance to refer simultaneously to an effect and its (con)textual causes, an occurrence so normalized that we don’t even notice it” (2002: 153). In the words of Vandaele: “humour as a meaning effect has an undeniable, exteriorized manifestation.” Translating Humor for Subtitling, by Katia Spanakaki. Literary Translation. Verónica Albin Interviews Amir Gutfreund and Jessica Cohen. A New Approach to Translation: The transposition or transcription system of Sub-Saharan African writers by Salawu Adewuni, Ph.D. Translators often face the task of having to translate seemingly untranslatable humor, while not reducing the meaning effect, which invariably tests their capability for finding creative solutions. Definitions and theories of humor. Humor and translation. 4. dangerous simplification is to presume that humor will necessarily be equally important in both the translated version and its source text. Or that the nature of the humor must be the same in both source text and its translation. Applied to humor, this means that translators, teachers and researchers of texts, where humor is an ingredient, especially if it is an important one, would benefit.