Among the many cognitive abilities of human beings, creating humour may be considered one of the most complex, due to its relative and idiosyncratic nature. Moreover, much of its fascination lies in the fact that it can serve a wide range of purposes: in-group bonding (Archakis and Tsakona 2005: 41), disparagement, correction of socially improper behaviour (e.g. Superiority Theory, Raskin 1985; Attardo 1994) and so forth. Hence, theories of humour have been developed and discussed across disciplines (Palmer 1994; Attardo 2001; Oring 2003; Martin 2007; etc.) in the attempt to explore and explain this linguistic, semiotic, cognitive and social phenomenon from different standpoints. This academic interest has culminated in the creation of a research field in its own right called Humour Studies, which has stimulated and produced a good deal of interesting research. However, many scholars have struggled to provide a unified definition of humour and the debate is still ongoing. Since agreement on this point has proven to be difficult to reach, they have focused on unveiling the mechanisms that this phenomenon entails and its function(s) within the context and text it occurs.

If considering translation, it is generally defined as a process that makes texts produced in one language accessible to people who do not speak that language (cf. Holland 2009: 183 on the idea of “enabling” in translation). Over the years, when considering the translation of humour, Translation Studies scholars such as Delabastita (1993, 1994, 1997), Zabalbeascoa (1996, 2005, 2012) and Chiaro (1992, 2000, 2007) have produced a significant amount of literature on this practice. They have debated it in general terms, but often concentrated on its transfer within audiovisual works. By doing so, they have also contributed to arousing interest in humour translation among “younger” scholars, including myself. Consequently, the literature on the Audiovisual Translation (AVT) of humour has been steadily increasing over the last decade (e.g. Bucaria 2007, 2008, 2017; Dore 2009, 2010a, 2010b; De Rosa et al. 2014; Iaia 2015 and, in part, Ranzato 2016, just to name a few).

However, theoretical and applied perspectives on humour research and AVT do not intersect as often as might be desirable. In other words, scholars in Humour Studies sometimes have a limited grasp of the issues
that AVT involves (e.g. condensation in subtitling and lip synchronisation in dubbing), as well as of those factors that influence the translator’s decision-making process (e.g. time pressure and degree of expertise). By the same token, AVT scholars sometimes are not entirely aware of the specific theories developed within Humour Studies, thus having only a partial understanding of the issues at hand.

In the light of the above, this volume seeks to bring together research in Humour Studies and AVT for the advancement of both disciplines. One of the main issues that this study seeks to tackle is the feasibility of transferring humour across languages and cultures, which has often been called into question. Scholars in Translation Studies hold opposing view on the (un)translatability of humour (cf. Section 2.6 in Chapter 2 for an extensive discussion). Chiaro (2005) has summarised this point as follows:

[H]umour discourse, which is naturally impeded by linguistic and social barriers, actually succeeds in crossing geographical frontiers. The translation of Verbally Expressed Humour (VEH) concerns one of the most complex types of language to translate owing to the fact that it needs to come to terms with the very tenets of translation theory, those of equivalence and (un)translatability (ibid. 135).

“Equivalence” is a controversial term in Translation Studies. A concise but comprehensive overview of the issues revolving around this concept can be found in Kenny (2008: 96), who generally defines equivalence as: “the relationship between a source text (ST) and a target text (TT) that allows the TT to be considered as a translation of the ST in the first place”. Subsequently, Chiaro (2008) has also remarked that “recent debates on equivalence have been favouring TT oriented approaches which are becoming ever more divorced from formal equivalence or faithfulness” (ibid. 577). In this light, she mentions Skopos-theorie (Vermeer 1996) and explains how it has become a convenient approach to the translation of Verbally Expressed Humour (ibid.). In other words, when texts aiming at conveying humour are translated, interventionist actions in the TT can be justified by the fact that they are intended to retain the perlocutionary effect (Hickey 1998) of the ST so that the target audience can experience “the same or a similar effect” (Vandaele 2002: 151) conveyed by the ST. Drawing on Nida and Taber’s (1969) idea of “dynamic (or functional) equivalence”, this type of interventionist approach can be described in terms of what I call functional manipulation (Chapters 1 and 2 in this book).

Tackling humour translation (and translation in general) in such a fashion is motivated by the fact that this endeavour poses a range of “objective problems” (pragmatic, linguistic and textual) that can be further complicated by “subjective difficulties” (e.g. the translator’s expertise,
time pressures; Nord 1991, quoted in Popa 2005: 51). The objective problems that arise specifically in AVT are directly related to the multisemiotic nature of the mode used. The term “mode” in AVT is used to define “all types of transfer of audiovisual texts between two languages and cultures (interlingual) or within the same language and culture (intralingual)” (Chaume 2013: 106), which can be subsumed under two “macro-modes” of AVT: revoicing and captioning (Zabalbeascoa et al. 2012: 18; Chaume 2013: 106–107). Each of these two macro-modes comprises other types or subtypes. This book will consider not only dubbing and audio description (part of revoicing) but also professional subtitling and the so-called “participatory audiovisual translation” (Pérez-González 2014: 233), i.e. amateur subtitling, or fansubbing (part of captioning).

The considerations regarding the theoretical debate on the AVT of humour derive from both the theory and practice. The two can be considered equally useful because, as Ulrych (2000: 410) puts it, they are “simply two sides of the same coin: theory informs practice, which in turn contributes towards a theoretical framework”. This view falls into the framework of Descriptive Translation Studies, which investigate translations “as they manifest themselves in the world of our experience” (Holmes, 1988: 71). Translations are analysed according to the socio-historical context within which they are embedded and the translation norms such a context has established (Toury 1995). As a consequence, researchers can offer insight into the translation process they analyse and possibly detect procedural patterns. Venuti (1992, 1998, 2017 [1995]) and his famous distinction between source-oriented (a.k.a. foreignisation) and target-oriented (a.k.a. domestication) approaches come readily to mind. In the former case, translators attempt to retain in the TT the linguistic and cultural differences the ST contains, thus making it evident that the former is a translated version of the latter. In a domesticating or target-culture approach, the TT is made fluent, “intelligible and even familiar to the target-language reader” (Venuti 1992: 5).

These concepts can be and are applied to the analysis of TV and film comedy in this book, along with other considerations stemming from the Polysystem Theory (Even-Zohar 2005) that can help us to understand “the role translation plays in canon formation, and the establishment, development and maintenance of an academic discipline” (Nornes 2007: 3–4). For instance, in the case of Italian AVT, which is the polysystem under scrutiny here, Italy’s cinema and audiovisual tradition matches the definition of “weak literature” as suggested by Even-Zohar (2012) when talking about literary translation. He describes weak literature as being on the margins of a larger literary hierarchy that prevents the former from developing like other larger literatures, which may be therefore felt to be indispensable (ibid. 164). This description fits the context because, like “weak literature”, the audiovisual production of Italy is limited compared to that of the United States, the reason being that after the initial
boom, between 1906 and 1913, the European film industry halted due to the outbreak of World Wars I and II, and it was consequently outdone by Hollywood. Despite its recovery, the European market is still overshadowed by US productions (Perego 2005: 17).

Like other European countries, Italy largely depends on the importation and translation of American series and movies. It is therefore unsurprising that a large amount of scholarly research in AVT often deals with American audiovisual works and their translation into French, Spanish, Italian, German and so on (cf. Chapter 2). And this study is indeed no exception; in its attempt to offer an account of the treatment of humour in Italian AVT, this work considers instances taken from comedy productions for the television and the cinema. In order to investigate revoicing and captioning, this book concentrates on the first two seasons of the TV comedy program *Modern Family* (Christopher Lloyd and Steven Levitan, 2009–) and its Italian dubbed and captioned (subtitled and fun-subbed) versions. This family sitcom revolves around the lives of Jay Pritchett and his family, all of whom live in suburban Los Angeles. Jay’s family includes his Colombian second wife Gloria, their son Joe and Manny, Gloria’s son and Jay’s stepson. Jay also has two adult children: Mitchell, who is gay and in a long-term relationship with Cameron; and Claire, who is married to Phil. Cameron and Mitchell have adopted a Vietnamese baby girl (Lily), while Claire and Phil have three children: Haley, Alexandra and Luke. *Modern Family* is a telling example of the way comedy has been evolving to depict a multilingual and multicultural society such as that of North America. Most of the series’ success and humour derives from its characters’ playful use of language, cultural references and the clash between the North and South American societies, languages and cultures. It is a fascinating and humorous sitcom that poses several challenges and is therefore well worth exploring.

Hence, the contrastive analysis carried out in this volume seeks to shed light on precisely those language- and culture-specific features that pose significant problems in humour translation, meaning wordplay, culture-specific references and multilingualism. As mentioned above, this investigation aims to bring together insights from the scholarly research on AVT and Humour Studies, most notably, Raskin’s (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH) and Attardo’s General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH; Attardo and Raskin 1991, 2017; Attardo 1994, 2001). However, the inner complexities of humour, its development and translation within a multisemiotic system such as the audiovisual setting call for an eclectic approach that extends beyond these fields. Therefore, this study also integrates observations by scholars in Film Studies, Corpus Linguistics, Conversation Analysis and so on.

From a statistical point of view, the corpus under scrutiny is sufficiently large to allow for detecting patterns of translational behaviour within different AVT modes. Each of the two original seasons comprises
24 episodes with an average running time of approximately 22 minutes per episode and an average of 3,300 words per episode. This means that the ST corpus is roughly made of 160,000 words. The word count for the dubbed text is approximately the same, whereas the subtitled and funsubbed versions have an average of 3,100 words per episode, which once again is not substantially different from the ST’s word count. Therefore, the overall word count for Modern Family is approximately 600,000 words. In addition, the number of people involved in the transfer (meaning translation and/or adaptation) of these two seasons is quite large. As explained in more detail in Section 3.4.2, the dubbed and funsubbed versions are the result of a collective effort by, respectively, a group of professionals and some amateur subtitlers who were part of the Italian fansubbing community called ItaSA. Unfortunately, no information regarding the official subtitler(s) could be retrieved, proof of their chronic invisibility (Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007: 40). By and large, it is likely that the translation patterns detected here are in part the result of personal choices but mostly the decision of a group of people working together.

Finally, in order to give a more exhaustive picture of the issues connected with AVT, this volume also includes an investigation of humour in Audio Description (AD) in Chapter 6. This AVT mode allows the visually impaired or the blind to assess the non-verbal content of a film. The present analysis has concentrated on a recent romantic comedy titled The Big Sick (Michael Showalter, 2017). In a nutshell, this feature film revolves around Kumail and Emily’s love story. Kumail is an Uber driver in Chicago who is trying to become a famous stand-up comedian by self-producing his one-man show about his Pakistani background. Emily is a white graduate student in psychotherapy who happens to attend one of Kumail’s performances. Despite Emily’s health problems and Kumail’s immigrant parents’ attempts to marry him off to a young Pakistani Muslim woman, the couple will finally end up together.

As may be gathered, this romantic comedy has been chosen because it shares some of the themes that Modern Family also deals with, i.e. the attempt to show that the present society is continuously changing, incorporating people coming from many different cultural backgrounds. Although the linguistic and cultural differences may result in a clash, which is exploited here for humorous purposes, the ultimate underlying message is that accepting and embracing diversity is possible when understanding prevails. Besides, humour is a very important part of the film’s storyline, given that Kumail wants to become a professional stand-up comedian. Finally, since the English and Italian ADs have been carried out independently, it is interesting to compare them and understand how the visual humour in this film has been approached within each of these cultural and linguistic contexts.
Introduction

Generally speaking, the results of the inductive research presented here confirm that scholars need to take into account textual and contextual factors at play during AVT, if they really want to understand the way professional practice works, the problems translation poses and how they are tackled (Zabalbeascoa 2005: 206). This approach can help determine procedural processes that need to be informed by a clear methodology, which in turn helps to conceptualise a sound theory. As Attardo and Raskin (2017: 52) nicely put it: “[a] theory should and often does imply a methodology. An explicit theory always suggests and establishes it. The methodology results in what we call descriptions, and the format and substance of those are what a real theory defines”.

The Scope of This Book and Its Structure

Performing arts, music and literature have been and are created to make everyday life more enjoyable. However, having a good laugh can also be as therapeutic as reading a novel, attending an exhibition or going to a concert. Lay people may enjoy the performers’ skills in creating a pleasant experience. Conversely, a well-informed and expert eye tends to go beyond this surface level of appreciation. As far as TV comedy is concerned, Humour Studies scholars, and linguists in general, are interested in the way the production crew and the scriptwriters in particular are able to convey humour via the language the characters use and the fictional world they inhabit. Scholars in AVT who are also interested in humour not only look at the way this type of humour is conceived and conveyed but also how it is transferred across languages and cultures. Some may also explore the appreciation of humour in AVT (cf. Section 2.6). However, humour creation and translation in audiovisual content are the main concerns of this study and will be extensively debated in theoretical and practical terms.

This volume is purposefully divided into two main parts, which altogether comprise eight chapters, including this introduction. Part I contains two chapters that are entirely devoted to the theoretical discussion of humour and audiovisual translation respectively. Chapter 1 offers an overview of the most popular theories developed within Humour Studies and an in-depth discussion of the ongoing debate on the (im)possibility of translating humour. Chapter 2 contains an overview of the literature produced on AVT in general and the AVT of humour in particular, thus nicely connecting Part I to the following chapters. Those who are already familiar with these topics may wish to move directly to Part II, as it focuses primarily on the application of such theories to the case studies under scrutiny.

Part II is composed of three chapters (Chapters 3–5) that tackle specific language- and culture-bound issues that are exploited for humorous purposes: punning, culture-specific references and multilingualism
respectively. As mentioned above, Chapter 6 is instead entirely devoted to the AD of humour and the way it has been tackled in English and Italian. Each of these chapters provides the reader with a theoretical discussion of the issue at hand, a detailed analysis of some instances taken from the corpus and a conclusion summing up the related findings. Consequently, every chapter can also be read as a self-standing piece of research.

The reader may easily notice that the chapters in Part II progressively decrease in length. This is mainly due to the fact that each phenomenon has been variously explored in the literature, depending on either its long-established tradition or its novelty. However, a caveat is in order: while multilingual humour is probably no more recent a phenomenon in human communication than punning, it is a matter of fact that wordplay and its translation have attracted greater attention in the past and, even today, many scholars in both Humour Studies and AVT continue to investigate it. Conversely, multilingualism and, consequently, multilingual humour have recently become trend topics in research (cf. Dore 2019; Corrius et al. Forthcoming), and this is most probably the result of its appeal to today’s globalised world and society. More and more people move to other countries for work-related or study purposes. Migration flows have contributed to creating more multi-ethnic communities, which are clearly represented in audiovisual productions such as Modern Family and The Big Sick.

By the same token, the development of new technologies and new sensibilities regarding accessibility has led to the creation of AD. Although gaining momentum in AVT research, AD can be said to be in its infancy, and the AD of humour almost non-existent. It is therefore hoped that the discussion carried out in Chapter 6 will foster the (presently limited) debate on this important aspect of AD.

Finally, Chapter 7 elaborates on the results of this study in more general terms, pinpointing their implications for both Humour Studies and Translation Studies. It also addresses certain limitations of this work as well as indicating possible avenues for further research.

Bibliography


8 Introduction


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