LINGUISTIC AND/OR CULTURAL
(UN)TRANSLATABILTY OF HUMOUR

Silvia Campanini
S.S.L.M.I.T., Università di Trieste

Though nothing suffocates humour more swiftly than a thesis, the comic muse will never lack commentators.
(Walter Nash)

This essay is based on the comparison of the Italian and the German translations of two contemporary humouristic novels, namely Small World by David Lodge and Talking It Over by Julian Barnes. A number of examples will be discussed which are representative of the various humouristic techniques employed by the two British authors; these techniques include word-play, parody, allusion and the linguistic creation of caricature. The following passage from Lodge's Small World will serve to illustrate the aim of this trilingual comparison. The two main characters in the novel are discussing the arbitrariness of the sign at a conference dinner:

"Different languages divide up the world differently. For instance, this mutton we're eating. In French there's only one word for 'sheep' and 'mutton' – mouton. So you can't say 'dead as mutton' in French, you'd be saying 'dead as sheep', which would be absurd."
"I don't know, this tastes more like dead sheep than mutton to me," said Persse, pushing his plate aside. (Lodge 1985: 23)

Saussure's classic example is here employed to generate a kind of metalinguistic humour. For any translator who wants to avoid using an explanatory note to clarify the meaning of the phrase "dead as mutton", the translation of this apparently simple passage, let alone the reproduction of the comic effect of the conclusive statement, is no simple task. An Italian reader would have to be familiar with Saussure's text to be able to grasp the full significance of this exchange in the Italian translation:

"Per esempio, prendi questa carne di montone che stiamo mangiando: in francese c'è solo una parola per definire la pecora e il montone, essa è mouton. Perciò in francese non si può dire, come da noi, 'stecchito come un montone' perché suonerebbe 'stecchito come una pecora' e ciò sarebbe assurdo."
"Non lo so ma questo qui ha più sapore di una pecora morta che di un montone," disse Persse, allontanando il piatto. (Lodge 1990: 39)
The reason why the translation sounds slightly incoherent and is far from being even mildly funny is quite clear: in Italian, as in French, there is no difference between sheep and mutton (rendered respectively as "pecora" and "montone"), "montone" being just 'a male sheep'; in this context the translator was only able to render the literal meaning of the idiomatic expression "dead as mutton" — the corresponding Italian idiomatic expression is "morte stecchito" — deleting the subtle play on words which activates both the usual idiomatic meaning of the phrase and the literal one.

The German translator, faced with the same kind of difficulty, due to the lack of semantic equivalents, tried to circumvent the problem by adopting a different, perhaps more linguistically aware strategy, which consists in retaining the two English key words as well as the phrase, while smuggling into the translation the information necessary to clarify their meaning:

"Verschiedene Sprachen unterteilen die Welt auf unterschiedliche Art. Nehmen Sie das Hammelfleisch, das wir gerade essen. Im englischen heißt das Tier sheep, sein Fleisch mutton. Auf Französisch gibt es für Tier und Fleisch nur ein Wort – mouton. Unser Ausdruck 'dead as mutton' hieße also auf Französisch 'tot wie ein Schaf', was einfach absurd klingt."

"Ob nun Hammel oder mouton – tot kommt mir das Zeug auf jedenfall vor", sagte Persse und schob den Teller beiseite. (Lodge 1987: 31)

The third sentence of this passage is an addition which explains to the reader that "In English the animal is called sheep, while its meat is called mutton". Unfortunately, also the strategy of zero-translation plus metalinguistic comment is not entirely satisfactory: the word "Ausdruck" (phrase) only describes the linguistic nature of the expression, but falls short of illuminating the reader regarding the double meaning of the phrase. It can, however, be said that this solution introduces the German reader to the lexical form of the SL (source language) and calls his attention to the fact that he is actually reading a translation.

This passage, although only mildly comic, is relevant to a discussion of the translation of humour in two ways, one theoretical, the other practical: the author himself is consciously addressing the long-standing issue of the mutual untranslatability of natural languages, due to the lack of semantic correspondence between their signifiers — and in doing so he actually (consciously or unconsciously) poses a challenge to his translators. In other words, this passage incorporates both the theory supporting untranslatability — no two languages refer to reality in the same way; hence the untranslatability of word-play based on polysemy — and its demonstration. On the practical level, the two translations show that, when it comes to having to solve problems of this kind, the translator must strive to trade off formal equivalence against
functional equivalence\textsuperscript{1}. Double entendres, puns or plays on words are not untranslatable as such – most of the time they can be imitated or recreated – rather, their (un)translatability depends on the context, or co-text, which in the case at hand is binding: if one were to retain the overall significance of the passage through a recreative procedure, one would have to replace it wholesale, trying to fit into an analogous co-text a similar play on words; quite a hopeless enterprise.

Similarly, since the expression of humour – being a linguistic manifestation – is necessarily also conditioned by the culture which it presupposes and helps to create, the translator also has to trade off the world-view expressed in the foreign text against the world-view of his own culture.

Translators, therefore, work under several constraints: the languages they work with, two different universes of discourse, and the two ideological frameworks they have to reconcile. Rather than focussing on the translatability vs.untranslatability dichotomy, we will analyze the actual strategies employed to tackle specific problems, strategies which in turn can be revealing for a particular overall translation agenda.

Linguistic Constraints

Starting from the category of language, let's consider three more examples from Lodge's Small World, where constraints of a semantic and phonological nature come into play.

a) semantic constraints
The Japanese translator and teacher of English Akira Sakazaki, while marking his students' compositions, comes across a funny mistake:

"Having rescued girl drowning, lifeguard raped in blanket her," he reads. Sighing, shaking his head, Akira inserts articles, re-arranges word-order, and corrects the spelling of "wrapped" (Lodge 1985: 141).

The humourous effect lies in the malapropism "raped", which totally changes the intended meaning of the sentence. If we compare the Italian and the German translations we can see that the aim of the two translators was basically the same, i.e. to imitate the device and its comic effect; but with quite different results:

\textsuperscript{1} Formal equivalence is used here in the sense intended by Nida, i.e. as a basically source-oriented translation procedure designed to reveal as much as possible of the form and content of the original message. Functional equivalence (Jäger 1973), on the other hand, is a target-oriented procedure aiming at maintenance of effect.
"Dopo aver salvato ragazza che annegava, bagnino avvinghiò lei dentro coperta." Con un sospiro e scuotendo il capo, Akira inserisce gli articoli, modifica l'ordine delle parole e sostituisce "avvinghiò" con "avvolse" (Lodge 1990: 174).

"Nach Errettung von Ertrinkungstod Rettungsschwimmer Mädchen deckt", liest er. Seufzend und kopfschüttelnd setzt Akira Artikel ein, stellt die Wortfolge um, streicht 'deckt' und schreibt:.... wickelt das Mädchen in eine Decke. (Lodge 1987: 149)

The Italian translator has tried to reconcile formal and functional equivalence, choosing two verbs which are similar in sound and even attempting to imitate the compositional process of the original text (an attempt which is very often bound to fail, as when, in translating a poem, one tries to translate an alliterative sequence with words that coincide with those of the original not only semantically but also on the level of grammatical categories). The Italian "avvolse/avvinghiò" (wrapped/embraced) comes no way near the effect of the original, since "avvinghiò" misses precisely the sexual connotation which is the actual 'point' of the English word-play. On the other hand, the German "deckt/wickelt in eine Decke" (covers/wraps in a blanket), by means of a simple change of category, and exploiting the polysemy of the verb 'decken' – which also means 'to mount' – succeeds in producing an effect comparable to that of the original. In the German, functional equivalence is therefore achieved not through global recreation of the passage, but starting from the linguistic material of the original, through a minimax strategy of verbal manipulation.2

Along a similar line, relying on a minimum of creative effort, in Italian we could take advantage of the phonic similarity between 'stuprare' (rape) and 'stupire (astonish) to construct a more successful alternative in terms of function and effect:

Bagnino ha salvato ragazza che annegava, stuprando la con suo coraggio.
(Lifeguard rescued girl drowning raping her with his courage.)

where "stuprandola" (raping her) could function as a malapropism for "stupendola" (astonishing her).

When wordplays happen to have cultural implications, a successful compromise between formal and functional equivalence is not always possible and the translator may choose either to adapt the source text or to resort to a

---

2 The term minimax (Levy 1967) means a minimum of effort for a maximum of effect.
footnote. The following *double entendre* exploits the polysemy of a culture-bound term:

Another, smaller advertisement urging the passer-by to "Have a Fling with Faggots Tonight" is not, Morris knows from his previous sojourn in the region, a manifesto issued by Rummidge Gay Liberation, but an allusion to some local delicacy based on offal. (Lodge 1985: 97)

This passage contains a semantic as well as a cultural constraint: neither in Italian nor in German are there cases of homonymous terms covering the two meanings in question ('balls of chopped meat' and 'homosexual man'); moreover, the context specifies that "Faggots" is an English regional food; to replace it, say, with the name of an Italian or of a German dish would amount to an abrupt cultural displacement. The two translators had antithetical priorities. In the Italian text the relevant sentence reads:

[...] "Spassatevela con i Faggots questa sera!" [...] (Lodge 1990: 122)
("Have a good time with Faggots tonight!")

the English term is left untranslated while a footnote clarifies its two concomitant meanings: "Faggots, polpette. Nel linguaggio popolare il termine indica anche gli omosessuali" (Faggots, meat balls. In popular slang the word also has the meaning of homosexual). This solution reflects the source-culture orientedness of the Italian translator, for she sacrifices the comic effect to maintain the cultural identity of the original. Exactly the opposite applies to the German version, where the original play on words is ingeniously imitated, albeit at the expense of the cultural reference:

[...] "Etwas Warmes braucht der Mensch" ... (Lodge 1985: 104)
("Everybody needs something warm")

By means of reformulation the German translator succeeds in exploiting the double meaning of the adjective "warm", which means both 'warm (food)', as in this context, and 'homosexual'. Since the name of the original delicacy is not mentioned, the cultural specificity of the slogan is lost; nonetheless, the humorous equation food=sex is retained.

b) phonological and grammatical constraints
The structural features of the SL can be, of course, an objective barrier. For instance, a phonic feature of the SL may have no counterpart in the TL. The fictional microcosm of *Small World* is populated by a series of minor characters who often appear as amplifications of cultural stereotypes – suffice it to mention the German professor von Turpitz, presented as an alleged ex-Nazi, the homosexual French narratologist or the American professor Morris Zapp, who is always smoking cigars and speaking in slang. The author also resorts to
linguistic characterization to enhance the stereotypical nature of his characters: the Italian university professor Fulvia Morgana, though speaking fluent English, distinguishes herself as being typically Italian also by her habit of dropping her h's.

"E talked all around the subject. E waffled and wandered. E repeated things 'e said twenty, thirty years ago, and said better. It was embarassing, I am telling you. In spite of all, they gave 'im a standing ovation." (Lodge 1985: 119)

This feature of her idiolect adds an exotic hue to her character and fits the cliché she is called on to embody. To the eyes of the English reader she therefore appears unmistakably Italian. The same effect can be achieved in German, using the same graphical device, whereas it gets necessarily lost in the Italian version, for obvious reasons:

"Er 'at um das Thema 'erumgeredet, 'at salhabet und geschwafelt. Er 'at Dinge wiederholt, die er schon vor zwanzig, dreissig Jahren gesagt – und zwar besser gesagt – 'atte. Es war peinlich, das dürfen Sie mir glauben. Trotzdem 'aben sie ihm eine stehende Ovation gegeben." (Lodge 1987: 127)

"Continuava a girare attorno all’argomento. Chiacchiere e chiacchiere. E ripeteva le stesse cose che aveva detto venti, trent’anni or sono, solo che allora le diceva meglio. E’ stato imbarazzante. Te lo assicuro. Eppure ha ricevuto un’ovazione." (Lodge 1990: 149)

Though banal at first sight, this is an example of assimilation through translation: the Italian bears no sign of a linguistic difference between this character and the others, and therefore erases from the text an element which belongs to the stylization and identification of the cultural Other.

One more example will serve to demonstrate that the (un)translatability of humour, rather than absolute, is a function of the degree of relatedness between languages. In the following passage, from Talking It Over by Julian Barnes, a convention typical of written formal discourse is used to enhance the stereotypical nature of the female protagonist. She is the kind of liberated pseudointellectual girl advocating sexual parity in every respect. This psychological trait affects her idiolect which often borders on the absurd:

Turn on the television and every second programme has someone talking about his or her problems, his or her divorce, his or her illegitimacy, his or her illness, alcoholism, drug addiction, sexual violation, bankruptcy, cancer, amputation, psychotherapy: His vasectomy, her mastectomy, his or her appendicectomy. (Barnes 1992: 8).
The speaker is here consciously subverting the conventions of everyday speech by repeatedly using the double possessive, which sounds extremely artificial in the context of an informal discussion and therefore provides for a comic effect. Unlike in German, this feature is not reproducible in Italian, a language in which possessive adjectives do not refer to the possessor but to the thing possessed and inflect according to gender and number (italics are mine):

Sie brauchen nur den Fernseher anzustellen, und in jedem zweiten Sender redet jemand über seine oder ihre Scheidung, seine oder ihre uneheliche Geburt, seinen oder ihren Alkoholismus, Krebs, Konkurs, seine oder ihre Krankheit, Drogenabhängigkeit, Vergewaltigung, Amputation, Psychoterror. Seine Vasektomie, ihre Mastektomie, seine oder ihre Appendektomie. (Barnes 1997: 15)

Accendete il televisore e ogni programma a ogni secondo propina qualcuno, maschio o femmina, che sbrodola parole sui suoi problemi, il suo divorzio, il suo status di illegittimo, le sue malattie, il suo acolismo, la sua tossicomania, la sua bancarotta, la sua frustrazione sessuale, il suo cancro, la sua amputazione, la sua psicoterapia. La vasectomia di lui, la mastectomia di lei, la appendicectomia di lui, di lei ... (Barnes 1992: 15-16)

In the last sentence the translator tries to imitate the structure of the original by using a prepositional form which allows the for explicitation of the genders: di lui (his), di lei (her). This device, although rather pointless in terms of reproduction of the comic effect, clearly reflects the intention of conveying something of the strangeness and absurdity of the source text.

Literary Allusions

Generally speaking, literary allusions are elements relevant to the Universe of Discourse shared by the author and his readership. Allusion, like parody, can be a cardinal device in the structure of comic texts (Nash 1985: 74-102) and its meaning potential becomes really effective only if the readers are able to recognize it and to grasp the association the allusion is intended to evoke. Allusions are often keys to the interpretation of a text and can be employed to achieve comic relief; therefore they can represent a translation problem when they have a culture-specific nature, i.e. when they refer to works familiar to the reader of the original, but unknown to the average reader of the translated text. They operate on the level of intertextuality, calling up memories of previous texts which may be unknown to the majority of the translation's recipients; they may be considered a special case of untranslatability. Unfamiliar allusions, if they are retained unchanged, may lead to a puzzle or "culture bump" (Ritva
Leppihalme 1997), i.e. a breakdown in communication. Some authors suggest that the only way to retain their function – comic effect, irony, etc. – would be to replace them with allusions that can be recognized by the target readers (Lefevere 1992), a strategy which is very often adopted in translations for the stage where immediate comprehension on the part of the audience is paramount. This solution is less practicable in texts where allusions are not just occasional occurrences but are part of the thematic structure of the work itself. Small World is a satire on the academic world, part picaresque novel and part romance, which contains a wealth of literary allusions, parodies and quotations, mainly from the classics of the English tradition, to create an ironic undercurrent of meaning and humourous effects. The initial parody of Chaucer’s Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, for instance, establishes an ironic analogy between medieval pilgrimages and modern conferences, while the more frequent quotations from Spenser’s The Faerie Queene are used to enhance the central paradox of the book: the erotic character of the adventures of conference-goers. The intellectual amusement provided by this kind of narrative mode can be experienced only by readers with more than just a superficial knowledge of these works and, indeed, they are likely to lose their significance for the potential readers of the translation. However, to substitute allusions, not to mention parodies, for the sake of functional equivalence would mean to undermine the coherence of the text as a whole. The strategy of substitution is, in fact, never adopted in the two translations I have analyzed, and the two translators signal the presence of allusions by choosing two different methods which are coherent with their respective translation approaches.

In the following passage, the allusion serves the purpose of heightening the tragicomic potential of the situation: at the sudden outbreak of a storm a boat trip turns into a shipwreck and, while the boat is sinking, the panic of one passenger is described in these terms:

Maxwell’s lenses had turned transparent in the murky light and his pale grey eyes were eloquent of pure terror. He clutched at Persse’s arm with a grip as tight as the Ancient Mariner’s. "Are we sinking?" he screeched. (Lodge 1985: 254).

Le lenti di Maxwell erano diventate trasparenti nella foschia e gli occhi grigiachi esprimevano terrore allo stato puro. Afferrò il braccio di Persse con una stretta violenta come quella del Vecchio Marinaio. "Stiamo affondando?" chiese con voce stridula. (Footnote: S.T. Coleridge, La ballata del vecchio marinaio) (Lodge 1990: 303)

For an English reader the significance of the allusion will be transparent: the clash between the triviality of the situation described and the tragic adventure of Coleridge's *Mariner* enhances the comedy of the situation. A more attentive reader will even be able to recognize the parodic reference to the Mariner's "glittering eye" at the beginning of the passage.

The German translator, in line with her global agenda, which does not contemplate the use of footnotes, tries to give a clue to the readers by adding italics to signal that this is also the title of a work, and the adjective "berühmte" (famous) to qualify the status of the work itself. This kind of procedure, known as 'internal marking' (Ritva Leppihalme 1995: 183-185), is obviously less intrusive than the footnote used by the Italian translator, and is in fact in keeping with the global translation agenda of the German translator, who aims at providing a fluent reading. The Italian edition of Lodge's novel has a more scholarly and, as previously noted, 'source culture oriented' outlook, for it often includes footnotes that offer information regarding the sources of literary quotations or explain the meaning of culture-bound terms which are kept untranslated. The absence of footnotes in the German translation, which might respond to strategic criteria, does not mean, as one might suppose at first sight, that the translator is less sensitive to the cultural 'otherness' of the original; indeed, she is able not only to appraise but also to bring across something of the more subtle parodic devices employed by the author. The next extract is anticipatory of the tragic destiny that awaits the boat mentioned in the passage discussed above:

It was a fine May evening, with the river almost at flood, and a brisk breeze flapping the flags and pennants on the *Annabel Lee*’s rigging. When they got on board, some were not so sure it was a good idea. (Lodge 1985: 254)

The markedly poetic diction of the first sentence, heavy with alliterations and sound effects, reinforces the poetic connotation of the name, thus reminding the reader of Edgar Allan Poe's homonymous poem – a well-known classic of American literature, but unfortunately, rather less well-known to the average Italian or German reader, who might not grasp the allusion and its subtly ironic significance: Annabel Lee, the girl with her "tomb by the sounding sea", is not a very fortunate name for a boat. The translations read as follows:

Es war ein schöner Maiabend, der Fluß hatte fast die Flutmarke erreicht, und eine frische Brise ließ die Flagge und die Fähnchen an den Toppen der *Annabel Lee* flattern. An Bord legte sich bei einigen Gästen die Begeisterung merklich. (Lodge 1987: 176)
Era una bella sera di maggio, con il fiume quasi in piena e un venticello vivace che scuoteva bandiere e pennoni sul sartiame della Annabel Lee. Quando salirono a bordo, qualcuno non fu sicuro che fosse stata una buona idea. (Lodge 1990: 206)

The German translator skillfully exaggerates the alliterative device (seven words begin with an f), signalling by means of an abrupt stylistic departure from the surrounding text that something special is going on. Of course, the connotative and associative meaning of the boat’s name is lost, albeit through no fault of the translator; while unable to convey the irony, the formal features of the sentence point to a meaning that goes beyond the literal one, thus encouraging an interpretative effort. The same cannot be said of the Italian translation, where the first sentence does not particularly stand out and the only perceptible alliteration (venticello/vivace) will certainly go unnoticed. The absence of a footnote, which might have revealed the allusion, may mean that the translator has not judged it relevant to the global allusive texture of the novel or, more simply, that the translator just wanted to spare the reader one more footnote.

Cultural Stereotypes

Stereotypes are elements relevant to the ideological framework shared by a whole community of speakers. These standardized images or conceptions often find linguistic concretization in derogatory or derisory names or in nicknames whose ideological significance is likely to become opaque for readers of the target text. A case in point is the derisory name used by the American Morris Zapp to define the nationality of the German critic von Turpitz in the sentence "Turpitz is a kraut who is in reception theory" (Lodge 1985: 195). "Kraut" is obviously a German word, meaning 'herb' or 'weed' depending on the context, and it is humorously used in American slang to define the whole German nation as 'cabbage eater' (from Sauerkraut = pickled cabbages). "Kraut" can be said to correspond as regards register and usage to the Italian word "crucco" – which is in fact the word chosen by the Italian translator. For obvious reasons, "kraut", as used in American slang, has no equivalent in German. The German translator, perhaps in the conviction that the special connotation of the word would be transparent to all German readers, has left the term unchanged: "Turpitz ist ein Kraut, der in Rezeptionstheorie macht" (Lodge 1987: 203). It must, however, be noted that the absence of italics as a device of internal marking, and the use of the capital letter, may blur the real nature of the word, which in this context might be interpreted in the merely derogatory sense of 'weed', thus losing both the humorous connotation linked with the stereotypical image, and its ideological significance.
In *Talking It Over* by Julian Barnes one of the three main characters, the arrogant and dandy-like Oliver – himself a stereotype – cultivates one hobby in particular: ridiculing the intellectual backwardness of his friend and rival in love Stuart, a bank-accountant. On one occasion, he makes fun of Stuart's simple-mindedness in using a German insult, "*dummkopf*" (Barnes 1992a: 28), a word often to be encountered in the Sturm-Truppen comic strips, where German soldiers are in fact represented as brainless idiots; this word is intrinsically funny, for it immediately evokes the stereotype which here is clearly used as a means of characterization: the Germans as the quintessence of mental dullness. "*Dummkopf*" disappears in the Italian text and is replaced by the colloquial expression "*zuccone calzato e vestito*" (Barnes 1992b: 36), which means 'hopeless pumpkinhead'. The decision to reduce the foreign word to sense may be due to the fact that the Germans are generally associated with qualities like precision and efficiency; as a matter of fact, if left unchanged, the German insult might just puzzle the reader and would in any case lose its main function of evoking the national stereotype relevant in this context and its humorous effect. In other words, there is an image, a mental artefact shared by author and readers of the source culture and it is used for the effect of caricature; the linguistic medium employed to evoke the image becomes void of connotations for the reader of the target text since he does not share the same mental framework.

In the German translation, on the other hand, the desire to preserve an exotic character is apparent from the choice of an Italian near-equivalent of "*dummkopf*": "*cretino*", a solution which in terms of ideology may find its motivation in the image of intellectual inferiority the Germans usually have of southern people. These last examples clearly illustrate that culture, as much as language, rather than a barrier, is a filter through which information is sifted, and thus necessarily transformed.

References


