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LINGUISTIC MECHANISMS OF HUMOUR SUBTITLING

Abstract

As a multidisciplinary field of study, Humour has been the focus of interest to many academics ranging from Anthropology to Cinema Studies. There has been an increasing interest in humour ingressions in the movies in the area of Translation Studies, and especially in Audiovisual Translation Studies (AVTS).

Translating audiovisual humour poses a genuine challenge to the translator, and more particularly, to the subtitler. Situational humor is usually more accessible to the public than that which is verbally expressed. Therefore, and in accordance with a descriptive approach, this paper aims to provide a reflection on the detection of illocutionary act of (intention of) humour in the original film text and on the perlocutionary effect of humour either on the film characters themselves or, through subtitling, on the target audience. In order to achieve such effect, the translator/subtilter has to take into account that verbal humour requires a special treatment, not only as far as linguistic mechanisms are concerned, but also regarding the universe of paralinguistic elements.

In many countries (namely Portugal) where subtitling is traditionally widely accepted as the most common mode of audiovisual translation, humor subtitling has shown that there are specific translation competences to be considered. From a practical point of view, scenes from the feature film *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) will

be presented so as to illustrate some of the most valuable examples of verbal humorous effect transfer into the Portuguese language.

The focal point of view of the present reflection is threefold, and it shall be developed in harmony with the following subdivisions:

1. Humour Studies and Audiovisual Translation Studies
2. A General Theory of Verbal Humour
3. Audiovisual Humour Translation Competence

Keywords: *Humour, Audiovisual Translation, Verbal Humour Theory, Humorous Complicity Principle, Audiovisual Humour Translation Competence*.

1. Humour Studies and Audiovisual Translation Studies

Verbally expressed humour has proved to be one of the most intricate experiences for audiovisual translators, especially as far as subtitling is concerned. Therefore, it is crucially relevant for the translator/subtitler to become acquainted with some of its linguistic idiosyncrasies, particularly regarding their semantic and pragmatic significance.

Humour management in audiovisual translation is limited by technical (acoustic, and visual synchronization), linguistic and cultural constraints, nonetheless it is my intention to lay emphasis on the importance of linguistic and cultural construction of humorous interaction detected in subtitled films.

In 2003, in his introduction to the *Special Issue of the Journal of Pragmatics: The Pragmatics of Humor*[1]*,* Salvatore Attardo wrote:

> The most significant conclusion one can reach is that we are clearly facing a rapidly evolving field, in which several different approaches are examining a broad range of data. This is encouraging, especially if we consider that a mere twenty years ago, it would have been fair to say that linguists had mainly stayed away from humour, with the notable exception of puns.

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[1] ATTARDO, Salvatore (ed.). 2003. *Journal of Pragmatics: The Pragmatics of Humour (special issue)*. Vol 35, No 9, September, pp. 1287-1294.

What is noteworthy in Attardo's quotation is the fact that a parallel between Humour Studies and Audiovisual Translation Studies can be established given that both investigation areas have recently witnessed a remarkable increase in the amount of academic interest and research[2]. Although further research is needed, the field of AVT of humorous communication has been the recent focus of analysis[3].

Throughout this reflection, humour will be perceived according to three presuppositons:

- firstly, humour – a psychological and a cognitive manifestation – and laughter – a neurophysiological phenomenon – are not always correlated;
- secondly, unlike laughter, humor is a subjective and a relative concept, differing from individual to individual, from context to context and from one culture to another;
- finally, humour and intelligence are correlated.

2. A General Theory of Verbal Humour

A high degree of social interaction involves humorous utterances, either intentional or unintentional, which rely on linguistic formulae. Hence, for methodological purposes, in order to understand the dynamics of language in some of its comical dimensions, I shall take into consideration Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) (*in:* Vandaele (ed.), 2002: 173-194), based on six Knowledge Resources (KR) or parameters: Language (LA), Narrative Strategy (NS), Target (TA), Situation (SI), Logical

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[2] *Vide* Raskin (1985), Nash (1985), Chiaro (1992), Attardo (1994; 2001), Defays (1996), Ross (1998), Fuentes Luque (2000), Critchley (2002), Rosas (2002) and Ermida (2003).

[3] On the audiovisual mode of dubbing *vide* Zabalbeascoa (1993; 1996; *in:* Delabastita (ed.), 1997). As far as subtitling practices are concerned, several works of outstanding reference should be referred to, namely those of Susanna Jaskanen (1999), Fuentes Luque (2000), Pekka Marjamäki (2001) Asimakoulas, (2001; *in:* Harvey (ed.) 2002; 2004) and Thorsten Schröter (2004). Díaz Cintas also offers an insight to humour translation in his *Teoria y práctica de la subtitulación* (2003b). Moreover, some articles of a special issue of the journal *The Translator: Studies in Intercultural. Communication – Translating Humour* (Vandaele (ed.), 2002) discuss issues related to audiovisual humour translation.

Mechanism (LM) and Script Opposition (SO)[4]. Although Attardo applies this theory to the study of jokes, he states that the GTVH

> […] *already incorporates a simple theory of humour translation*, if we limit translation to simple meaning correspondence: keep all Knowledge Resources (except Language) the same. So the simplest translation approach to humor is substitute Language in TL [Target Language] for Language in SL [Source Language].

No matter how tempting this advice sounds, a linear pattern cannot be followed when one tries to apply it to AVT. This is mainly due to the fact that an audiovisual text entails inter-semiotic elements that ensure its construction as such. Indeed, film materials incorporate a triadic structure – image/word/sound. Each of these constituents of the audiovisual poly-code would, in its own right, demand deeper analysis. However, what is at stake in this discussion is to describe how verbal humour is conveyed in the process of inter-linguistic subtitling in some scenes of the feature film *Forrest Gump* (directed by Robert Zemeckis, in 1994).

In Example 1, one can infer the way Language '[…] contains all the information necessary for the verbalization of a text' (Attardo *in:* Vandaele (ed.), 2002: 176-177), as a KR, can be adjusted to subtitling, for it does not demand a hard task on the translator[5].

Example 1- *Forrest Gump* **– Literalization and Implicature**

ORIGINAL TEXT	TRANSLATED/SUBTITLED VERSION
Forrest: (voice-over) I stayed with Lieutenant Dan and celebrated the holidays.	Fiquei em casa do Tenente Dan/ e passei o Natal com ele.// [I stayed at Lieutenant Dan's place and I spent Christmas with him]
Bob Hope: You have a great year and hurry home. God bless you.	Bom Ano Novo, e voltem depressa./ Deus vos abençoe. //
Lt. Dan: Have you found Jesus yet, Gump?	Já encontraste Jesus, Gump? //
Forrest: I didn't know I was supposed to be looking for him, sir.	Não sabia que o devia procurar. // [I didn't know I should look for him]

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[4] As Attardo (Vandaele (ed.), 2002: 176) points out, the GTVH is a revision and extension of Raskin's (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH). Obviously, the GTVH incorporates the latter. Both theories were applied to the specificity of short humorous texts/narratives – jokes.

[5] Symbols / and // stand for 'line-break in subtitle' and 'end of subtitle', respectively. When a translation of the Portuguese version is not made available it is due to being very similar to English or literal in meaning. NT stands for 'Not translated' in the target language.

Very often one of the linguistic mechanisms of humour relies precisely on the **literalization** of utterances, that is to say, like Forrest in the above case, the receiver fails to perceive the **implicature** (implicit meaning) of what is symbolically meant by the speaker, Lieutenant Dan. In addition to this, Forrest's verbal exchange 'I didn't know I was supposed to be looking for him, sir' clearly demonstrates his unintentional lack of cooperativeness and deficient share of a common ground of knowledge in relation to the religious reality that is being depicted. In short, the unintended dismissal of the cooperative principle (Grice, 1989) on Forrest's behalf results in a misunderstanding of Lieutenant Dan's **locutionary act** (a spiritual encounter) and the subsequent unexpected **perlocutionary effect**. As it is widely recognized, the degree of intensity of verbal humour can be enhanced in accordance with the amount of unanticipated and surprising elements an utterance can provide.

Under a macro-analysis level, this also reinforces the coherent process of creating Forrest as a simple-minded character, thus confirming that characters can be indirectly described through their own words. This reveals to be of fundamental significance for any audiovisual translator to bear in mind when deciding lexical choices or which language register should be used to better portray them.

In translational terms, literal translation (or translation *ad litteram*) is not as complex as other paths humour can pursue, namely those that imply **verbal play** (referring to syntactical, phonetical, graphological, morphological,… levels), **conceptual play** (especially concerning the semantic level) and **contextual play** (chiefly dealing with semantic and pragmatic levels), where **intertextuality** and **parody** challenge and broaden the scope of audiovisual analysis of humorous utterances. Consequently, as Delia Chiaro (1992: 77) argues:

> […] translation is not simply a matter of substituting the words of one language with those of another and adapting the syntax to suit it. For a translation to be successful, the translator has also to convey a whole store of added meaning belonging to the culture of the original language.

This brings us to discuss the influence that context and culture may have on AVT, as is illustrated in Example 2.

Example 2 – *Forrest Gump* – Context and cultural equivalence

ORIGINAL TEXT	TRANSLATED/SUBTITLED VERSION
1- Lt. Dan: Shrimping boats? Who gives a shit about shrimping boats?	Barcos camaroeiros?/ Quem se rala com isso? // [*who cares about that*?]
2- Forrest: I got to buy me one soon as I have some money. I promised Bubba in Vietnam that as soon as the war was over, we'd be partners. He'd be the captain and I'd be his first mate. But now that he's dead, I got to be the captain.	Tenho de comprar um, / assim que junte o dinheiro. // [*as soon as I gather some money*] Prometi ao Bubba, no Vietname, // que mal acabasse a guerra, / faríamos sociedade. // [*We would have a partnership*] Ele seria capitão, e eu o imediato. // Mas ele morreu, / [*But he died*] portanto serei eu o capitão. // [So, I'll be the captain]
3- Lt. Dan: A shrimp boat captain.	Capitão dum camaroeiro... /
4- Forrest: Yes, sir. A promise is a promise, Lieutenant Dan.	Sim, senhor. O prometido é devido, / [Whatever is promised is owed] Tenente Dan. //
5- Lt. Dan: Now hear this! Private Gump here is gonna be a shrimp boat captain. Well, I tell you what, *Gilligan*. The day that you are a shrimp boat captain, I will come and be your first mate.	Oiçam todos! / [*Listen everybody*!] Aqui o Soldado Gump será capitão/ dum barco camaroeiro. // Olha, *Vasco da Gama*, quando chegares/ a capitão dum camaroeiro, // eu serei o teu imediato. /
6- People: Ha ha ha!	
7- Lt. Dan: If you're ever a shrimp boat captain, that's the day I'm an astronaut!	Se alguma vez fores capitão, / eu serei astronauta! // [*I'll be an astronaut*!]

Besides the linguistic material that is verbally expressed, paralinguistic aspects such as prosodic elements (tone, pitch, rhythm) can be traceable in Lieutenant Dan's speech. Those prosodic elements also serve the purposes of irony in his verbal interaction.

Whenever words in their humorous application go unrecognized and misunderstood, this situation always gives origin to misrepresentation, *i. e*., to their mistranslation in the TL. However, in this case, the translator/subtitler has not only shown linguistic competence but he/she has been able to demonstrate **intercultural sensitivity**, thus allowing for a better rendering of the original text in the TL. The preference for the **cultural and pragmatic equivalent** – identified as the substitution or **transcontextualization** of Gilligan for Vasco da Gama (1469-1524, a Portuguese

explorer and navigator who first sailed directly from Europe to India (1498)) – not only illustrates the translator's **communicative competence**, but it also corroborates the preservation of the same **perlocutionary humorous effect**. Only through a cultural and pragmatic equivalent could the audience in the TL relate to humour, otherwise receivers would not consider the origin of the intertextual reference to the Northern-American sitcom *Gilligan's Island* (directed by Sherwood Schwartz, between 1964 and 1967).

While Mona Baker ((1992) 1977: 217; 260) regards translational processes of this kind as 'pragmatic equivalence', Leo Hickey ((ed.) 1998: 217-232) refers to it as 'perlocutionary equivalence'. Furthermore, according to Hickey's (*idem*: 229) point of view, '[…] the strength of the perlocutionary effect should be roughly similar in both texts' and the amount exegesis (explanation or explicitation) of humorous stimuli should be limited in order to avoid the eradication of the humoristic intentionality.

Intertextuality is also one of the most productive instances of humour, as shown below.

Example 3 – *Forrest Gump* **– Intertextuality**

ORIGINAL TEXT	TRANSLATED/SUBTITLED VERSION
1- Forrest: (voice-over) […] We were the first Americans to visit the land of China in like a million years or something like that, and somebody said that world peace was in our hands. But all I did was play ping-pong. When I got home... [...] ... I was national celebrity. Famouser even than Captain Kangaroo.	*Fomos os primeiros americanos/* *que visitaram a terra da China//* *num milhão de anos.//* *Disseram que a paz mundial/* *estava nas nossas mãos...//* *mas eu/* *só joguei pingue-pongue.//* *Quando regressei,/* *era famoso no país todo,//* *mais até que o Captain Kangaroo.//*
2- Dick Cavett: Mr. Gump, have a seat.	NT
3- John Lennon: Welcome home.	- Bem-vindo a casa.//
4- Dick Cavett: You had quite a trip. Can you, uh, tell us, uh, what was China like?	Que tal achou a China?// [What did you think about China?]
5- Forrest: Well, in the land of China, people hardly got nothing at all.	Na terra da China,/ as pessoas não têm quase nada.//
6- John Lennon: No possessions?	Não têm haveres?//
7- Forrest: And in China, they never go to church.	E na China, nunca vão à igreja.//

8- John Lennon: No religion, too? **9- Dick Cavett:** Oh. Hard to imagine.	- Também não têm religião?/ - Custa a imaginar.//
10- John Lennon: Well, it's easy if you try, Dick.	É fácil, se tentarmos, Dick.//
11- Forrest: (voice-over) Some years later, that nice young man from England was on his way home to see his little boy and was signing some autographs. For no particular reason at all, somebody shot him.	*Uns anos mais tarde,/* *aquele simpático moço da Inglaterra//* *ia para casa ver o filhinho,/* *parou para dar uns autógrafos...//* *e, sem razão aparente,/* *alguém lhe deu um tiro.//*

Besides the reference to "All-American Ping Pong Team"[6], to "Captain Kangaroo", a children's programme (broadcast by CBS, between 1955 and 1984) and the presence of Bob Keeshan, a TV presenter interviewing both Gump and Lennon (through a cinema technique known as *gumping*') there are explicit quotations from the lyrics of "Imagine" (*in: Imagine*, 1971) by John Lennon (1940-1980). Processes to materialize humour are achieved through the use of parodic citation, which consists in the partial reproduction of the song. Humor also constitutes a way of ironically criticising China's political system.

In my opinion, if we choose to apply the GTVH to AVT it would be read as follows: LA corresponds to all oral (actor's utterances, songs, etc.) or written (inserts, subtitles, and so on) linguistic material in a film that needs to be translated; NS comprises the way audiovisual narrative is organized so that it will produce humor; TA implies that any translation of humorous exchanges is submitted to constraints, such as the audience profile, thus, demands on **relevance** and **adequacy** of linguistic and cultural transfer are a reality; SI refers to the verbal, psychological, social and cultural context in which humour is originally produced and to the cultural and linguistic context of reception; LM consists in the resolution of incongruity that instigates rupture of preconceived knowledge we acquire the world; SO denotes the existence of a combination of more than one piece of information, which somehow (partially or totally) collides, overlaps or opposes our perception of reality as we know it. Therefore, Example 3 constitutes an outstanding illustration of the existence of the six Knowledge Resources (KR) or parameters

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[6] This is an actual reference to an intercultural exchange program between the USA and the Popular Republic of China, known as "Ping Pong Diplomacy" (1970's). This was an attempt to appease the relations between the two countries (*vide* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ping_Pong_Diplomacy).

(Language (LA), Narrative Strategy (NS), Target (TA), Situation (SI), Logical Mechanism (LM) and Script Opposition (SO)) brought together in verbal exchanges so as to convey humour through the use of universal references, such as John Lennon's musical work.

3. Audiovisual Humour Translation Competence

Indeed humour generated by the last two Knowledge Resources (LM and SO) turns out to be one of the most challenging tasks for the audiovisual translator/subtitler in a target language, in order to meet requirements such as **efficiency**, **appropriateness** and **effectiveness**, as they were designed by Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler (1981: 34)[7] in consideration to any text. Obviously, any audiovisual translation is also expected to include such factors and humour transfer is no exception. The three aforementioned regulative principles of textual communication can be very useful (when combined with **adequacy** and **acceptability** of subtitled audiovisual texts.

In terms of appropriateness, elements such as **intertextuality**, **contextual** instances (situationality) can be definitely limitative as far as subtitled humour is concerned. Therefore, the professional of AVT should not only reveal **humour awareness** but also translate humour according to the information of a given verbal or contextual situation in the original and evaluate how **relevant** it is for the preservation of humour in the TL.

Efficiency indicates that communication has to be established with a minimum expenditure of effort by participants. This will result in textual economy which is often connoted with **reduction** or **elliptical processes** of AVT. In its turn, effectiveness will favour the results achieved by translational choices that lead to the **acceptability** of the audiovisual text as a **relevant** and successful instance of humour production. This means that the audiovisual text was felicitous in its humorous **intention**(**ality**), that is to say that there is a clear understanding between the locutionary act and the perlocutionary effect.

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[7] These are regulative principles '[…] that control textual communication rather than define it'. For a definition of a text as such, Beaugrande & Dressler (1981: 3-13) evoke seven constituents or standards of textuality: **cohesion, coherence**, **intentionality**, **acceptability**, **informativity**, **situationality**, **and intertextuality**.

The creation of humour is neither teachable nor learnable. It depends on the individual's sensitivity to develop *humour awareness*, even though this does not mean that there is a straightforward interrelation between humour and the capacity for translating humour. Undoubtedly, aiming at the full understanding of humour dynamics in film translation is a way of helping professionals to do their jobs, nevertheless, it is not a synonym of being able to produce or to (re)create humour in a TL. Hence, it is my contention that an **audiovisual humour translation competence** is not achievable by any translator who is unable to develop **Humorous Complicity**.

Humorous Complicity stretches the boundaries of the Cooperative Principle as it was presented by Grice (1989) 1991)[8]. On the one hand, humour is suggested to be identified as a *non bona-fide* mode of communication; yet, on the other hand, translation is believed to be a *bona-fide* mode of communication (Raskin, 1985: 100-101). How should AVT professionals connect these two modes when transferring humour from the SL into the TL?

In daily humorous transactions individuals are supposed to assume a cooperative behaviour so as to show they understand nuances of speech which may not follow one or more conversational maxims (quality, quantity, relation and manner). Indeed, for a conversation to be felicitous, receivers need to show they have perceived humour, yet they may or they may not choose to respond to it. The translation of humorous exchanges, nonethelesss, requires not only a passive ability – understanding humour (cooperative behaviour) – but, as mediators, translators/subtitlers will be expected to play an active role in both humour reception and production. In other words, cooperativeness does not imply complicity in humorous verbal transactions. Through the **Humorous Complicity Principle**, AVT professionals should be able to (re)create humour in the target language.

In conclusion, **Audiovisual Humour Translation Competence** comprises several constituents, listed here from the most teachable to the least teachable:

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[8] *Vide* 'Logic and Conversation', a chapter of *Studies in the Way of Words,* by Paul Grice ((1989) 1991: 22-40), where the Cooperative Principle is defined. In VEIGA (2009) "The Translation Of Audiovisual Humour In Just A Few Words" (Chapter 12)*, in: New Trends in Audiovisual Translation – Topics in Translation.* (Jorge Diaz-Cintas (ed.)). Bristol: Multilingual Matters, pp. 162-179. I have suggested the existence a Humour Cooperative Principle that has undergone some conceptual changes and is now reformulated and presented as Humor Complicity.

Technical Competence (subtitling techniques) – **Translation Competence** (linguistic and communicative) — **Humour Complicity** (humour sensitivity – humour awareness).
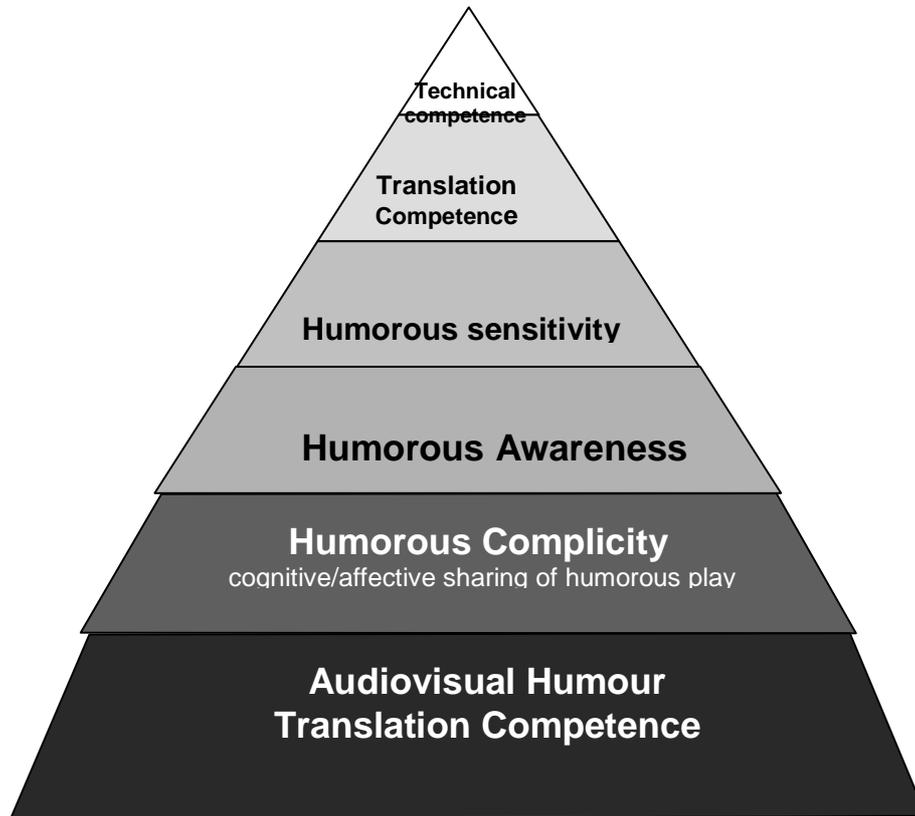
Audiovisual Humor Translation Competence

Humourous Complicity goes far beyond Humour Cooperative Principle for it requires a more profound involvement in the utterances that are being translated. Humour Cooperative Principle only requires of the subtitler/translator the identification of the humorous stimulus, whereas **Humorous Complicity** is indeed a **dynamic process** and it serves the needs of translation because it implies that, besides the recognition and identification of humorous utterances, the translator has to **(re)create** the same **perlocutionary effect** as conveyed by the original (audiovisual) text. In AVT,

Humourous Complicity requires a high degree of intertwining competences (technical, translational, humorous) that will enable the audiovisual translator to efficiently reconcile translation (a *bona-fide* mode of communication) with humour (a non *bona-fide* mode of communication) in such a way that the perlocutionary effect is maintained in the audiovisual translated text. Only then would we consider that a translator has **Audiovisual Humour Translation Competence**.

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Song
"Imagine" by John Lennon (*in: Imagine*, 1971)