

IV Congreso Latinoamericano de Traducción e Interpretación

ON SUBTITLING HUMOR
BENNY HILL VS. SEX AND THE CITY

Trad. Gabriela L. Scandura
Asociación Argentina de Cultura Inglesa
Asociación Argentina de Traductores e Intérpretes

ON SUBTITLING HUMOR

BENNY HILL VS. SEX AND THE CITY

Gabriela L. Scandura

Traductora

Asociación Argentina de Cultura Inglesa

Asociación Argentina de Traductores e Intérpretes

The Benny Hill Show and *Sex and the City* are two famous programs from different countries: one from Great Britain, the other from the United States. They do not share the same kind of humor, although their humor was considered “vulgar” when they were first shown on TV. This paper will try to answer questions such as how those differences and similarities affect the subtitling, how we should analyze this type of discourse, what kind of references translators face when subtitling humor, and so on. Examples taken from both shows will be included to illustrate the theoretical concepts.

Introduction

The translation of humor is never easy. If you add to that the constraints usually associated with subtitling, the result is a really difficult task. However, subtitling humor is both challenging and rewarding (and obviously funny!).

When it comes to humor, cultures are as different as they get, even if people speak the same language. Thus, a program that may be considered terribly funny in one culture is horribly boring or offensive in another.

Overview: The subtitling of humor

Humor is based both on words and on physicality. The physical aspect of humor is no problem (unless it is very offensive), since people who slip and fall are usually funny all around the world (think of *Mr. Bean*). Or maybe not. But puns on words are difficult to translate, particularly if the pun is combined with the visual aspect.

When you subtitle from English into Spanish, most jobs come from the United States, followed by Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, not to mention others (like a Croatian movie, for instance) already subtitled into English which you have to in turn translate into Spanish. Since humor differs so much according to the origin of the program or movie, the translator has to take into account those differences and then include his or her knowledge of the target culture so that humor is not lost in the translation.

Translation students usually study British and/or American history, geography, literature, and culture, but they never (or almost never) study Australian or Canadian issues. And obviously they do not study Thai culture. So what are subtitlers to do when faced with a kind of humor or references they do not know?

Analyze humorous discourse on film

When you analyze a humorous program or movie, you must take into account the two facets of humor: words and physicality. When they are combined, physicality should take precedence. Why? Simply because if not, the viewer would be at a loss. For example,

if a character says “She’s such a pain in the ass,” and points to his buttocks, you cannot translate it as “She’s a pain in the head” (which would be the usual saying in Spanish), simply because the viewer would see that something is wrong.

Check words in other languages for funny meanings

If the original language is not English and you are translating English subtitles, you should check what certain words or names in that other language mean. For instance, in a Croatian movie called *Marsal (Marshal Tito’s Spirit)*, two agents help the main character. One is a tall, dark-haired man, and the other one is a short, red-haired woman, whose names are Lijan Mulderic and Danica Skulic. The obvious reference to *The X Files* character names (Fox Mulder and Dana Scully) are easy to spot (Lijan being a name in Croatian, and similar to the word ‘lisica’, which means ‘fox’). But if the reference is not that clear, it is the translator’s job to make it clear to the viewer.

Check and keep or change references

In an episode of *The Nanny*, Fran tells Niles she now understands why Princess Diana is throwing up all the time, because she does not like English meals. When the episode aired for the first time, Princess Diana was still alive, and so the joke was funny. But if you watch the episode now, you may find it a bit awkward, or just sad or offensive. If that episode was to be subtitled now, some translators might think it right to change the reference, while others would keep it because that was what reality was like at that time.

Know who ‘the bad guy’ is

“Most comedy is derived from some form of offense, it is simply how it is presented that causes different reactions and results.” (Séamus Byrne, *Comedy, censorship and political attention*) Many jokes are based on cultural references. Most ethnicities or cultures have another one which is usually the target of their jokes. For example, in Argentina we laugh at *gallegos*, people from Galicia, Spain. (Think of Manuel, the incompetent Spanish waiter in the britcom *Fawlty Towers*.) What happens in English-speaking countries? Americans joke about Polish people, the English about the Irish, Australians about the English, etc. Even in the United States you have jokes about people from different regions. But since jokes are always based on the same kind of criticism (the *others* –whoever they are- are stupid, mean, dirty, drunkards, ugly, etc.), translators can keep those jokes (if it is possible to translate them literally instead of adapting them) and the viewer will understand the criticism:

- What does a Redneck say before he gets injured? “Watch this!”
- Things never said by Southerners:
 - I’ll take Shakespeare for 1,000, Alex.
 - Checkmate.
- Why did the Canadian cross the road? He saw some American do it on TV.
- A Texan, a Russian and a New Yorker are at a London restaurant. The waiter says, ‘Excuse me, but if you wanted the steak, there’s a shortage due to mad cow disease.’ The Texan says, ‘What’s a shortage?’ The Russian says, ‘What’s a steak?’ And the New Yorker says, ‘What’s “excuse me”?’
- Reasons for being English:
 - 2 World Wars and 1 World Cup.
 - Beats being Scottish and Welsh.

Now that we have criticized almost everybody, let's pass on to another issue that writers use to make fun of characters and make people laugh: pronunciation.

Pronunciation

A character who mispronounces words in English or uses grammatical structures that are wrong, is a source of laughs.

- An Indian at an airport:
"Wait, please."
"65 kilos."

A typical example are the Pink Panther movies, in which Inspector Jacques Clouseau (played by Peter Sellers) speaks a terrible English:

- I think he has received a faint. (For "I think he fainted.")
- The Poop is coming. (For "The Pope is coming.")

The problem when subtitling is that you need to write the mispronunciation. In the case of dubbing, it is easier. Nevertheless, it is not impossible, particularly because most people know how a person who speaks another language would speak theirs (eg. An Asian would replace an "r" with an "l", etc.)

A Case Study: Benny Hill vs. Sex and the City

The Benny Hill Show and Sex and the City are two famous programs from different countries: one from Great Britain, the other from the United States. Although they do not share the same kind of humor, their humor is considered "vulgar"; however, they have both won awards (BAFTA awards, Golden Globes, etc.).

The problem of asynchronism

Lately I have found myself subtitling both episodes from the latest season of Sex and the City and The Benny Hill Show, which aired from 1969 to 1989. This asynchronism presents a problem to the translator. First of all, old humorous programs or movies are not always 'politically correct.' This may result in a joke being offensive to current viewers. For instance, in The Pink Panther movies, Inspector Clouseau calls his Asian manservant Cato 'yellow' and talks about 'Coolies' (an offensive term meaning unskilled Asian laborer). However, this political 'incorrectness' in old programs like The Benny Hill Show is made fun of in www.theonion.com, because complaining about it is disregarding the asynchronism and forgetting what life was like in those times: "Veteran stage performer Jackie Wright's grandson has become an enduring symbol of Hill's legacy of abuse toward the elderly. 'That bastard slapped me granddad upwards of 1,500 times back in the '70s. And why? Because his short stature made him an easy target? Because his bald, shiny head, God bless it, made a humorous thwacking sound when smacked with an open palm?'"

The problem of asynchronism had peaked in the late 80s, when most movies had to be subtitled for their VHS version. Today the phenomenon is repeating itself due to the creation of DVDs. Movies are being re-subtitled for DVD format, and that implies that you end up translating old movies as well as new ones. Thus, asynchronism is again part of the subtitling equation.

Vulgarity and offensiveness

“Comedy is one of the most difficult forms of performance, due to the fine line it walks between humor and offensiveness.” (Séamus Byrne) And *Sex and the City* is the perfect example. It is a modern tale of four (mostly) single women in New York City right now. There is no asynchronism in this case, but the series is criticized due to the women’s course language. “There has not been this much decadence in the public eye since the release of the Starr report.” (Marianne M. Jennings, professor of legal and ethical studies at Arizona State University) Some people see the language as unacceptable on television. Others do not. In Australia, for instance, the Court has recently decided that the F word is no longer a rude word. Meanwhile, many subtitling companies for Latin American countries force translators to avoid offensive terms.

Other people enjoy the fine writing, in spite of the images and the foul language used:

“If the things we left behind become the archaeological relics of our sexual history, I should be able to leave something. Ancient man left cave drawings to prove they existed. I left a Hair Pro 1200.

Charlotte was making history as well. Tired of the Neanderthal she’d been dating, she was spending her Saturday night with a gay friend.

(...)

The gay straight man was a new strain of heterosexual male spawned in Manhattan as a result of overexposure to fashion, exotic cuisine, musical theater, and antique furniture. Hopefully, he’s a gay straight man. Which means he’s straight with a lot of great gay qualities. Whereas a straight gay guy is just a gay guy who plays sports and won’t f... you.”

Wordplay

While *Sex and the City* relies on more explicit wordplay and sometimes physical slapstick, older comedies were based on more naïve or saucy wordplay:

- “Take your filthy hands off my asp.” (Cleopatra) (*The Pink Panther*)
- A sign reading “Georgie’s Tarts and Crumpets” altered to read “Orgies, Tarts and Strumpets.” (*The Benny Hill Show*)
- Cast of characters of a fake movie within *The Benny Hill Show*:
 - Ima Twitt
 - Manny Offem
 - Cameraman: Arthur Phocus

Nevertheless, years after Benny Hill died, some people in Great Britain still think that “Benny Hill was renowned for his risqué sketches, with sex and squealing nymphets the constant theme,” (Sarah Womack, www.telegraph.uk.co, 18/07/2002), while the Government blamed teenage pregnancies on what they call “the Benny Hill culture.” Curiously enough, on the other side of the Atlantic, this is what Kim Cattrall said in January 2003 when she received a Golden Globe as best supporting actress in a TV series for her role as the sexpot in *Sex and the City*: “You have no idea how many men I’ve had to sleep with to get this award.” As Séamus Byrne puts it, “Humor, as with any form of communication, is subject to the rules of encoding and decoding a message. It is a negotiation between the joke-teller and the listener, where the listener will have the final say on whether the joke is funny or not.”

Conclusion

“When humor is used effectively, it can open windows into cultures, (...) making strong statements about the state of the world in which we live,” (Séamus Byrne) or in which we used to live. When humor is subtitled effectively, it can make target audiences laugh as much as the source audience did. The translation of humor is a way of understanding other people, other cultures, of communicating in a funny way. And translators are part of that communication process.

Since the listener or viewer is the one who will judge whether a joke is funny or not, it is the translator's job to help him decide. Audiences differ, even if they speak the same language, and when a joke reaches an audience with a different language and culture, its members may be amused, bored or offended. It is the translator's task to try to get everybody in the first category, because that was the purpose of the performance in the first place.