

ADAPTATION PROCESSES OF TABOO-WORDS IN THE ITALIAN DUBBING OF *FAMILY GUY*

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1. Theoretical Background

Audiovisual translation is not an easy process, since it involves lots of factors. First of all, the choice between dubbing and subtitles takes into consideration the different costs of the techniques, so that as Perego (2005) argues, there are countries that cannot afford dubbing and decide to add subtitles. In addition to this, there are also cultural factors, since dubbing is chosen in those Countries where English is less widespread, or in those that want to preserve their own language (in Italy, for instance, dubbing was introduced by the Fascist regime, in order to protect the Italian language and people from foreign influences).

Besides the costs and the linguistic reasons, humour is also a tricky element, as there is not a shared sense of humour and because when a movie, a sitcom, or a cartoon has to be translated, the translator has also to take care of the elements that appear on screen that could be culture-bound, thus being difficult to translate, with the risk of losing a joke if it is too culture-specific.

The “imperfect” art of dubbing, as Paolinelli (2005) defines it, is the result of a long, difficult process which deals with linguistic, cultural and technical problems, since besides the translation of the original meaning and the respect of the Target-Culture values, the translator has also to observe «severe constraints» (Herbst 1996, p. 102) which are: quantitative lip synch; qualitative lip synch; nucleus synch. As for the quantitative lip synch, the number of words of the original text and the translated one should be more or less the same, so that they can be uttered in the same time intervals in the SL and the TL; furthermore, the translator has also to pay attention to how the original actors move their lips, in order to give the impression that they have actually said those words in the TL, too. This is the qualitative lip synch. Yet, dubbing does not consist only in finding more or less the same number of words that need the same lip movements. The third constraint, in fact, the nucleus synch, concerns the external elements which appear in an audiovisual text, such as «raising the eyebrows, shaking one’s head, etc.» (*ibidem*, p. 102).

Obviously, there are not only linguistic problems to be concerned with, because dubbing can change according to the genre of the product. In other words, the language used in films or cartoons, the scenes represented and other characteristics, like the sense of humour, also depend on the audience the show has been thought for. Sense of humour is one of the most difficult elements to translate, since it deals with cultural and linguistic elements at the same time: «it has to play on knowledge which is shared by sender and recipient» (Chiaro 1992, p. 11) and it is based on shared socio-cultural and linguistic parameters (Guido 1997). For this reason, jokes have been divided into prosaic jokes, which play on some aspects of the world knowledge and are easier to translate, and poetic jokes, more difficult to translate, which play on the language itself.

As for *Family Guy*, this is a series based on non-sense humour, and on what Chiaro (1992) defines as «common denominators in verbal humour», which are sex (a Western

joke universal), the underdog and the absurd, and it is generally based on the succession of little scenes presented as flashbacks, introduced by one of the characters, according to the following scheme:

BRIAN: What are you watching,
Peter?

PETER: *Passion of the Christ.*
[Pause] I tell you, Brian, I
can't believe that this guy's
just lying there taking it. If
it was me I would have
done somethin' about it.

[A guard whips Peter,
dressed like Jesus during
His Passion.]

PETER: [Suddenly, stands up] Hey!
Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey!
Stop it! Stop it!

GUARD: Ok.
PETER: Ok?
GUARD: Ok.
PETER: All right.

INTRODUCTION

JOKE

The show is about the adventures of a family with a father, Peter Griffin; his wife, Lois Pewterschmidt, a rich man's daughter; their children, two boys (Chris, the elder brother, and Stewie) and a girl (Meg); a talking dog (Brian, who resembles Snoopy). The series has pushed *The Simpsons* limits forward, due to its grotesque, vulgar, exaggerated humour, which deals not only with sex and drugs, but also mocks current affairs, pop culture, American television and religions, with caustic, vulgar and explicit language. That is why the show – even though it is a cartoon – is suitable for adults, but in Italy it has been mitigated by softening some jokes or even cutting some scenes, to make it suitable also for a younger audience, since it is aired at about 2 p.m.

2. Method and Corpus

In this paper, the original jokes and their Italian translation will be compared, analysing the Italian translator's choices, which follow two approaches: the first consists in softening the jokes, so that if the vulgar sense of humour is maintained, its force is mitigated (even though in some examples some jokes are lost); the second approach consists in respecting the original jokes, or even in adding vulgar lines absent in the original scripts.

The scenes in which the changes occur will be introduced, with a comment. Furthermore, instances of good and bad translations will be analyzed, together with instances in which the Italian translator has added lines which were absent in the original scripts.

The chosen episodes from the fourth season of the show, produced in 2005 and aired in Italy from 2006, will be investigated both in English and in Italian, with English subtitles. When a discrepancy between the English and the Italian versions occurs, the dialogues will be reproduced, marking the beginning and the end of the scene.

The DVD collections labelled as *I Griffin – stagione quattro*, which contains 13 episodes distributed in three discs, and *I Griffin – stagione cinque*, which contains 14 episodes distributed in three discs, represented the corpus of this analysis. Even though they are called “fourth” and “fifth” seasons, the episodes belong to the fourth season, which has 27 episodes, broadcast on Italia 1 in the afternoon and at night.¹

3. Original Vs. Italian Version

In dealing with drug references, generally if a character reveals that he/she takes drugs, in the Italian version that same character becomes an alcoholic. Perhaps, alcohol has a more comic effect, or it is considered more suitable for cartoons. Yet, this is not the only way of dealing with drug addicted characters, since in other episodes the references to drug are maintained (especially when characters smoke marijuana), maybe due to the fact that differently from ecstasy, marijuana is more acceptable in a show addressed to young people.

The following extract proves what has been said above: in a cutaway gag from the episode “Petarded” (4ACX09, “Genio ritardato”), Peter remembers the times when his neighbour Timer—probably the testimonial for a brand of cheese—used to sing at night what seems to be the song from an advertisement. When Peter complains, Timer says that ((1): 0:04:54 – 0:05:06):

- (1) PETER: What the hell is your problem? Insomma, qual è il tuo problema?
 TIMER: **I just smoked a whole bunch of Sai, sono ubriaco fradicio!**
crack.

While in the original script Timer admits that he had smoked crack, in the Italian translation the character becomes alcoholic; obviously in the translated version the cause of such weird behaviour is an addiction, as well, but one should wonder why the translation has shifted from drug to alcohol abuse. Probably the reason has to do with the view that cartoons, such as *Family Guy*, have to be suitable for a wider audience, so that the theme of drug-addicted characters should not be represented in shows that also children watch. Furthermore, the airtime of the show and the Italian title itself may suggest the intent to make the show closer to *The Simpsons (I Simpson)*, and this could explain the change in the type of addiction, since in Matt Groening’s cartoon Homer Simpson and his friends are alcoholics.

¹ The analysis does not include the three episodes that were broadcast as season four finale in America, but which were originally distributed on DVD, under the title *Stewie Griffin: The Untold Story (La storia segreta di Stewie Griffin)*. The episodes are: “Stewie B. Goode” (4ACX05); “Bango Was His Name, Oh!” (4ACX06) and “Stu & Stewie’s Excellent Adventures” (4ACX07).

The shift in (1) is also present in “Model Misbehaviour” (4ACX13, “Top model”). Here, Peter’s wife, Lois, has become a top model, but she has ended up neglecting her family. In order to find a solution, Peter asks for his father-in-law’s help and explains that Lois has changed ((2): 0:16:27 – 0:16:33):

- (2) PETER: Mr. Pewterdsmith, I need your help: Lois is out of control. I mean, she’s acting crazier than I did that time **I tried ecstasy**.
 Signor P., ho bisogno del suo aiuto: Lois è fuori controllo. Si comporta in modo ancora piú strano di me di quella volta **che ho provato la tequila**.

Even though the example is similar to (1), in (2) the visual elements are more important, since the cutaway gag after Peter’s words shows the man on his sofa, acting and talking in a relaxed, detached way, which is always used to comically represent the effects of drugs rather than the effects of alcohol.

One of the extreme consequences of changing the original lines is the transformation of a joke into a non-joke, especially if the joke plays on the language or on the shared knowledge, the cultural values, as in the following extract (3) from “The Cleveland-Loretta Quagmire” (4ACX08, “Amicizia tradita”). In this episode, Peter, Lois and their friends are on a boat and when Lois tells Peter that she did not expect to see Portuguese people working also on Saturdays, the man gives his explanation (0:00:38 – 0:00:45):

- (3) PETER: Are you kiddin’, Lois? They’re Portuguese: **work is their cocaine**.
 Stai scherzando, Lois?! Sono Portoghesi: **il lavoro è la loro vita**.

This adaptation is more difficult to explain, but one could assume that the Italian translator has preferred to be more respectful of other nationalities, since Portuguese people are still represented as exclusively devoted to work but in a more neutral way than the original, where the concepts of drug and work are put together. In this particular case, the joke has been transformed into a non-joke by using a neutral line in the Italian translation that has twisted the original caustic humour.

When it comes to jokes concerning sex, the translation has respected the same criteria, so it is frequent to come across jokes whose sense has been mitigated by using diminutives (in particular when characters refer to genitalia), or by resorting to paraphrase, although there are some jokes that respect the original scripts.

In the episode “Don’t Make Me Over” (4ACX03, “Il brutto anatroccolo”), the following vulgar joke (4) mocks the relationship between a mother and her daughter and the importance given to sex and physical appearance. Yet, the original strength is lost in the Italian version, together with the sense of the joke (0:03:57 – 0:04:13):

- (4) LOIS: Oh, what about this, Meg?
 A pink baby tee that says **“Little Slut”**. That seems pretty hip.
 MEG: **I don’t know if that’s really me**, Mom.
 LOIS: Well, they’ve got one that says **“Porn Star”** and another
 Che ne dici di questa, Meg?
 Una magliettina rosa confetto con la scritta **“Prendimi”**. Sembra abbastanza trendy.
 Ehm... **Non so se è il caso**, mamma.
 Be’, ci sono anche con la scritta **“Star del porno”** e

that says “**Sperm Dumpster**”. un'altra con la scritta “**Banca dell'amore**”, e sono tutte con i glitter. brillantini.

As evident, the original “Little Slut” and “Sperm Dumpster” have been replaced by the less vulgar “Prendimi” and “Banca dell'amore”. If it is true that the change is unavoidable due to the Italian airtime, it is also true that the original meaning is not respected, because what Meg says, “I don't know if that's really me, Mom”, is coherent with the words on the shirt, while the Italian answer is more neutral “Non so se è il caso, mamma”, thus losing a part of the joke.

When the original scripts talk about sexual relations, the Italian version resorts both to neutral translations (as in (4)) and to the semantic field of “play”, to transform the vulgar lines into dialogues suitable for a cartoon that also children watch. The following extracts are from the episodes “Brian Goes Back to College” (4ACX18, “Brian torna a scuola, (5): extract from 0:08:05 – 0:08:35); 4ACX03 ((6): extract from 0:18:41 – 0:19:03); and 4ACX08 ((7): 0:01:02 – 0:01:19). In (5) Stewie, the baby, is recording a message for the answering machine; in (6) Peter gets angry when he finds out that the *Saturday Night Live* opening gag consists in Meg making love to the host; in (7) Brian, under the effects of alcohol, makes a proposal to Meg:

- (5) STEWIE: [...] and condoms for **sexual relations** with our classmates. [...] e i profilattici per poter **giocherellare sicuri** con le nostre compagne.
- (6) PETER: Wait a minute! Are you telling me that **my daughter was deflowered** in front on one-and-a-half-times the Mad TV audience? Mi stai dicendo che **mia figlia è stata deflor-gi-gi-gi-ginata** davanti a quasi il doppio degli spettatori di Mad TV?
- (7) BRIAN: Listen, you're 17 now, right? Er... Er... I was... Er... Just throwin' there. I was thinking, er... You know, **if you ever want er... to screw around or something.** Allora, Meg, senti... Tu... Tu hai 17 anni, giusto? Ehm... Cioè, io te la butto lí cosí! Stavo pensando, ehm... **Se una volta ti va, potremmo giocare un po' insieme.**

From the examples above, we realise that the Italian jokes are more politically correct than the original counterparts and that they generally shift to the less vulgar tone, or to the parody tone, since in both (5) and (7) the expressions “sexual relations” and “to screw around” are replaced by expressions that indicate ‘to play’, like “giocherellare” o “giocare un po' insieme”. What is more, in (5) Stewie specifies that thanks to condoms they will play safely, but the Italian addition changes the audacity of the joke, which is transformed into a non-joke, following the same process of (3), i.e. the use of a neutral expression. Finally, in (6) Peter's words try to hide what really happened to his daughter and what is funny is that he stammers out the pun “deflorginata”, between the Italian words “deflorare” and the more vulgar “sverginare”.

As in (5), in another episode the act of transforming sexual references into harmless ones has caused the loss of the original joke. For example, in the following example (8) from “The Fat Guy Strangler” (4ACX20, “Se non son matti...”), Italian

viewers cannot catch the reference to the movie *American Pie* (*American Pie – Il primo assaggio non si scorda mai*, Paul Weitz, 1999)—where the protagonist used a pie to experiment the sensation of making love—because there is not any sexual meaning in the Italian translation (0:14:25 – 0:14:36):

- (8) PETER: Hey, pie. I know what you want. Ehi, tortina. Lo so che cosa vuoi. I saw you in that movie. **Whore, slut, bitch. You don't deserve to have sex with me.** Instead, **I'm gonna eat the whore out of you.** Ti ho visto in quel film. **Lurida provocatrice. Non meriti che ti mangi.** E invece **mangerò il ripieno che è in te.**

The process of using indirect expressions has also been applied to objects like tampons or to sexual references like oral sex, as showed by the following extracts, from “Fast Times at Buddy Cianci Jr. High” (4ACX02, “Tutto accadde in una scuola”, (9): 0:18:21 – 0:18:46) and “Peter’s Got Woods” (4ACX14, “Il mio migliore amico”, (10): 0:16:57 – 0:17:05). In (9) Peter remembers what he did when he was a Wonder Twin; in (10) Peter replaces Brian with James Woods after an argument, and the dog replaces Peter with a woman. When they reconcile, they explain why they left their partners:

- (9) JAYNA: Peter! The old schoolhouse is on fire! Let’s go! Peter! La vecchia scuola sta andando a fuoco! Dobbiamo andare!
 P. & J.: Wonder Twin Powers, activate. Potere dei Super Gemelli, in azione.
 JAYNA: Form of a hawk. Come on, Peter! Trasformazione in falco. Sbrìgati, Peter!
 PETER: Yeah, I’ll be right behind you. **Shape of Jayna’s tampon.** Sí, ti raggiungo subito. **Trasformazione in un utile oggetto per Jayne.** [PAUSE] And now I play the waiting game. [PAUSA] E ora me ne sto buono, buono in attesa.
- (10) BRIAN: So, huh, where’s your good buddy James Woods? Allora... dov’è il tuo amico del cuore James Woods?
 PETER: Eh, turns out **he wasn’t very good at catching stuff with his mouth.**² Where’s your girlfriend? Ah, sai, **non era un granché a prendere il frisbee con la bocca.** Dov’è la tua ragazza?
 BRIAN: Huh, same problem. Ah, stesso problema.

Brian’s joke has a different shade of meaning in the Italian version, and the sense could be understood only by focusing on the possible hidden meaning behind the statement “stesso problema”, ‘same problem’. Again, it is an example of a softened sexual reference.

Yet, *Family Guy* Italian dubbing is labelled here as incoherent because of the presence of examples that still maintain the original humour or even add vulgar jokes, as in the following extract (11), from the episode “Untitled Griffin Family History”

² In a scene, Peter tries to make James Woods catch a Frisbee with his mouth.

(4ACX30, “La storia sconclusionata della famiglia Griffin”), when Peter’s ancestor explains with a metaphor how beautiful Lois’s ancestor was (0:10:26 – 0:10:39):

- (11) PETER: [O.S.] As a poet might say, she was the kind of woman you just want to have sex with over and over, with the kind of breasts you just wanna push together so she looks like a cross-eyed torso.
He knew he had to have her.
- [fc] Come direbbe un poeta, lei era quel tipo di donna con cui vorresti fare sesso ad oltranza, con un seno perfetto in cui avresti voglia di affondare per poi non rialzarti mai più. **Sapeva che lui doveva averla. E lei doveva darla!**

The exclamation “[...] E lei doveva darla!” is absent in the English version, and although it may even be appropriate in the context of the joke—because the Italian invention is not only funny, but it also “sounds” good, thanks to the alliteration between the verbs “averla” and “darla”—one should wonder why the translator has decided to add it, especially considering the previously examined modifications.

4. Conclusions

The dubbing process is made difficult by trying to respect the three constraints (qualitative, quantitative and nucleus synchs) which force the translator to search for proper ways to render the original dialogues, the original jokes. Sense of humour could be a “fourth” constraint, since it is often endowed with cultural elements that can make the act of translating a movie or a cartoon not only difficult, but almost impossible.

In addition to this, broadcasters can condition dubbing because of economic or other reasons, such as the airtime of the show or the audience it is addressed to. As for *Family Guy*, its caustic, satirical, vulgar humour clashes with its cartoon form, especially in Italy where cartoons are considered as mostly suitable for young people. For this reason, the original jokes have been translated into Italian with a less vulgar equivalent, sexual references have been replaced with a sort of paraphrase, and the use of neutral words that do not respect the original scripts have caused some jokes to be transformed into non-jokes.

Moreover, the adaptation process has not followed the same rules and sometimes the translator has added lines that were absent in the original scripts. Even though these lines may give a funnier tone to the joke, *Family Guy* dubbing is incoherent, because of the coexistence of non-jokes, softened and vulgar jokes, caused by the different approaches adopted by the translator, sometimes within the same episode.

The Italian translation of adult-oriented animation should be carried out by means of a new approach that respects the original features, so as not to produce mutilated versions, such as the *Family Guy* episodes that have been analysed so far.

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