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Recreation and Style

Translating humorous literature in Italian and English

Brigid Maher

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CHAPTER 1

Humorous style and translation

Creation, recreation and interpretation

The close connections humour has to language, culture and identity are brought to life in Stanisław Barańczak's account of the experience of the Polish poet and wit Antoni Slominski, who lived in England for more than a decade after the start of World War II (Barańczak 1990: 229). At home Slominski "had been nearly idolized by the readers of his side-splitting feuilletons", but he found that even after twelve years in his new home and new language, "he was unable to tell a joke". This was not for want of trying, Barańczak tells us: Slominski prepared his jokes meticulously, fine-tuning and rehearsing them, "once [...] he even stooped so low as to jot down a witticism on his cuff", but to no avail. So while in every other way Slominski was happy and comfortable living in England, his inability to be funny in the company of his English friends became too much for him, and in 1951 "of all moments", he returned to live in Poland.

Barańczak uses this anecdote to reflect on the experience of expatriate writers, who must forever translate themselves for foreign readers, but the story also sheds light on the nature of humour. Slominski, we must presume, was naturally witty; the failure of this wit to function on English shores must have been attributable to external factors, either his self-translation into the English language or some failure or incompatibility in his English audience, or a combination of the two. Slominski's plight is understandable – different cultures laugh at different things and in different ways, and humour, widely considered one of the hardest things for new learners of a language to grasp, is famously difficult to translate. Humorous style is also an important part of many people's sense of self. The inability to use humour was traumatic for Slominski because it had always been one of his primary means of expression, and without it he was "tongue-tied". The translated Slominski was no longer Slominski, and he had to return home, in spite of the fraught situation there, in order to regain an essential part of his identity.

Questions of humour, culture, identity, language and translation, and their interaction with literary form, style and genre, are the central concerns of this book, which seeks to examine some of the ways translators of literature, like so many Slominskis (but one hopes with more success), transfer humorous styles across languages and cultures. The topic is explored through case studies centred on the translation of Italian and English literary texts boasting a wide variety of humorous styles. The strategies translators use in dealing with seemingly untranslatable elements of humour show both the limitations and the possibilities of translator creativity and experimentation.

Making sense of humour

One of the difficulties in writing about humour is defining the very concept. In everyday life, we cannot help but be aware of considerable variation among individuals as to what is considered funny, and what kinds of topics it is legitimate or appropriate to laugh at. This is so even within a single culture and language, and – as poor Slominski found – only becomes more and more evident when we examine humour and its reception in different cultures or, for that matter, historical periods. Some scholars have suggested that humour is so complex a concept that it is simply not possible to define it at all, or that it is so delicate and ephemeral that it will not survive definition or close analysis.[1] Throughout this study, I use the term *humour* in a broad sense, in keeping with the usage of many (Anglophone) scholars in the field that is – predictably – known as humour studies. The term serves as a catch-all to encompass a range of styles and modes appearing in the literary texts analyzed, including irony, satire, parody, farce, wordplay and the grotesque.

From the perspective of translation, one central question is the extent to which different languages' terms and concepts within this semantic field can be considered equivalent. Delia Chiaro (2006: 207) rightly deplores those studies of 'humour' across cultures that seek supposed 'universals of humour', yet frame all their data collection and analysis solely in the English language. The etymological links between Italian and English mean the two languages do share a number of cognate terms within this semantic field, including *humour* and *umorismo*, but one can still discern differences in meaning between apparently equivalent terms. The words *humour* and *umorismo* share Latin origins and their meanings today developed from the medieval meanings of *humour* and *umore* respectively, which referred to the four humours of the body (blood, phlegm, choler and melancholy) (OED 1989). The evolution of the word *umorismo* is generally considered to have been heavily influenced by the development of the modern meaning of the English word *humour* (IEI 1994; Zingarelli 1999).

The most famous explication of *umorismo* is Pirandello's (1986[1908], 1960). He advocates a very specific use of the word, and disapproves of its more common use, in which its meaning is broader. For him, a key aspect of *umorismo* is the *sentimento del contrario* ('feeling of the opposite'). As an illustration he uses the image of an old woman absurdly dressed and coiffed in the style of a young woman. The first stage in looking at such a woman is the *avvertimento del contrario* ('perception of the opposite'): noticing that she looks the complete opposite of how a dignified, respectable elderly woman is expected to look. This stage represents the comic; one laughs at this ridiculous woman. But if one reaches a further level of reflection – wondering whether perhaps the woman is dressed up like this not because she wants to be, but because she desperately hopes this kind of attire will help her retain the love of her much younger husband – one reaches a second stage, the *sentimento del contrario*. This higher level of understanding and feeling, where the nature of things is more complex, is what for Pirandello constitutes *umorismo*. My application of the term *humour* is different from and much broader than Pirandello's use of *umorismo*. *Umorismo* in this narrower sense does sometimes occur in the texts under discussion, however, and their humorous styles certainly share with *umorismo* these elements of complexity, ambiguity and reflection.

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[1] E.B. White famously wrote, "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind" (1954: 173).

Studies by Italian scholars often use *il comico*, rather than *umorismo*, as the catch-all term. This is no doubt in part because of the special, restricted, Pirandellian meaning *umorismo* has taken on in literary criticism. However, I believe *humour* is preferable to *comic* as a term for capturing the range of the texts I analyze, which all use humour to make critical comments on society, human relationships, power and hypocrisy. The words *comic* and *il comico* tend to be associated with 'harmless fun' and clowning around and are less likely to be used for more subversive styles of writing. This fits with Umberto Eco's analysis of humour (*umorismo*) – for him a special subcategory of the umbrella term *comic* (*comico*) – as a transgressive and critical form, quite distinct from those styles of the comic that perpetuate the status quo by providing easy targets for mockery or social censure (1983, 1984).[2]

Studies of humour show the wide variety of functions it can perform, and the range of forms it can take. A good deal of research into humour focuses on jokes, an area which is only of marginal relevance to my own study, though some research has sought to apply findings from the study of jokes to longer stretches of narrative (e.g. Nash 1985; Attardo 2001). In literature, humour can function as an expression of superiority, as in irony and tongue-in-cheek humour, forms we appreciate because we know not everyone can (Almansi 1984: 19); as a defensive response to threat or marginalization, allowing us to dismiss traumatic events by laughing at them (Chard-Hutchinson 1991; Cory 1995; Freud 1953–75; Gutiérrez-Jones 2003);

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[2] Laura Salmon (2004: 206) comes to a similar conclusion about the critical power of *umorismo* in contrast to *comicità*.

or as a hostile yet socially permissible way of releasing aggression or tension (Freud 1976: 146). The grotesque expresses ambivalence and conflict by exploiting a combination of disgust and the comic (Thomson 1972: 8); parody seeks to play with or even destabilize official forms of literature (Dentith 2000); and satire can serve as a weapon of rebellion or resistance by members of a weaker underclass or subculture (Fernandez 1989). The carnivalesque, too, critiques the prevailing power structures within society, as Mikhail Bakhtin outlines: during carnival roles are reversed, the rules of social etiquette are suspended, freer communication is permitted, and the social distance between people is removed (1984: 10). This potentially subversive form of communication can empower society's disenfranchised in ways unimaginable in the world of serious behaviour and interaction.

In *The Comedy of Entropy*, Patrick O'Neill (1990) coins the term 'entropic humour' to describe a particular kind of humour, akin to black humour, which he sees as emerging relatively recently in Western European and North American literature. More traditional humour seeks to reinforce social norms. For example, for Henri Bergson (1911), laughter has a punitive and a corrective function: it punishes transgressive behaviour, bringing the target into line with accepted norms and reinforcing those norms for all members of society.[3] Entropic humour, by contrast, is not normative or reassuring, or even derisive, threatening or intolerant. Rather, it reflects an absence of clear norms, and O'Neill argues that its popularity among twentieth-century writers is a reaction to a "loss of certainty" in the values and beliefs of the past (1990: 50). He attributes this loss of certainty to advances in physics, mathematics and information theory, and their pervasive effects on philosophy, literary criticism and many other disciplines. He notes that pure tragedy and comedy no longer occur as they used to, "for both tragedy and comedy in the traditional sense are firmly anchored in a solid system of commonly accepted values", values which no longer hold in today's disordered world where "the future remains veiled in undecidability" (p. 20).[4] The links between the prevailing social, intellectual and historical climate within a culture and its literary production and humorous style have important ramifications for translation.

The extraordinary variety of humorous styles that can occur in literature is borne out by the texts that are the focus of this study; in different ways, they all transgress literary and social norms in order to register a comment on injustice or

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[3] Michael Mulkay, too, finds that humour reinforces existing social structures rather than questioning or challenging them (1988).

[4] Lisa Colletta, too, has explored the nature of dark humour in literature, observing that the breakdown of a shared core of values means that for some British modernist novelists, satire no longer fulfils its traditional corrective and ultimately conservative role (2003). Bruno Pischedda (1994) notes analogous trends in some Italian comic writing of the 1980s.

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hypocrisy in society. Each of the case studies in Chapters 2–5 examines in detail the humour of a single source text and the strategies its translator or translators have applied to these humorous elements. My analysis is bi-directional, with some case studies looking at an Italian source text in English translation and others at an English source text in Italian translation; this facilitates an exploration of literary translation as a form of exchange between cultures. The texts examined are: Rosa Cappiello's *Paese fortunato* and Gaetano Rando's English translation, *Oh Lucky Country* (Chapter 2); Dario Fo's *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* (*Accidental Death of an Anarchist*) and English translations by Gavin Richards, Tim Cumming and Alan Supple, Ed Emery, and Simon Nye (Chapter 3); Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* and its Italian translation, *Dorian*, by Nicoletta Vallorani (Chapter 4); and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* and Floriana Bossi's Italian translation, *Arancia meccanica* (Chapter 5). A final case study (Chapter 6) moves from analysis to synthesis and provides a more explicitly practical perspective, as I discuss my own translation into English of Milena Agus's *Mal di pietre*, reflecting upon the theoretical findings of earlier chapters in the light of my experience of the translation, editing and publication of an Italian novel.

The texts selected often explore serious or even tragic themes and events, so while they may well make us laugh or smile, they rarely induce feelings of pleasure alone. In some cases, it is the humorous element itself that unsettles, because of the grotesque contrast it sets up with the subject matter. The texts' humour has a 'blackness' that opens up a path for pursuing complex issues within society in ways that can capture multiple and even conflicting perspectives in 'entropic' times. In addition to treating serious topics in an irreverent, grotesque or satirical way, the texts are also transgressive in their deployment of language, which is one of the main sources of their humour and consequently poses a particular challenge to the translator who seeks to recreate that humour in a different language.

The translation of humour

Relatively little research has been published on humour translation, something Jeroen Vandaele suggests might be an indication that it is "qualitatively different from 'other types' of translation" and needs to be approached in a different way (2002a: 150). It would seem, however, that the topic is gradually beginning to attract more interest, and some important special issues on the theme have been published (Laurian and Nilsen 1989; Vandaele 2002b; Chiaro 2005b).

One of the most obvious challenges to the translator of humorous literature is wordplay and punning, and a considerable proportion of the research into humour translation focuses on this topic (see e.g. Delabastita 1993, 1996, 1997). John

Schmitz considers "linguistic or word-based humor" to be the most difficult kind to translate, more difficult than "universal or reality-based humor" and "culture-based humor" (2002). Peter Newmark, by contrast, is rather dismissive of the whole topic: "The translation of puns is of marginal importance and of irresistible interest" (2001[1988]: 217), a comment that perhaps betrays the not uncommon assessment of punning as a rather low form of humour. Much of the commentary on the translation of wordplay advocates compensation as the primary strategy, replacing puns that would not fulfil their original function if they were translated literally. Most authors agree that retaining the humour should be a priority, even if this means changing the meaning of a pun or nonsense word (see e.g. Gledhill 2003: 172–3; Harvey 1995: 66; Juva 2001; Landers 2001: 109–10; Lefevere 1992: 52; Leibold 1989; Nord 2003: 189).[5] John Rutherford calls this prioritizing "functional accuracy" over "semantic accuracy" (2006: 81).

Function is a key consideration for the translator of humour. Patrick Zabalbeascoa notes that a significant part of the role of the translator of humour involves assessing the importance of a given instance of humour for the overall text (2005: 187). It is only once relative importance has been established that the translator can decide what strategy to use in translating a humorous item. Throughout this book, the question of the rhetorical functions of humour is recurrent, as the different case studies give an insight into the complex functions humour carries out within a text's broader framework – functions that can help in shaping a translation strategy. Puns often have more than one function in a literary work, just as they have more than one meaning, and the translator may need to negotiate between conflicting functions. In some cases, puns have a very complex rhetorical function that goes well beyond simply amusing and entertaining by playing with linguistic forms. Ida Klitgård observes that in Joyce's *Ulysses*, certain puns on particular themes (for example, Anglo-Irish relations) recur in different parts of the text, forming underlying patterns with considerable contextual significance (2005b). These patterns of meaning are important to the text as a whole and the translator needs to discern them and seek to convey them in translation. She warns that a translator who simply focuses on each individual pun as a self-contained puzzle to be solved for the target language may end up neglecting these important contextual themes. I return to some of these issues in my discussion of the translation of puns in *Dorian* (Chapter 4) and of the Nadsat vocabulary in *A Clockwork Orange* (Chapter 5), which makes extensive use of invented words with extra, underlying meanings.

In addition to work on the translation of wordplay, there is also a small body of literature dealing with the translation of other aspects of humour. In particular, a number of case studies have looked at the humorous potential of style, tone or dialect and the strategies used in translating them. Studies focusing on style often note that attention to detail is of paramount importance in pinpointing and reproducing sources of humour. For example, both Lawrence Venuti (2001) and Eleni Antonopoulou (2002) suggest exploiting the resources of the target language, in the form of idiomatic turns of phrase, allusions, and lexical and syntactic heterogeneity, in order to enhance the target text's humour and compensate for the differences between the source and target languages. Throughout my analysis it becomes clear that the finest details of sentence structure and lexical choice can impact upon the humorous effect of a line of text, whether it is the utterance of a character or the voice of a narrator, and the translation of these features in turn contributes to a target text's overall effect. The impact of humour translation on characterization can be particularly strong. In the field of literary criticism, a number of studies have looked at the way authors use humour to shape a novel's characters.[6] This function of the comic is one that must be borne in mind by the translator, for when a translation (inevitably) changes the humorous voices of a source text, it can also change the characters to whom those voices belong. This is particularly evident in some English translations of *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* and in the Italian translation of *A Clockwork Orange.*

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[5] See also Attardo (2002) on the topic of the translation of puns.

The choice not only of wording but also of language variety can contribute to humorous effect. In his study of the translation of the multilingual comedy of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, Delabastita finds that some translators simply replace the characters' non-standard speech with a standard form of the target language, giving top priority to correctness, while others seek in some way to transfer the non-standard language to the translated text (2002). The challenge of translating non-standard speech and the associated humour is evident in most of the texts analyzed in this book, particularly *Paese fortunato*, which includes code-switching for ironic effect, and *A Clockwork Orange*, which is narrated in an argot whose strange sounds create a very particular grotesque effect. The tension between the natural urge to write clearly and correctly on the one hand, and, on the other, the obligation to recreate effectively the 'difference' conveyed by transgressive or non-standard styles, can be difficult for the translator to resolve, and in Chapter 6 I discuss this dilemma with reference to the colloquial style of the narrator of Agus's *Mal di pietre*.

Because humour is born of the peculiar cultural, historical and social experience of a group of people, humorous styles are in large part culture-bound. A useful contribution to the study of the cultural aspects of humour is Avner Ziv's edited volume *National Styles of Humour* (1988), which contains chapters describing the literary and popular humorous styles of eight different countries from an historical, social and cultural perspective. In Paolo Consigli's contribution, Italian humour is characterized as "Janus-like", with "two opposite souls", one pagan and hedonistic, the other Catholic and moralizing, and often itself a target of humour (1988: 134). The importance in Italian humour today of improvisation, farce and sexual allusion – aspects of which can be discerned in all the Italian source texts I examine here – is attributed to the country's theatre tradition, which Consigli traces back to Roman times. In British humour, by contrast, Jerry Palmer finds that religious content is relatively uncontroversial because of the more secular nature of the society (1988: 87). Due to Britain's long history of shared language, "linguistically complex" humour is popular and widely appreciated, indeed punning, "often said to be a peculiarly Anglo-Saxon form of humor" (p. 100) is described as one of the most popular sources of humour, along with sex. Linguistic humour is indeed very evident in my two English source texts, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Dorian.*

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[6] See, for example, Paul Lewis (1989: Ch. 3) on humour as an indicator of maturity and cognitive development in *Bildungsromane*, Carole Anne Taylor (1994) on humour as a factor in the characters' personal growth in *The Color Purple*, and Christy Burns (1995) on wordplay as a reflection of the bicultural protagonist's personality and psychology in Nabokov's *Pnin*.

Shared knowledge and cultural background play a fundamental role in the successful reception of humour. Within humour studies, the topic has been explored by theorists of incongruity, who focus on the way humour exploits a contrast between two situations or frames of reference. Arthur Koestler describes these frames as "matrices of thought" (1964), while Victor Raskin refers to a similar concept as "scripts" (1985). Both see the incongruity or incompatibility of contrasting scripts/matrices of thought as central to the function – and felicitous reception – of humour. This has implications for translation, because source culture frames, scripts or matrices will not necessarily be recognized within the target culture. Thus, it is often difficult to transfer humour across languages, cultures and time periods. Eco's explanation for this is that tragedy *restates* the rule that is violated by the protagonist, meaning that this violation can be perceived and understood even by members of a society that is far removed culturally or historically from the source culture, whereas for comedy to be successful "the broken frame must be *presupposed* but never *spelled out*" (1984: 4, original italics). The passage of time will almost inevitably weaken the comic effect of such works, because later audiences may not recognize the social rules on which the comedy hinges.[7]

The importance of shared knowledge and associations is stressed by Ana María Rojo López: "Humour needs a common ground or frame where interlocutors share a history and a way to interpret experience. Humorous emissions have their effect by referring to a frame or store of shared knowledge and memories" (2002b: 38).

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[7] See also Borsellino (1989: 19) on the culture-specific nature of comedy in comparison to tragedy.

The challenge for the translator is to try and activate frames with the same associations as those of the source text reader (Rojo López 2002a). Another useful concept in understanding the cultural grounding of humour is Maria Tymoczko's notion of the 'comic paradigm', the world view determining what is or is not generally considered comic in a given culture at a given time (1987). If the 'comic paradigms' of a target culture or era are very different from those of the source, the translation and reception of a text will be greatly affected. Tymoczko shows how this occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the translation of Irish hero tales into English. Victorian morality condemned bawdy humour, and the humourless Irish nationalist movement, which longed for Irish culture and history to be taken more seriously, did not see humour as helpful to its cause. As a result, comic tales were rarely translated, and when they were it was often in expurgated form.[8]

Elements such as shared knowledge, cultural background and historical and literary traditions, which help make up the 'frames' and 'comic paradigms' described by Rojo López and Tymoczko, are highly relevant to the source and target texts I analyze in the coming chapters. Each of the source texts draws upon humorous traditions that do not have exact counterparts in the target culture. This raises a number of interesting issues regarding their translation and their reception by audiences more familiar with different 'frames' and 'comic paradigms'.

Interdisciplinarity and diversity

The complex functions of humour in the texts under discussion in this book demand complex translation strategies, and an analytical approach characterized by interdisciplinarity and flexibility. As Zabalbeascoa (2005) points out, translation studies and humour studies are themselves interdisciplines, and our understanding of both translation and humour can only be deepened by an interdisciplinary approach (see also Santana 2005). The cultural turn in translation studies has taken the field beyond a focus on purely linguistic aspects of source and target texts towards a broader perspective that also encompasses the many cultural factors involved in translation, "the larger issues of context, history and convention" (Lefevere and Bassnett 1990: 11). My approach is not restricted to any single framework; I draw on a number of theories from within the field of translation studies, as well as literary criticism and humour studies research. In this respect, like much recent work in the field, my study has an interdisciplinary character that meets José Lambert's call for translation studies to contribute and respond to debates in other academic disciplines besides its own (1994: 25).

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[8] Likewise, Rutherford notes a number of changes in our taste in humour between Cervantes's time and our own (2006: 73–6).

Each of my case studies builds upon the close reading and comparison of source and target texts. For my analysis I draw both on my own interpretation of the texts and on relevant critical literature. My aim is to gain a clearer idea of the 'world' the source text comes from. Any literary text is the product of a complex environment that includes factors like language, culture, historical moment, literary tradition, taste, class, politics and sense of humour, and it is essential to consider such factors when examining the different ways in which translators deal with all this 'cultural baggage'. While it is certainly not to be assumed that a target text must do the same things as its source, a clear picture of the source text will make it possible to pinpoint the places in which its rhetoric is either preserved or modified, and then to speculate as to the reasons for this.

The bulk of my analysis in each of the case studies consists in comparing the source and target texts in a number of respects. In large part, this is related directly to humour, as I analyze the translators' strategies and the ways in which these have shaped the humorous effect of the target text. A range of techniques can be observed, some of which seek to recreate source text effects through close translation, others through compensation, rewriting or adaptation. Examining these different strategies also entails speculating about the translators' interpretation of the text – which aspects they give most weight to, which humorous elements they appear to have considered translatable or untranslatable, and how their work takes the needs and expectations of the target audience into account. In my analyses, I discuss the various constraints that can come into play, such as target culture literary conventions, and audience expectations, including not only what the audience is likely to expect from the translated text, but also what translators can expect of their audience. I also examine paratextual features including cover images, notes, introductions and blurbs in those cases where they are of particular relevance in indicating the expected audience of the target text.

Throughout my analyses, I examine the fine details of lexical choice and grammatical constructions in addition to larger segments of text and context because such details are highly indicative of translation strategies and, cumulatively, have an impact on the overall rhetoric of a target text. Edoardo Crisafulli declares that straightforward linguistic description is too limited an approach to translation studies, and advocates a hermeneutic approach that will "switch the focus of attention from *form* (equivalence in terms of types of linguistic device) to *meaning* (equivalence in terms of the communicative function of linguistic devices)" (1996: 270). My contention is that a combination of linguistic detail and contextual-interpretative approaches is most profitable. In this respect, Keith Harvey's injunction for translation studies to be attentive to the "imbrication of texts and contexts" (2004: 421) is taken up in the present study. Harvey writes:

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