



Using Multimodal Texts and Video Editing Software in Educational Contexts to Train Audiovisual Mediators

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Abstract

This paper illustrates a case study carried out at the University of Salento focused on the adoption of multimodal texts and video editing software to increase translators' awareness of the influence of ideology, linguacultural background and the cognitive construct of "implied receivers" on language use and reformulation. Multimodal texts are seen as pedagogic tools that support the development of the alternative process of 'audiovisual mediation' to limit the selection of conventional localization and domestication strategies. The subjects, undergraduate foreign language students, were required to produce an Italian translation for the subtitles of humorous segments from Conan and Late Show with David Letterman, which they embedded in the video files using dedicated software. After examining the original multimodal composition and humorous discourse, participants decided to address their translations to prevalently male viewers, familiar with American culture. By exploring the cognitive-functional and technical perspectives of the renderings, this study shall exemplify that the project has trained students in the achievement of pragmlinguistic equivalence through audiovisual mediation.

Keywords. Audiovisual translation; audiovisual mediation; ICT based language teaching; multimodal composition; fansubbing

1. Introduction

This paper presents a case study implemented at the University of Salento, representing a pedagogic approach to Audiovisual Translation (AVT) that exploits the interaction between a specific, multidisciplinary theoretical background—briefly explored in the following section—and information technology to raise awareness of the cognitive and polisemiotic dimensions of multimodal retextualizations [10]. Sections 3, 3.1 and 3.2 detail the translation strategies adopted by the participants—undergraduate foreign-language students—to make a top-ten list from *Late Show with David Letterman* and a humorous segment from *Conan*, containing several references to the American pop culture and celebrities, accessible to their imagined recipients. Besides providing more data about the educational role of subtitling and video editing software, this study also aims to increase the available process-based analyses of AVT [4], looking into the influence of the translators' mental processes on the reformulation of the original jokes.

2. Theoretical background

AVT is presented to participants as a multimodal mediation process [7], entailing that source scripts should be critically "read" [8] and reformulated from a cross-cultural perspective. Accordingly, the actualization of the denotative-semantic and connotative-pragmatic levels in both source and target texts has to stem from the analysis of the linguistic and extralinguistic features, as well as from the interaction between the senders' and receivers' linguacultural and cognitive backgrounds, urging future translators to activate an interaction between the "bottom-up", text-based examination of the original multimodal composition and "top-down", knowledge-based inferences [12], in order to render the target textual world both pragmlinguistically equivalent to the source version and more accessible to its addressees. Thanks to this focus on AVT's multimodal and mental nature, participants can act as 'audiovisual mediators' who perform a critical analysis of the selected corpus of texts, succeeding in deducing the senders' ideological stance [5] and illocutionary force [1] by accounting for what is uttered, the tone of actors' voices, the real audience's laughter (when present), the arrangement of the extralinguistic features. Additionally, students can also reflect upon the role of the cognitive construct of 'implied receivers', which controls the real viewers' response [6]. In fact, semiotic resources are purposely chosen to comply with the knowledge supposedly shared by recipients, allowing them to derive the appropriate meaning potential that is instantiated in multimodal discourse [13]. After watching the selected audiovisual texts, the subjects come up with the definition of implied receivers

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that are familiar with American culture and hence capable of decoding the puns and derogatory references [11] in the source scripts.

As regards the technical dimension of this project, participants have to use video-editing and subtitling software, such as *AEGSub*, *iMovie*, *Movie Maker* and *VideoShow*, to embed their retextualizations. As the analysis exemplifies, this approach to multimedia translation fosters the creation of educational “environments which provide opportunities for learning through acquisition” [3], where future translators can train their mediation ability, opting for an integration between the senders’ and recipients’ socio-cultural backgrounds to convey the author’s intentionality, the content and functional aspects of the original versions.

3. Analysis

The following sections examine the Italian translation strategies for the subtitles of three extracts. The first and second excerpts are from a list of what Homer Simpson has learnt about television, characterized by “national-sense-of-humour” jokes [14] and culture-bound references to celebrities or events. The last sample, from one of *Conan*’s satirical fake phone calls between Barack Obama and Donald Trump, requires students to find appropriate ways to preserve the original cognitive opposition between expected and unexpected situations triggering the humorous response.

Besides contributing to the inference of the senders’ intentionality and perlocutionary effects, the multimodal composition of the examined videos is also exploited to produce examples of “multimodal compensation” [2]—increasing the humorous discourse’s accessibility (Fig.1)—or to replace the original scripts with the Italian versions (Fig.2):



Fig.1. Example of “multimodal compensation”



Fig.2. One of the Italian translations produced by the subjects

Since this research aims at proposing an alternative pedagogic model to train the audiovisual mediators’ achievement of pragmalinguistic equivalence, reformulations are accepted even when they may remind one of fansubtitling [9], without displaying the conventional features of subtitles in terms of font size or number of characters per line (Fig.3):



Fig.3. One of the Italian translations produced by the subjects, without the conventional traits of subtitling

Finally, technology also facilitates the investigation of the translators' mental processes, allowing the subjects record their thoughts using the Think Aloud Protocol (TAP). This activity helps to illustrate the reasons of their renderings, and it also reveals that students regularly resort to websites such as *urbandictionary.com* and *wordreference.com* to identify the gist of scripts or to access the senders' intentionality and understand some of the culture-bound references.

3.1 Late Show with David Letterman

According to Homer Simpson's top-ten list, "Widescreen televisions were invented to accommodate Keith Olbermann's enormous head" (position 7). This utterance provides a non-credible explanation of the function of widescreen televisions, integrating the "expected/unexpected" schematic opposition with disparaging humour and a visual backup by Homer, who opens his arms to indicate in a virtual way the dimension of the man's head (Fig.1 above). Initially, the subjects'—mostly relying on top-down mental processes—propose to localize the reference to Olbermann by writing Gianni Morandi, an Italian singer who has big hands. The TAP recordings reveal that this initial adaptation is then discarded, because the influence of the specific theoretical background leads translators to account for their implied receivers' knowledge of American culture and *The Simpsons*. They hence acknowledge that they "should include American names, or use an Italian one", as the official Italian translators "do in" the animated sitcom. Furthermore, thanks to the availability of video-editing software in the course of the experimental activity here discussed, a form of "multimodal compensation" [2] is also elaborated, adding a picture of Keith Olbermann to fill the hypothetical receivers' cognitive gap (Fig.1 above). Although this strategy may have limited feasibility depending on the source versions' fixed frame, this solution does derive from the critical analysis of audiovisual composition, indeed confirming one of the theoretical assumptions of this research—namely, the perception of the fusion of linguistic and extralinguistic features as an active tool that supports the translators' and recipients' appropriate pragmatic interpretation of the semantic levels.

The last extract contains a reference to the morning-show weathermen's physical constitutions, who are labelled "as fat as a dump truck" (position 2). This example provides further evidence of the achievement of pragmalinguistic equivalence through an interactive activation of bottom-up and top-down mental processes. According to the TAP recordings, in fact, the metaphorical, disparaging portrayal of overweight people triggers the humorous reaction and, also in this case, the subjects discuss whether to introduce a reference to an actual weatherman from Italian television or to leave the original one. After realizing that there are not similar figures in the target country, they choose the second option and produce a literal rendering of Homer's utterance, trusting the implied receivers' "acquaintance with American culture" and familiarity with the exaggerated representation of overweight morning weathermen in a number of films, series and humorous shows, which should not prevent the instigation of the expected response from target receivers, as well.

3.2 Conan

In one of the fake calls between former President Obama and President Trump, the latter asks for clarification about the European word 'chancellor', which he associates with 'chance', eventually thinking of a reality show—to be broadcast on Fox—about a gambler, "who rolls the dice [... and] takes his chance". The reformulation of these semantic and communicative dimensions culminates in two solutions that seem particularly smart, by reproducing the phonetic alliteration and even by trying to preserve the reference to the semantic field of "gambling". In one of the two renderings, one can read, "*Sempre allerta, sguaina le chiavi, serra i cancelli. Perché lui è... IL CANCELLIERE*", detecting a connection between "cancello", 'gate', and "cancelliere", 'chancellor'. It is true that this version does not maintain the reference to gambling and perhaps conveys a nonsensical shade of meaning thanks



to the preview of a not-so-captivating series about someone who “locks gates”, but it does replicate the phonetic characteristics and the basic, satirical representation prompting the original humorous reaction.

The other solution, instead, describes a reality show about a man who has to follow these instructions: “*CANCELLA il tuo avversario, lancia il dado e gioca le tue carte, cogli l’occasione perché tu sei... il CANCELLIERE*”. In this case the subjects preserve the link between “*cancella*”, ‘delete’, and “*cancelliere*”, but they even manage to relate to the semantic dimension of gambling, talking about “enemies”, “dice” and “cards”.

“Fox” is always left unchanged since target viewers are expected—in the TAP recordings—to “watch” or to “have heard of” it, although this does not implicate that everyone can deduce the ideological connection between President Trump and the TV channel, partly because the Italian version broadcasts different types of programmes, avoiding reality shows almost entirely.

4. Conclusions

This paper has described a case study performed at the University of Salento, concerning the educational use of multimodal analysis and information technology to produce equivalent translations of culture-bound humorous discourse. The analysis has exemplified that the interaction between the definition of AVT as a communicative mediation process, a critical analysis of multimodal composition, and video-editing and subtitling software can help to achieve pragmalinguistic equivalence through a symmetric contact between the source and target linguacultural settings. Thanks to this approach, future translators can pursue the achievement of an equivalent reformulation of the illocutionary force and functional aspects, aiming at prompting appropriate perlocutionary effects in recipients, without reiterating the conventional domestication and localization strategies that may enable ideological re-creations [7] of source texts.

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