Watching humor traveling across languages, cultures, and media
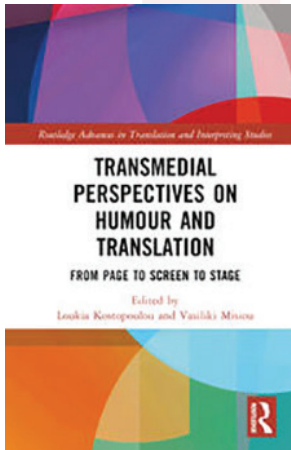
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Loukia Kostopoulou and Vasiliki Misiou

Transmedial Perspectives on Humor and Translation

Oe of the most conspicuous changes in humorous discourse during the past few decades concerns the ways it is created and disseminated: the (online) media have radically modified what we consider to be humorous genres, their content, and the ways they spread across languages and cultures (see among others Chiaro 2018; Attardo 2023). Especially social media and the easily accessible and usable software circulating online nowadays allow individuals, whether professionals or amateurs, to transform texts from one genre to another, as well as to translate and thus disseminate material that would otherwise be accessible to a limited part of the audience, thus resulting in a plethora of humorous texts connected through intertextuality (Fairclough 1992; Tsakona 2020). In this context, Loukia Kostopoulou and Vasiliki Misiou offer a fascinating kaleidoscopic view of what such changes entail for the translation of humorous discourse and simultaneously for its transference from one medium to another.

The volume under review begins with an introduction by the editors, which refers to two of the main theories of humor (incongruity and superiority / aggression) and, most importantly, to the changes digital technology and media have brought to the creation, dissemination, and perception of humor. As Kostopoulou and Misiou clearly state,

important questions that are addressed and debated in this book are how different media/media formats trigger different audience reactions, how humor is interpreted across media and, finally, which translational transformations take place during the 'migration' of humor across various media and genres. (p. 3)

Hence, the concept of *transmediality* (Jenkins 2006) enters the picture. It is used to account for diverse practices that transform humorous texts into suitable media.

The discussion of the interplay among transmediality, translation, and humor opens with a chapter by Patrick Zabalbeascoa and Salvatore Attardo on "Humor translation theories and strategies" offering an overview of theories of translation and focusing on those that emphasize contextual parameters, such as the purpose of the target text, the humor taste of the targeted audience, the ideology about the in/appropriateness of humor, and the established social norms concerning translation practices in a particular sociocultural community. Based on an example of a joke built on culture-specific scripts that are not necessarily available in the target language(s), they discuss how Zabalbeascoa's *priorities and restrictions model* (1993) and *binary branching* one (2018) offer potential solutions to translation problems. Furthermore, they discuss how and why the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (Attardo 2001), here reframed as the *General Theory of Semiotic Humor* (p. 23), could account for issues arising from transmedia and multimodal adaptations of humor.

Nicola M. Dusi and Greta Donati elaborate on "Parody, pastiche, and remix in film and TV series." Following Genette's (1997[1982]) distinction between *transformation* (including parody and travesty) and *imitation* (including caricature and pastiche), the authors examine film adaptations of novels and their parodies as well as parodic remixes and web series of TV series produced chiefly by fans. Even though the initial texts provide the material for the transmedial and resemiotized ones in all the cases, new meanings, and semiotic resources are generated in the latter. This enhances the content and semiotic gap between initial and derivative texts and simultaneously offers new, alternative perspectives on pre-existing semiotic material. The authors underline the significance of humorous or ironic purpose for achieving all this: "the lucid and satirical regimes, together with the ironic and the humorous, are active functions in audiovisual hypertextual practices, which play a key role in the creations" (p. 48).

Cross-cultural differences and cross-linguistic inequivalences are the focus of Jeroen Vandaele's chapter titled "Translating literary humor: Aspects of detection and analogy making." The author claims two main problems when translating literary humor: the detection of literary humor and *analogy making*, which refers to coming up with translation solutions and reproducing similar or equivalent humorous effects in

the target text. In the former case, the translator must be able, first and foremost, to trace the humor of the source text by retrieving the necessary background knowledge, which is not always easy or even achieved in practice. In addition, translators may miss subtle ironic cues (e.g., repetition and register shifts) and thus not reproduce the irony in the target text. In the case of analogy making, translators need to anticipate and allude to the background knowledge available to their targeted audience and recreate the humorous effects produced through wordplay or diverse (usually) nonstandard or obsolete varieties appearing in the source text. At the same time, they are expected to consider restrictions concerning what kind of humor is socially permitted and not potentially offensive in the target culture and language.

In his chapter titled "From the page to the screen. Superlópez: Fun superheroes and transmedia," Juan José Martínez Sierra examines the case of humorous transmedia storytelling with the Spanish superhero *Superlópez* as a protagonist. This character was designed as a parody of the well-known *Superman* in Spanish comic books since 1973. Recently, in 2018, he became the main character in a Spanish film. Martínez Sierra exploits an elaborate analytical model including a taxonomy of signifying codes (linguistic, paralinguistic, musical and special effects, sound arrangement, iconographic, photographic, planning, mobility, graphic, and syntactic codes; see Chaume 2004) and a taxonomy of humorous elements (referential, preferential, linguistic, paralinguistic, visual, graphic, acoustic, and non-marked humorous elements; see Martínez Sierra 2018) to account for the transmedia adaptation of the humorous mechanisms originally attested in the comic books to reproduce humor in the film. According to his findings, the same humorous mechanisms are employed in both genres despite their semiotic differences.

In her chapter on "Rewriting and redirection of the comedy and humor in Camilleri's Montalbano series: Gains and shifts in translation and adaptation," Brigid Maher investigates how humor is reproduced in the translations of Andrea Camilleri's crime book series featuring Inspector Salvo Montalbano, and is recreated in the TV series based on the crime novels. The Montalbano crime novels are famous, among other things, for their humor, which is, to a significant extent, based on the fictional vitagese dialect of Italian, but also on caricature and slapstick, situational humor, political and cultural satire, swearing and malapropisms, and self-irony. Through several well-chosen and fascinating examples, the author demonstrates how, even in cases where verbal humor may be lost in translation, the endnotes provided by the translators and the situational humor of the novels (e.g., slapstick or incongruous chains of events) help translators to explain or maintain the humorous effect in the target text, respectively. In the TV adaptation, the actors' physical traits and comic performances, as well as the (comical) musical soundtracks, contribute to the same effect, thus compensating for the loss of verbal humor. The author concludes that

the vivid theatrical and filmic features of Camilleri's writing add to the multilayered and multimodal quality of the humor. This means it lends itself well to translation or adaptation, because even if some aspects of the humor prove difficult to carry across or have a reduced effect, there are usually other humorous features in place simultaneously that allow the work to retain much of its verve. (p. 104)

In "A grinning bite: Ilana Zeffren's translation of the news into comics," Ayelet Kohn and Rachel Weissbrod concentrate on the work of the Israeli journalist and comics artist Ilana Zeffren. Zeffren has created an idiosyncratic code allowing her to comment on sociopolitical issues: she combines *mini texts*[1] referring to current sociopolitical events with comics featuring her cats as protagonists and animators (in Goffman's 1981 sense) of her critical thoughts and stances. This results in a series of transformation/ transmedial moves: "from a mini text to a full-fledged, detailed one, though condensed into one page; from a serious to a humorous treatment of the subject matter; and from the human world to the world of animals" (pp. 124-125). The data analyzed are fascinating, and the author convincingly shows how this multimodal genre she has devised allows her to draw unexpected analogies between politics and the 'cat world,' to point to thought-provoking incongruities, and eventually to demonstrate how multimodality and transmediality can yield multiple meanings and perspectives on sociopolitical affairs.

The case study analyzed by Vicky Manteli in "Exploring theater transmediality and humor translation in Aris Biniaris' *Animal Farm*" offers a glimpse of what an extended transmedial analysis can involve. Manteli does not restrict the data examined to the source text by George Orwell and its theatrical adaptation and simultaneously translation into Greek, but includes in her dataset all the material stemming from, surrounding, and promoting the theatrical performance: its official video trailer, the theater program and memorabilia, the playtexts, the songs, the music, and the dance, all contributing to enhancing the political satire and humor of the source text. By adopting such an extended and compelling definition of transmediality, the author sheds light on the mechanisms through which classical novels such as *Animal Farm* are reinterpreted and recreated to appeal to contemporary audiences who may not be familiar with traditional narrative modes but may appreciate a piece of political satire adapted to their sociocultural context and exploiting familiar genres, such as comics and rap songs. Manteli's study confirms Straumann's (2015:352) observation that "adaptations represent reinterpretations so that viewers are offered a new perspective and experience with each adaptation. It is possible, therefore, to discuss adaptations and appropriations of much earlier texts as transmedia phenomena" (p. 139).

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[1] Following Nir (2006), Kohn and Weissbrod define *mini texts* as "short, semantically independent verbal sequence[s], which may be classified under a variety of genres, including news headlines, definitions, advertisements, proverbs, slogans, placards, graffiti, and more. Mini texts can be informative or argumentative." (p. 109)

In the next chapter on "Postfeminist humor from page to stage to screen and translation: *Fleabag* as a case in point," Margherita Dore examines how what started as a standup comedy monolog involving postfeminist humor was transformed into a TV series and then translated from English to Italian as part of the dubbing process of the TV series. In particular, she focuses on Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* performance and TV show, where a young woman narrates her experiences in a (post)feminist, humorous, and often self-deprecating manner. Following Shifman and Lemish's (2010) approach, postfeminist humor is defined as

> Humor based on gender differences [which] does not attempt to constantly challenge the idea that 'men are superior to women,' which is normally instilled by sexist humor. Rather, it sees both men and women as equal but different. Consequently, both men and women can become targets of humor. (p. 158)

Through several well-chosen examples, Dore demonstrates how what was monological narration in the stage version becomes scenes featuring the narrator / protagonist and other characters, simultaneously rendering the latter "more absurd" (p. 164). The narrator's humorous perspective is no longer exclusively conveyed directly (i.e., through her monolog) but also enacted in humorous scenes featuring her interacting with others. When it comes to the Italian dubbed version of the TV series, it seems that the taboo, which is part of the narrator's postfeminist humor, is more often than not downplayed or even omitted, thus resulting in the "ideological manipulation" of the Italian target text (p. 165; see also Díaz-Cintas 2012).

A recently emerging and most interesting case of transmediality, translation, and humor is explored by Jan Chovanec in his chapter titled "Lest the jokes fail: Trans-cultural transfer in humor fan-subtitling." Chovanec opts for the under-researched topic of fan translations, namely translations by non-professional, untrained individuals, who appear not to limit their efforts to rendering the source text from one language to another but also provide relevant background information aimed at facilitating understanding and sometimes even convey their stances towards the source text. The case study examined here involves the opening monolog of the British comedian Ricky Gervais at the 2020 Golden Globes ceremony, which was translated into Czech and uploaded to YouTube. The author highlights the intricacies of humorous discourse addressing a broad audience, which led the non-professional translator to exploit the affordances of the medium by adding either metacomments on the source text into the body of subtitles or explanatory notes on the screen, thus enhancing the ways translators assist their recipients in grasping the humor of the source text. As Chovanec aptly remarks,

> [w]ithin this transmedial environment, users can perform a large number of acts: evaluate the quality of the translation; offer alternative translation solutions; discuss the indexicality of translation errors; invoke and enforce (standard) language ideologies; share metapragmatic stereotypes about the acceptability of the source text […]; interpret the assumed intended meaning; set the translated artefact into new interpretative contexts, etc. (p. 196)

Delia Chiaro's chapter on "Humor in a multilingual world: Tacit translation in the age of the reel" focuses on three types of reels, whose humor is based on linguistic and cultural differences, usually between English and other languages, and the implicit translation processes highlighting such differences. The examples and analyses provided bring to the surface online participants' evaluations of language variation, the unequal relationships between different languages, and eventually, how the social prestige of English as a dominant lingua franca may be confirmed or undermined by speakers whose first languages are different from English. Chiaro argues that tacit translation from English into other languages, and vice versa, underlies such humorous reels and becomes a means of comparing various language-specific rules and idioms as well as cultural particularities. She thus invites us to think in more depth and perhaps in a more critical manner (cross)linguistic humor, which points to linguacultural particularities and may perpetuate and naturalize sociolinguistic inequality and discrimination.

The final chapter of the volume is titled "The multimodal rendering of 'otherness' in the humorous discourse of image-macro memes." The author Pietro Luigi Iaia also explores the topic of sociolinguistic discrimination and inequality but rather from a different perspective. In particular, he presents the various stages and tasks in a university workshop, where students were asked to translate memes and recreate their humor to address recipients from different linguacultural communities. The memes analyzed and translated involved scripts reproducing derogatory stereotypes about the inhabitants of Southern Italy, associating them with mafia, criminality, poor education, and provocative behavior. Emphasis was placed on cultivating students' awareness of the difficulties entailed in translators' work and sensitizing them to the stereotypes and discriminatory values that may be disseminated through seemingly innocuous humorous texts such as memes. At the conclusion of the study, the author notes that

> from a transmedial viewpoint […] it would be worth exploring the translation strategies making the stereotypical and culture-bound humorous discourse available as social media short clips – the text types that are labeled as 'reel.' The passage from combining pictures and verbal descriptions to merging images, acoustic score, verbal description and even the actors' or authors' voices would raise some intriguing questions. (p. 234)

All in all, the chapters of the volume manage to explore an impressive variety of genres (novels, films, theatrical plays, TV series, video clips, jokes, cartoons, memes, comic books, and reels). The detailed and compelling analyses provided could be classified as a continuum ranging from those concentrating more on the translation of humor to those exploring more extended and complex cases of transmedia transference of an original humorous text. In this sense, the volume will appeal to scholars and students from a wide range of fields, including, but not limited to, cultural studies, translation studies, media studies, film and theater studies, social semiotics, linguistics, and literary studies. All these different topics and datasets examined by the contributors shed light on various definitions and dimensions of transmediality, which is an essential contribution of the volume since, as already mentioned, transmediality appears to be an under-researched concept. What, however, seems to need to be added to the introduction to the volume is an elaborate overview of the main theoretical and analytical approaches to transmediality, as well as a summary of the aspects of transmediality that are explored (or not explored) in the volume. The editors appear to take for granted that potential readers are already familiar with the concept and the relevant literature, which may not necessarily be true.

As underlined by most (if not all) of the chapters of the volume, more studies are welcome on the interplay among transmediality, translation, and humor. Given that the present collection has concentrated on the production side of transmediality and translation processes, it could be interesting to investigate how all the mechanisms and strategies exploited to transform the source texts into target texts are perceived and evaluated by their recipients. Audience perception studies would tell us more about how recipients of the target texts make sense of the changes from the source to the target texts and whether, how, and to what extent humor is successfully maintained or recreated therein. Considering Loukia Kostopoulou's and Vasiliki Misiou's unrelenting enthusiasm and remarkable dedication to research, this could be an inspiration for their next endeavor.

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