

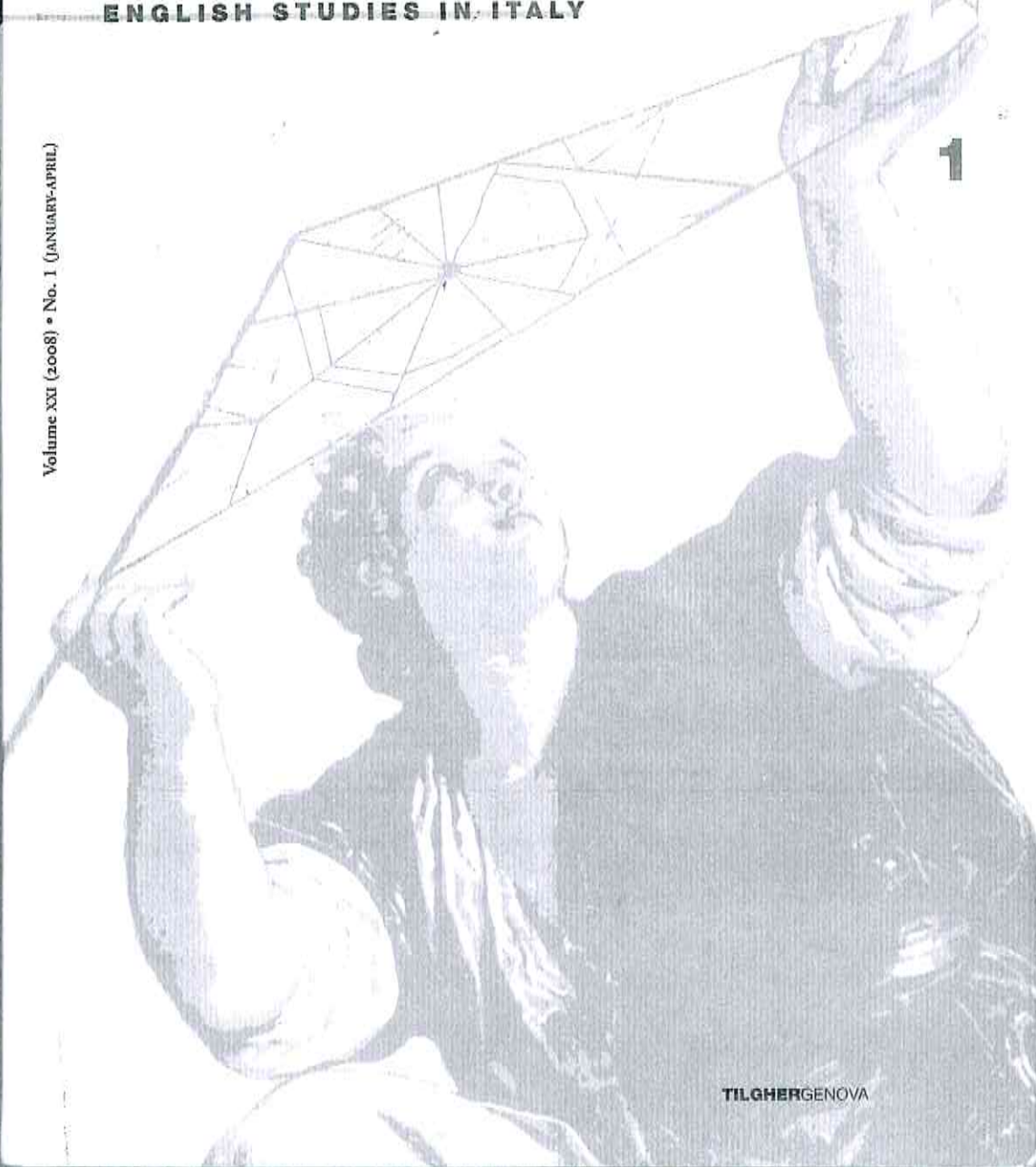
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ESTRATTO

Flavia Cavaliere

Can Culture-specific Humour Really “Cross the Border”?

1. *Introduction*

At the dawning of the twenty-first century, we can exchange information between the Western and Eastern hemisphere in the time it takes to press the button of a computer. Thus it would seem that there are no longer limits to every form of communication and trading between countries. However, there appears to be a highly social phenomenon whose manifestations vary greatly in different cultures and is still very localized and arduous – sometimes impossible – to export from the country where it has been produced: humour. As we will see, this is due to the fact that particularly verbal and referential humour (VRH) are deeply intertwined both with the language and the socio-cultural context in which they are produced; this means that these elements, in a type of Siamese-twin-like relationship, cannot be easily separated one from another.

All this accounts for the great – sometimes insurmountable – challenge that the rendering of VRH represents for translators, “a notoriously hard task the results of which are not always triumphant” (Chiaro 2005: 135).

2. *Humour, Language and Culture: An Inextricable Relationship*

A famous anonymous aphorism reads: “All people smile in the

same language”, but this obviously refers to the way people smile, not to the reason(s) why people smile. McGhee (1996: 145) holds that much humour, even the description of an incident, which is an example of more physical or visual humour, is unavoidably conveyed through language.

While humour doesn't have to be expressed through language, it generally is. When funny things happen in everyday life, they may not depend on language, but we use language to communicate them to others, and to think about them ourselves.

Both VRH are dependent on language, and in turn expressed through the witty exploitation of – different – languages themselves. Linguistic signs do not signify in a social vacuum, but, on the contrary, are deeply embedded in the socio-geographic context they are used in. Language, being a culture-bound code, plays a crucial role in the perpetuation of culture, and to cite Kramsch (1998), expresses cultural reality. By the same token, she adds that language embodies cultural reality, and experiences are not only exchanged by means of language, they are created by language as well. The way in which people use the communication medium, be it spoken, written or visual, through verbal and non-verbal signs produces meanings comprehensible to the cultural group they belong to: language is a system of signs that, though arbitrarily, holds a cultural value. As a consequence, people identify themselves and others through their use of language and consider it as a symbol of their social identity: language symbolizes cultural reality. Thus, due to “the conceptual freedom of language” (Vandaele 2001: 35-38) even within the same speech community, signs might have different semantic values for people from different discourse communities. Culture is heterogeneous, i.e., it is composed of a variety of subcultures and every situation may elicit a variety of responses, even within the same national culture: seemingly common concepts or even words may evoke different semantic associations owing to cultural and socio-geographical differences. As Taylor points out (1998: 48) “Although *lasagna* is now a familiar part of the British diet, the term will not conjure up the same associations as it does in an Italian context”. This is due to the “sociolinguistic force” of a sign, where the sign may entertain

multiple relations with its object that may be simultaneously of a denotative, connotative, or iconic kind. The "force of reality" (which refers to Sapir-Whorf's theory) and "metalingual force" (e.g., wordplay) complete Vandaele's description of the ways in which specific meanings are attached to specific codes.

All these considerations explain why each form of humour is so inextricably embedded in the cultural cradle in which it was born; in this perspective, according to Solomon (1997: 204) "humour is to some extent 'racist', not in the vile sense of demeaning some ethnic or racial group, but rather in the more innocent sense that all humour is to some extent context and culture-bound". Now, given that "Some part of what is meant can be left actually 'unsaid', as meaning is negotiated not only linguistically but also through the activation of the socio-cultural knowledge of the participants, who are able to pick up cues and implicatures (Taylor 1999: 444) relating to the particular contextualisation", what happens when humour is culture-based and Second Language (SL) and Target Language (TL) audiences do not share the same cognitive and socio-cultural schemes?

3. Translating Humour

In Snell-Hornby's view, (1988: 2) every "translation begins with the text-in-situation as an integral part of the cultural background", and careful attention must then be paid to the "cultural turn" (Bassnett 1991: 4), since, as highlighted by Eco (2001: 62), when translating "we bring into play not only two languages but also two cultures". However, "One cannot write about humour translation in the same way one writes about other types of translation" (Vandaele 2002: 150). This is due precisely to those relationships analyzed so far. From what has been said before, it is clear that particularly VRH can hardly, or even never, be perceived without an explanation of the cultural mindset and rules/taboo which the humorous issue refers to since the emergent quality of a joke lies exactly "in the network of linguistic, cultural and rhetorical relationships" (Muhawi

2002: 344). Translating humour requires both SL and TL world knowledge and skills such as the ability to switch a frame of reference to understand the ambiguity hidden in the majority of VRH. Particularly in the case of VRH, translators must be “knowledge breakers between the members of disjunct communities” (Neubert and Shreve 1992: 54) and, as such, they must understand what is different in a foreign cognitive environment and recognize any pre-supposed information, “culture bumps” (Leppihalme 1997), or collateral implications. By not translating them properly (or worse, leaving them un-translated) they can impede communication. Cultural gaps pose a real challenge and jeopardize the interpreter’s performance in getting the original message across. Where humorous issues are concerned, concepts relevant to the source cultural settings are to be made necessarily explicit in the target culture setting, or semantic equivalents must be found. Since, as maintained by Toury, translations are primarily “facts of target cultures” (1995: 29) in the translation process emphasis must be placed on transmitting the essence of the represented worlds, rather than simply providing a denotative translation.

4. Research Aims and Methodology

Our target was to analyze how translators deal with the problems of rendering highly lingua-culture-dependent humour outside the context in which it originated. We aimed at investigating if translation, in our case the Italian dubbed version of Hugh Wilson’s 1996 film “The First Wives Club” (FWC), is effective in decoding all the verbal (or even non-verbal) socio-culture-specific humorous elements present in the script and is thus successful (or not) in fully conveying their comic and satirical dimension. Our research made use of the theoretical framework both of Applied Descriptive Translation Studies (Gottlieb 1998; Snell-Hornby 1988, 2006) and the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) (Attardo and Raskin 1991; Attardo 1994, 2002).

5. *About the Film*

5.1 Motivating the Choice

We chose this comedy on the basis of two main factors which made it particularly revealing for our research aims. Firstly, the comedy is an archetypal film of the '90s, and a US nineties society fresco. Anthony Puccinelli, in his 1997 review of the film, wrote in the *Chicago Reader*: "*The First Wives Club* is nonetheless worth watching and preserving for what they tell us about ourselves and our culture. Two hundred years from now *The First Wives Club* will be an anthropological artefact for historians studying the 1990s, revealing the degree of self-consciousness that comes with living in a media culture". It is thus clear that the film, and accordingly most of all its wicked humour, is deeply entrenched in the American socio-cultural context. Its humour is highly culture/time-dependent, i.e., the audience, in order to understand and appreciate it, needs to refer to a very precise socio-geographic and chronological context. FWC, as we will see, is a scathing satire of North American modern society, and in particular of Upper East Side and Hollywood and Tinseltown norms.¹ Secondly, FWC bubbles with barbed remarks and witchy wisecracks, and its comic moments rest mainly on sizzling dialogues and zingers. In FWC humour is thus mainly verbal and referential and very little physical, thus instrumental to our research.

5.2 The Plot: Hell Has No Fury Like A Woman Scorned²

FWC is a buoyant comedy based on the best-selling novel by Olivia Goldsmith released in the USA in 1996 under Hugh Wilson's direction. The film opens with a flashback to 1969: best friends Cynthia (Stockard Channing), Brenda (Bette Midler), Elise (Goldie Hawn), and Annie (Diane Keaton) are graduating from Middlebury College; they take one last photograph together and

¹ Tinseltown TV is a world famous, award-winning television show featuring the best of Hollywood and Bollywood.

² *Heav'n has no rage like love to hatred turn'd. Nor Hell a fury, like a woman scorn'd.* This is the closing line of Act III of William Congreve's *The Mourning Bride*.

swear eternal friendship to each other. Of course, they lose touch with one another and take different paths. Twenty-seven years later, now wealthy mid-forty Manhattanites, they are brought together via a sort of "Big Chill" plot device: they reunite at Cynthia's funeral, who committed suicide after growing despondent when her tycoon husband ditched her for an anorexic plastic doll. After the funeral, Annie, Brenda and Elise go out for lunch and, while exchanging their life stories, find them perversely congruent: after giving their husbands the best years of their lives and helping them reach their respective pinnacles of success, they have been, like Cynthia, unceremoniously dumped for trophy bimbos.

Elise, a one time Academy Award-winning actress, now that she has seen the shady side of 40, is relegated to "B" movies, and has become a heavy drinker obsessed with plastic surgery. Her husband and producer Bill, whose career she made, has left her for a curvaceous starlet and is demanding a divorce and suing for half of her fortune. The abrasive wise-cracker Brenda helped her husband Morton open a profitable chain of discount electronics stores; now that he has fallen for Shelly, a vapid social climber "in preschool", as Brenda phrases it, Morton does not want to pay any alimony. Annie, a neurotic, overly-apologetic Upper East Side housewife, has allowed her husband Aaron to use her as a doormat throughout their marriage, and she is at a loss. With the toss of wedding rings into champagne flutes, they make a solemn pledge: it is time for a reckoning and so the First Wives Club is in session. Annie, the film's sporadic voice-over, tells the audience: "On November 28th at exactly 14.00 hours, Operation Hell's Fury swung into action." The three women concoct a plan to exact the most exquisitely bitter vengeance upon their cheating mates, and hatch an elaborate blackmail scheme that will win them control of their ex-husbands' businesses. Once they have extracted their pound of flesh, the warring triumvirate open a non-profit organization dedicated to aiding abused women.

6. *FWC English Script and the Italian Dubbed Version: A Comparative Analysis*

6.1 Translational Approach

Translating a text from one culture to another usually requires that a choice is first made between the two basic translation strategies, Domestication and Foreignization (Munday 2001: 146). As stated above, one conspicuous feature in FWC is the foreign elements evoking Northern American setting and culture, which virtually embody a character of their own. This means that in the Italian dubbed version of FWC the choice was to preserve its socio-cultural context, and, thus the predominant translation approach was Foreignization. In many cases, nonetheless, translators opted for Domestication, aiming at making the translated text more palatable and comprehensible, and avoiding target audience "culture shock" (Katan 1999: 419). Clear examples are the rendering of idiom by idiom, as shown in the following examples, which are all cases of "equivalent idiom transformations" (Veisbergs 1997: 164).

English	Italian
Knock wood	<i>Tocca ferro</i>
Pinheads	<i>Mentecatte</i>
We're has-beens	<i>Siamo superate</i>
Holy-Moly	<i>Santo Cielo</i>
She's loaded	<i>È piena fino all'orlo</i>
You've not changed a bit	<i>Non sei cambiata di una virgola</i>
She went for it	<i>Se l'è bevuta</i>
He had it easy every inch of the way	<i>L'ha avuta facile in ogni momento</i>

Table 1

In one of the first scenes, the drinks the three women order act indirectly as a type of introduction to their different personalities. Annie, "the one who can't manage a simple declarative sentence", as we learn later from her friends, tentatively orders a "Virgin Mary", which the SL version explains as being a *pomodoro condito*, i.e., a spicy tomato juice, while her two self-assertive friends have spirits.

In this case, Domestication plays a very useful role since it helps “to minimize the foreignness of the target text” (Munday 2001: 146) to match verbal message with gestures, and to trigger a humorous response.

In the same vein, when a mutual friend asks Brenda “Has Elise had any work done?” she replies with one of her saucy, Mae West-type ripostes: “Honey, she’s a quilt”. In the Italian version this is another example of Domestication, since “quilt” becomes *mosaico*, mosaic being nearer to the Italian artistic visual frame of reference, rather than a patchwork duvet, which is not very typical of Italian homes. Here, again, the strategy of Domestication has been used to assimilate those elements which may have appeared too alien to the TL audience, and this allows them to fully grasp Brenda’s comic malice.

6.2. Strategies at Work

We also investigated the different strategies adopted by translators in order to render culture-specific humorous references more explicit, and measured how much translated jokes differ from the source jokes within Attardo’s GTVH.

Our analysis was both quantitative and qualitative, but only a selection of meaningful examples will be reported owing to space limitations. Referring to GTVH, in the examples under scrutiny, *Script Opposition (SO)*, *Logical Mechanism (LM)*, *Situation (SI)* and *Narrative Strategy (NS) Knowledge Resources* do not differ significantly, so we will mention only those parameters, i.e., *Situation (SI)* and *Target (TA)*, where changes appear.

- FWC is filled with farcical moments and well-targeted barbs satirizing the way in which contemporary society, and particularly the Hollywood system, view the aging of men and women differently. Elise, the fast-fading film star, needs to look “Science Fiction young” because “There are only three ages for women in Hollywood: babe, district attorney, and ‘Driving Miss Daisy’”. Here Elise mentions the 1989 film whose characters are an elderly Jewish lady and her African-American chauffeur. In Italy, and in this line, the film is unhappily translated as “*A spasso con Daisy*” (Wandering with

Daisy). For those unfamiliar with the plot of this film, and considering also the quite misleading Italian rendering of the title, it is almost impossible to appreciate Elise's joke.

- Elise, in her trying desperately to defy the ravages of time with face-lifts, is totally nipped-and-tucked. She is continuously begging for a collagen lip implant from her plastic surgeon, who warns: "Any more collagen and you'll be able to blink your lips!" In one of the film's most hilarious sequences, she demands fuller lips from her doctor; "I want Tina Turner, I want Jagger!", but whoever in the SL audience is not familiar with the two singers' very thick lips will unavoidably miss all the high humorous potential of the scene. So, once again, it is necessary for the TL audience to share the SL socio-cultural background in order to fully grasp all the referential humour conveyed in the Source Text (ST).

- When, in a new film whose main character is the young Monique, she is offered the role of her "grotesque mother", Elise desperately cries: "Angela Lansbury plays Monique's Mother". Here there is only a *Replacement*, in Chiaro's terminology (1992: 86), in the rendering of the verb "plays" which is translated with the verb *è* – is – while the line would require what Neubert (1989: 151) has termed an "extra distinction", i.e., an integration of a discrete amount of paratext, but no supplementary information is given. Angela Lansbury, a real institution in American theatre and television, due to her features, which gave her an air of maturity that allowed her to pass as much older than she actually was, began playing mother roles, often to artists of her own age, while still in her thirties. But, in this case is the SL audience able to identify the butt of Elise's joke, and arguably capture the original joke?

- During Cynthia's funeral, when Cynthia's former husband enters the church with his brand new nymphet wife, Brenda hisses: "Vampire Lestat And Louis". Here Brenda clearly refers to the two main characters of Anne Rice's novel *Interview with the Vampire*, which in 1994 became a film starring Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise. The vampire Lestat chose the eighteenth-century Louisiana plantation owner Louis Pointe du Lac to be his fledgling and turned him into a vampire, so that the two became immortal companions. Here

referring to GTVH there is a slight SI change in participants since in the Italian option there is again a *Replacement* which substitutes Louis with the epithet *il travestito* – the transvestite. This sheds light on the type of relationship existing between the two for those unfamiliar with the plot of the film/novel, but also adds a bit of caustic flavor, which does not exist in the SL version.

- Another very note-worthy line is pronounced by Brenda when she defines her rival “Stairmastered and L’Oreal.” These are two typical examples of what Hall (1990), in his triad of culture, terms “out-of-awareness” elements, i.e., core cultural issues for which there are no frames of references; these elements cannot be traced in dictionaries or grammar books, and, as such, represent a particularly difficult challenge for translators, who often opt for omission. Stairmaster is a branded dual-step fitness equipment which was very popular in the 1980s, while L’Oréal, the world’s leading beauty company, concentrates particularly on producing hair colours; in this context they represent the prototype of Hollywood’s obsession with beauty and exercising. Both trade names here are fancifully used in a past participle form, so that they become adjectives, which in the TL version are rendered respectively as *ciclettata* – bicycled – and *ossigenata* – bleach-haired. Here translators recur to LA variants which Malone (1988) defines *Diffusion*, i.e., a translation strategy which consists in linguistically slackening SL elements for reasons of greater comprehensibility. Adjectives remain in the same semantic field, (hair colouring and exercising) even though the ST humorous effect inevitably loses its vigour.

- When Brenda, on finding a lot of empty liquor bottles in Elise’s trash, exposes her friend’s alcohol dependence by saying: “Let’s examine the evidence. Look! Nothing but bottles and gallon jugs!”, Elise tries to deny evidence and replies: “I had guests!” but Brenda sarcastically asks: “Who? Guns N’ Roses?”. The lines are translated literally but, in order to laugh, it is mandatory to know that Guns N’ Roses, one of the USA’s most successful hard rock bands, owing to the flagrant alcohol and drug abuse of its members – often seen intoxicated both on and off stage – and are not free of criticism by the media which often portray them as a poor example,

especially to their young fans, as far as drug and alcohol addiction are concerned. Is the SL audience aware of that, too? The *pragmatic explicitation* (Klaudy 1998) necessary for the SL audience to understand the joke would be too unwieldy to be added as paratext, so the joke probably slips by unnoticed by many.

- Brenda terms Morton "a cradlerobbing, Spandexsucking criminal", where the two invented adjectives are meant to poke fun at male sexuality. The first one ridicules mature men's attraction for teenagers, while the second one includes the possibility of the intersemiotic switch of meaning from the verbal to the virtually visual domain (*synesthesia*) since it evokes a type of fetishist intercourse with girls squeezed into Spandex. The GTVH *LA Knowledge Resource* here is responsible for recasting in a different wording. The Italian rendering – *succhianylon, sparviero di culle e criminale* – is responsible for both a Dislocation, and precisely an inversion in the adjective sequence, and a Pragmatic Explicitation, the word "Spandex" being substituted with *nylon*, which is more familiar in the SL cultural context; for "cradlerobbing" the translator resorted to a Replacement and "robbing" becomes *sparviero* – a sparrow hawk – which metaphorically raids cradles.

- When Elise finds out that Bill's mistress is a minor and threatens to ruin his reputation, he asks her: "Where are you going?" and she triumphantly answers: "To see Barbara Walters". Translators, being aware that the SL audience is not very likely to know that Barbara Walters is a famous American television anchorwoman, opted for a vague *Vado a farmi intervistare in Tv* "I'm going to have an interview on TV" so that the sense of Ellie's menace and laugh at Bill's misfortune therefore express an emotion that in non-humorous contexts would clearly be defined as *Schadenfreude*.

- Last, but not least, Ivana Trump shows up as herself and suggests to the first wives: "Don't get mad, get everything!", which in the Italian dubbed version is rendered as *Non prendetevela, prendetevi tutto!* Here translators managed very happily to reproduce the zeugma "get mad/get everything" again with a Replacement by resorting twice to the Italian verb *prendere*; the first time it is exploited in its idiomatic form *prendersela* ("to get angry"), while the second

time it is used in its literal meaning "to take". In this case changes in LA Knowledge Resource do not modify the semantic content of the joke. But the scene also contains a non-verbal message. The American audience laugh because they know who she is and because they know that she actually got almost everything, but do the SL audience get the ironical implicatures of her presence as well? Does the Italian audience recognize her as one of America's best-known celebrities, and, most of all, as the former wife of the New York real estate billionaire Donald Trump, whose divorce battle fuelled extensive pieces in the gossip columns and in 1992 got her a \$25-million payout? By implication, her cameo appearance and war-cry in this film crowned her as the ideal role model of U.S. ex-wives, but is this the same in Italy?

7. In Conclusion

All the questions raised in this paper could be a springboard for further, test-based research aiming at assessing the real perception, and thus appreciation, of lingua-culture-specific humour of the film so far analyzed.

Our analysis has shown that FWC humour requires recognition of stereotypes and socio-cultural-references. The TL audience has to tackle implications, famous characters, situations and manias which cannot be totally recognized and/or understood, and thus properly appreciated in their intended humorous dimension. Our investigation demonstrated that in FWC, despite the immediate general translatability from English into Italian, there is a large residue of VRH associated with the linguistic structures or socio-cultural background of SL which does not manage to "cross the border". This limit, in our case, cannot be attributed to lack of competence on the part of translators, given the undeniable general level of translational expertise, but it depends on the intrinsic untranslatability of too many socio-cultural implications, and on the constraints of the screen medium. Most of the above-cited examples would require what Appiah (2000) terms as a "thick translation", i.e., the explanation of

socio-cultural details in annotations or glossaries, but this is obviously unattainable in the case of dubbing, where the technical restrictions of timing, length and lip synchronization must be accounted for. Unavoidably lingua-culture-specific humour remains mostly untranslated or translated very vaguely. As a result, many jokes are invalidated.

We cannot but agree with Solomon (1997: 212) when he states: "The background and presuppositions of humor go deeper and are more complex than virtually anything else in a culture.[...] Humor is the last frontier to be crossed, in the complete understanding of a culture."

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edited by
Delia Chiaro and Neal Norrick

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