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(editor)

**Reflecting on Audiovisual Translation in the
Third Millennium:
Perspectives and Approaches to a Complex Art**

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Take a walk on the dubbed side. On the translation of song lyrics in dubbed TV sitcoms¹

GIOVANNA DI PIETRO

Abstract. Despite the ubiquitous presence of music and its massive importance not only from a merely cultural point of view, but in life itself, research on music translation is still scarce, especially within the field of Audiovisual Translation Studies. However, its semiotic relevance and its deep interconnections with other audiovisual communication modes such as graphic signs, icons, verbal language, sound effects and purely cinematic techniques such as camerawork, editing and the use of colour and lighting make it an extremely dense and polyphonic meaning-making resource interweaving with images, words and sounds in a complex multimodal whole. How such meaningful richness can be reproduced into another language is one of the most intriguing mysteries of translation. The present study aims at identifying when and how songs are translated in dubbed sitcoms. A comparative study has been conducted on the Italian, French and Spanish dubbed versions of the songs performed in the US-American sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* in order to analyse the multifarious ways in which the translation of song lyrics for dubbing purposes may influence narration, comprehension and enjoyableness, and the consequences of such process for the rendition of humour at an interlingual and intercultural level.

1. Introduction

Music translation is an under-researched and neglected domain within the field of Translation Studies, with a few exceptions (Berger and Carroll 2003, Filippi 1995, Gorfée 2005, Hewitt 2000, Martino 2007, Susam-Sarajeva 2008).

There seem to be even fewer studies on music in audiovisual translation (Bosseaux 2008, Di Giovanni 2000) which become almost nonexistent if we consider the specific relation between music and humour in AVT.

Nevertheless, music has a pervasive presence and relevance in everyday life and an equally capital role in audiovisual products, especially sitcoms. It is a semiotic code which co-operates with all the other aural and visual sources in the construction of meaning (Chaume 2004, Di Pietro forthcoming). Indeed, songs are not performed in a communicational void, but are the result of a tight interaction between verbal and nonverbal semiotic modes (see Table 1.1), which calls for an inevitably multimodal and multidisciplinary approach to music translation analysis. As Susam-Sarajeva (2008: 190) advocates, ‘translation scholars will certainly need new frameworks and tools beyond a text-based approach in order to be able to *explain* how music and translation work together.’

Table 1.1 *The interaction between semiotic channels and codes in audiovisual products*

	Acoustic channel	Visual channel
Verbal code	Verbal language (VL)	Written language (WL)
Nonverbal code	Paralanguage (P)	Kinesics (K)
	Music/sound effects (M/SFX)	Non-human image (NHI)
		Camera action (CA)
		Editing (E)
		Photography (PH)

2. Research questions and methodology

Thinking in Jakobsonian terms, music has a chiefly expressive function in virtue of its evocative power. The priorities for music translation are thus represented by rhythm and melody, which acquire a higher communicative force than language itself (Kaindl 2005). Consequently, isochrony and singability prevail over mere semantic content (Low 2005). According to

Skopos theory, the same perlocutionary effect needs to be attained in music translation, especially if humour is involved (Attardo 2002).

The present study aims at analysing the role and status of music in AVT by trying to answer the following research questions:

- When and how are songs translated in dubbed sitcoms?
- Which translational strategies are put into action and why?
- What are the consequences of translation for narration, comprehension and enjoyableness?

A comparative study involving different language pairs has been conducted in order to attempt a deeper understanding of the macro-level translational practices at play in a multimodal corpus represented by the 27 songs and poems performed in the first five seasons of the US-American sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* (HIMYM). This audiovisual product has been analysed in its original version and its Italian, French and Spanish dubbed renditions.

3. Data analysis and findings

The first aim of my research was to identify how many songs had been translated and into how many languages. The Italian, French and Spanish corpora presented apparently very erratic translational strategies, both at an interlingual and at an intralingual level. Some songs were dubbed, others subtitled, others left untranslated, others again were still untranslated but the spoken parts which punctuated them were voiced. At first sight, it looked like there had been no guiding criteria behind these choices.

Figures 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 show the translational strategies employed for each target language (*intralingual* level).

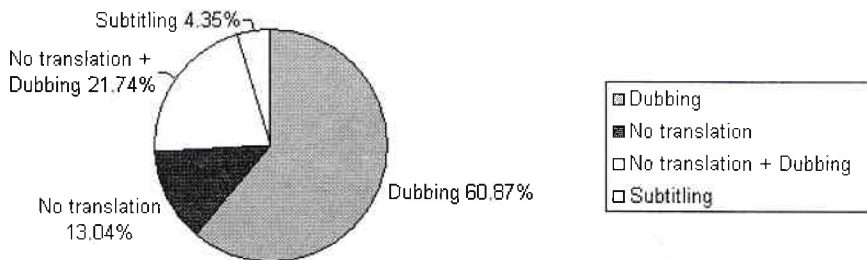


Figure 1.2 *Intralingual translational strategies (Italian corpus)*

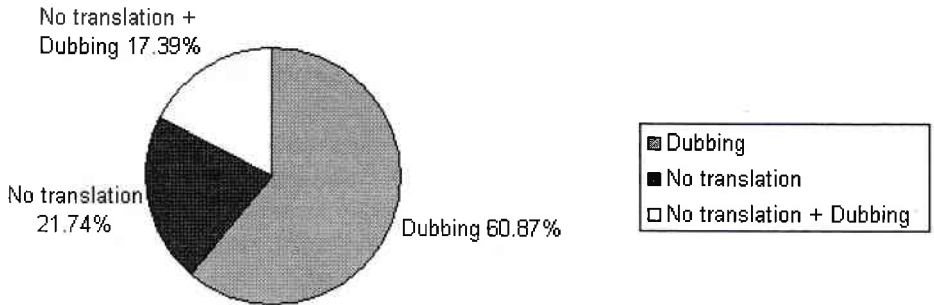


Figure 1.3 *Intralingual translational strategies (French corpus)*

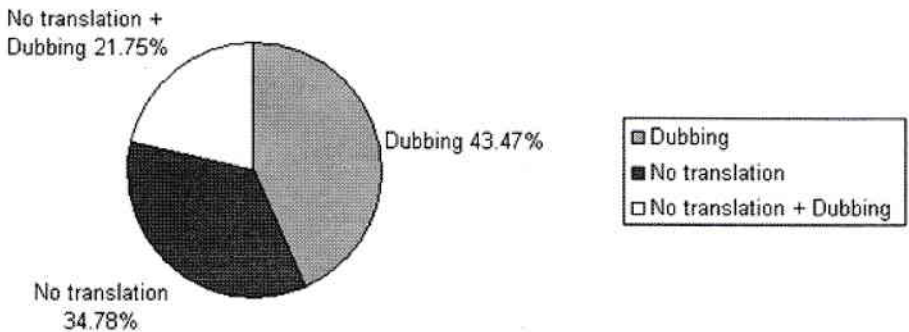


Figure 1.4 *Intralingual translational strategies (Spanish corpus)*

At an *interlingual* level, however, we can clearly see how dubbing is the most common strategy employed (see Figure 1.5). At the same time, it is interesting to notice how dubbing is less and less frequent if we switch from Italian to French to Spanish. Moreover, Italian is the only language introducing subtitles (although only in one instance), thus adopting more varied strategies.

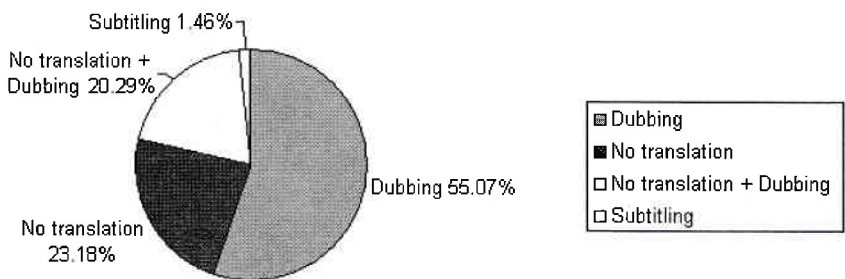


Figure 1.5 *Interlingual translational strategies (Italian, French and Spanish corpora)*

What seems to be guiding these apparently random translational strategies? Things seem to start taking shape after conducting a text-type-driven analysis.

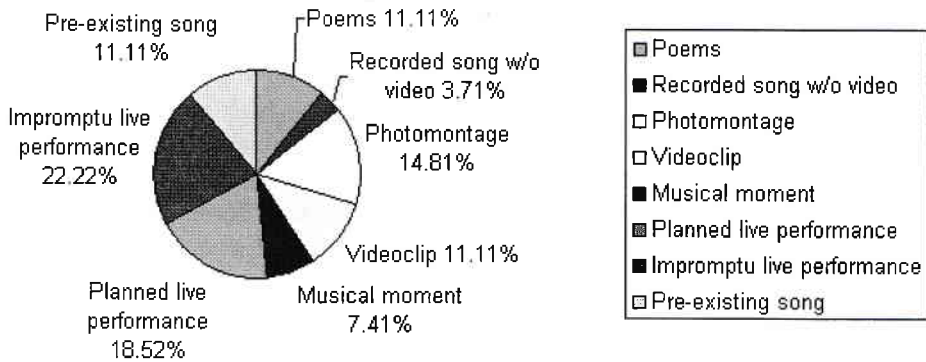


Figure 1.6 *Translational strategies employed per textual category (Italian, French and Spanish corpora)*

The music-related text-types in HIMYM appear to be the following:

a. Poems:

1. Barney's *The Sexless Innkeeper*
2. Ted's comeback to *The Sexless Innkeeper*
3. Marshall's *If Lady Lily's Jealousy*

The translational strategy adopted is dubbing, a less difficult process to perform when dealing with poems than with songs because there is no sung music to take into account when translating, although an evocative background track can be heard and rhythm is still a key vehicle of expressive meaning.

b. Recorded song:

The Foreskins' *Murder Train*

This heavy metal song, whose brutal lyrics utterly clash with the images of innocent dog puppies accompanying them, has not been translated in any of the TL-corpora, probably because all translators thought that the contrast between the visual and the acoustic code would suffice to convey a humorous effect. However, this zero-translation choice causes a total interruption of the suspension of disbelief in the target audience, who cannot fully get the intended irony.