Humour Translation – Interdisciplinarity at its Best

SANTANA, Belén
Universidad de Salamanca
bsantana@usal.es

Scientific research on humour and humour translation has a long tradition, but the topic itself is not always humorous at all. After reading the state-of-the-art literature on humour translation (even the contributions made by a recently created discipline like Humour Studies), a young scholar as well as any interested newcomer feels very soon lost in the middle of a humorous jungle. In my opinion, this feeling of disorientation is mainly due to two kind of problems of (1) terminological and (2) methodological nature (Santana 2005: 846). Therefore, this paper aims to illustrate the challenge of translating humour and propose a methodological approach based on interdisciplinarity in order to tackle the complexity of this research object.

(1) One of the first obstacles most humour researchers have to overcome is the object definition. As the Austrian writer Egon Friedell (1878-1938) wrote: "Probably nobody has tried to explain what humour is, and I believe that any mere attempt to define this concept proves a complete lack of humour. This is of course the reason why mainly academic scholars deal with this question". In fact, a semantic analysis of the lexical field of the word *humor* both in German and Spanish shows that this concept is related to 36 different words or semantic neighbours in each case (Santana 2005: 52ff; 88ff). This conceptual complexity is repeatedly mentioned in literature as well. In his introductory article to the special issue of the journal *The Translator*, devoted to translating humour (2002, Vol. 8-2), Jeroen Vandaele admits the limitations of the volume as far as proposing translation strategies is concerned, but insists on the potential advantages of a thorough humour analysis for descriptive purposes:

"It follows that the present volume cannot hope to offer straightforward tools that teach translators how to reproduce humour. However, the conceptual complexity of humour can be analysed and appreciated; moreover, its analysis may help scholars and trainers alike (a) to see structures in effects that are fuzzy but still bear strong (meanings), (b) to understand the ways in which these effects are encoded in language (means), and finally to compare source and target texts with respect to (a) and (b)." Vandaele (2002: 150).

Unfortunately, even by presenting excellent case studies, none of the contributions included in the volume succeeds neither in proposing a clear definition of humour nor in approaching the research object in a holistic way. Moreover, Vandaele's quote puts into practice the terminological consensus reached within the field of Humour Studies on the English word *humour* as an "umbrella-term", meaning the *humorous effect*. This agreement is of course very much welcomed in order to encourage communication and make academic exchange easier. However, this convention should not be an excuse for not addressing the terminological question properly on a multilingual basis. Unfortunately, here I shall participate from this pragmatic consensus too for reasons of space, but not without referring to a deep semantic analysis comparing the lexical fields of humour in Spanish and German to be published soon, which tries to throw some light on the problem of terminology (Santana 2005, chapter 2).

(2) As far as the methodological aspect is concerned, the concept of humour is related to a considerable number of sciences. Not only linguists and literature scholars, but also

translators, anthropologists, doctors, psychologists, theologists etc. have dealt with this question. Such plurality of methods is a double-edged sword, because on the one hand the researcher can benefit very much from seeing further than his/her nose but, on the other, most scholars talk on cross purposes, thus making any *real* exchange of ideas quite rare. This lack of communication is especially relevant if we take into account that the study of humour does not consist in the mere addition of specific aspects. Inasmuch as a humorous short story, for example, is not an addition of single jokes and the translation process cannot be described as a chain of isolated decisions, the study of humour translation must be regarded holistically.

Some of the negative consequences that arise from this situation are (a) an extreme focus reduction of most scientific approaches, (b) problems of relevance concerning corpus selection (jokes do not usually belong to a translator's everyday job!) and (c) a lack of parameters regarding text external factors like translation deadlines, publishing conditions or the financial aspect. In this respect Patrick Zabalbeascoa's work is a happy exception, since he succeeds in including practical aspects of the profession in his research (Zabalbeascoa 2005: 205). Another example of Zabalbeascoa's insight into the real world is his description of common practice when translating humor:

"So the common practice and general rule, when it comes to translating humor, could be summed up as 'translate the words and/or the contents and then keep your fingers crossed and hope that the humor will somehow come across with the rest'". (Zabalbeascoa 2005: 188)

My proposal in order to change this situation is a method for translating humour based on interdisciplinarity. By this word I mean an integration of different approaches coming from more than one discipline, but keeping in mind that interdisciplinarity means no vagueness, but real interaction. I have tried to apply this principle to my doctoral dissertation, which focuses on the translation of humour as a culture-specific element in the translation of contemporary (European) Spanish literature into German (Santana 2005). This method is illustrated in the following diagramme:
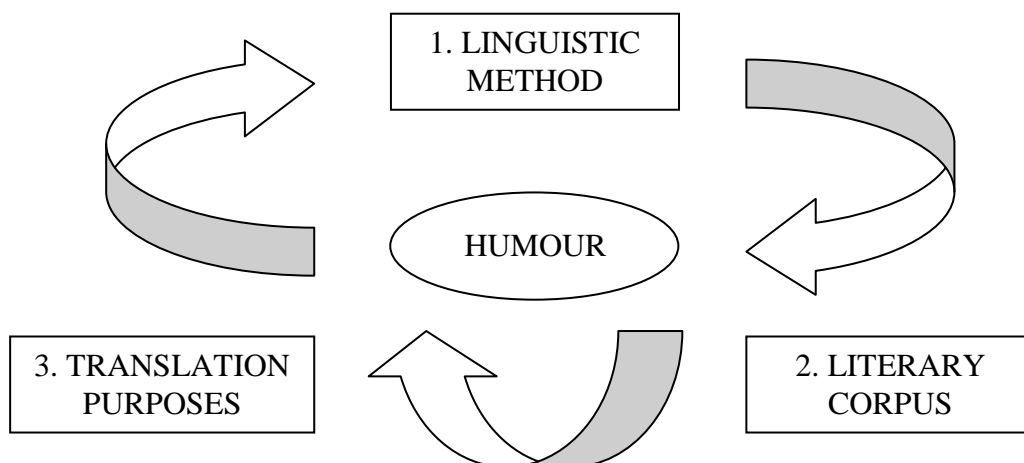
1. In order to define humour and its related concepts I have resorted to a semantic method (**Linguistics**), namely the analysis of lexical fields, and enhanced it by an intercultural perspective, because I have been working with the language combination Spanish-German. The result of this semantic analysis is a model that pretends (a) to be useful for identifying and analyzing humour in a Spanish source text (ST), in Zabalbeascoa's words a proposal for humour "mapping" and "prioritizing" (Zabalbeascoa 2005: 187) and (b) to give the German

translator some guidelines in order to reproduce (or not!) the humour of the original in the target text (TT) (Santana 2005: XY; XZ).

2. This model is then applied to a literary corpus (**Literature Studies**) in order to test its validity. The corpus consists of three fragments (both original and German translation) taken from two novels written by two of the most succesful contemporary authors in Spain. The novels are: *The Mystery of the Haunted Crypt* (1979) by Eduardo Mendoza and *A Heart so White* (1992) by Javier Marías. The humorous strategies used in the STs are classified according to the semiotic dimensions of every text (syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and cultural levels).

3. The corpus is finally analyzed for translation purposes and followed by a translation critique (**Translation Studies**). This analysis concentrates on the TT in order to find out which translation decission has been taken for which humorous strategy in the ST and whether the TT has an equivalent humorous effect. My aim here is neither to point at the translator nor to flatter him, since we all know that a translation is always subjective and never perfect. Nevertheless, I believe that a holistic analysis of humour in depth may help to activate the translator's conscience about what he/she is doing and to develop certain guidelines that might be useful for both translation students and professionals.