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**DOCTORAL DISSERTATION**

**TOWARDS A MANAGEMENT MODEL OF HUMOUR IN  
CONFERENCE INTERPRETING FROM ENGLISH INTO SPANISH**

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TRABAJO DE INVESTIGACIÓN PRESENTADO PARA LA OBTENCIÓN DEL GRADO DE DOCTOR DE  
LA UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA POR MARÍA JOSEFA ESPINOZA SAAVEDRA

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SALAMANCA,

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mª Josefa Espinoza Saavedra'.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jesús Baigorri Jalón'.

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**Towards a Management Model of Humour in Conference Interpreting from  
English into Spanish**

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## ABSTRACT

Humour is a communicative element that speakers sometimes decide to resort to in order to convey their message, either as a means or an end. Humour studies is a field, maybe not too well-known, that for more than forty years has been researching on the complexities of this topic. Translation studies, with greater or lesser influence from Humour Studies, has also been reflecting about humour according to its interests and paradigms for several decades now. Thus, it is appropriate to note that Interpreting Studies lacks a wide and cohesive literature on the issue. In the current dissertation we focus on the status of humour and interpreting academic literature, and we posit that it merits more attention from the interpreting field, then we sketch a possible methodology as a tentative exercise. We do so within our linguistic and cultural framework, English into Peninsular Spanish, following in the footsteps of humour studies and what translation studies have to say, paying particular heed to audiovisual and cartoon translation that, as we shall posit, share some common aspects with simultaneous interpreting, potentially applicable to conference interpreting. However, this work should only be regarded as a call for other researchers' insights and comments, with the aim to highlight the promising and lengthy work ahead of us.

*Keywords:* humour, humour studies, translation studies, audiovisual translation, cartoon translation, simultaneous interpreting, conference interpreting

## RESUMEN

El humor es un elemento comunicativo al que los hablantes pueden acudir en ocasiones, ya sea como medio o fin, para transmitir su mensaje. Los estudios humorísticos son un campo, quizá aún bastante desconocido, que lleva más de cuarenta años investigando la complejidad del tema. La traducción también lleva varias décadas estudiando el humor de acuerdo con sus propios intereses y paradigmas, y bajo una influencia variable de los estudios humorísticos. Así, resulta adecuado resaltar que la interpretación carece de una literatura científica amplia y cohesiva sobre el tema. En nuestra tesis nos centramos en la situación del humor y la interpretación en la literatura académica, planteamos que merece una mayor atención desde el campo de la interpretación y posteriormente esbozamos una

posible metodología al respecto, como mero ejercicio tentativo. Realizamos esta labor dentro de nuestro marco lingüístico y cultural, del inglés al español peninsular, siguiendo la senda de los estudios humorísticos y los dictados de la traducción, prestando especial atención a la traducción audiovisual y de viñetas que, tal y como sostendremos, comparten ciertas particularidades con la interpretación simultánea y son, por tanto, de potencial aplicación a la interpretación de conferencias. Sin embargo, este trabajo debería ser considerado, simplemente, como un llamamiento para que otros investigadores ofrezcan sus análisis y comentarios, con la finalidad de subrayar la tarea tan promisorio como extensa que nos queda por delante.

*Palabras clave:* humor, estudios humorísticos, traducción, traducción audiovisual, traducción de viñetas, interpretación simultánea, interpretación de conferencias

## INTRODUCTION

*Poucas cousas se teñen definido tantas veces como ise fenómeno indefinibel. A mesma abundancia de definicións e teorías denota a súa insuficiencia, mais acontez que totalas cousas indefinibiles espertan un paradóxico furor definatorio. (Fernández de la Vega, O segredo do humor, 1962, p. 37, as cited by de Miguel, 1997, p. 207).*

The current dissertation revolves around a complex and multifaceted concept called humour, to the extent that consensus even on a definition of the term “humour” has proved difficult, as a quick look at general dictionaries can attest.<sup>1</sup> It can be seen as an innate emotion in humans which is used as a communication tool between individuals, according to linguistic and cultural norms that vary widely among social groupings. In translational terms it can become at times the necessary key to decipher different types of messages—linguistic, semiotic or cultural, to name a few.

My interest in this subject was sparked in a classroom situation, when a talented and skilful senior student remained dumbfounded when faced with interpreting irony, apparently for the first time, in the simultaneous interpreting modality. This led me to think that perhaps I was not preparing my students properly to confront humorous remarks, and then to think of what pedagogical tools would be appropriate to fill that potential training gap.

I approached the theoretical and methodological background through the following steps, after realising the scarcity of specific literature on interpreting and humour. First, I explored the areas of study that can help us understand how humour has evolved, for example, from the historical or psychological perspectives. Secondly, I focused on areas more akin to interpreting: translation, where a significant corpus of scientific literature was already available; linguistics, where theories that explain the

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<sup>1</sup> Although we are going to refer to some specific examples, it might also be of interest to check other dictionaries such as the Oxford learners or the Merriam Webster. See for example: [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/humour\\_1?q=humour](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/humour_1?q=humour)  
[https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/humor?utm\\_campaign=sd&utm\\_medium=serp&utm\\_source=jsonld](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/humor?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsonld)

relations between humour and language have been developed, including a general theory of verbal humour by Raskin and Attardo; and pragmatics, which, for instance, has focused on a serious analysis of the topic of irony. Thirdly, I went through the main works that have reflected upon the difficulties encountered when translating humour. Among the various approaches to a task that some experts consider unfeasible, while others narrow down to a matter of degree, I took into account the models advanced by experts in audio-visual and cartoon translation, which hypothetically offered the possibility of replication in our field of study, simultaneous interpreting.

Translators have a long tradition of paying scholarly attention to humour, given the potential problems it may cause when trying to render it from one language into another. Such difficulties stem, *inter alia*, from the complexity of humour, a multi-layered communication tool that requires a deep knowledge in cultural, linguistic and referential terms, as books such as the seminal study edited by Jerome Vandaele in 2002 show.

Rather than asking why so little attention has been devoted to humour in Interpreting Studies so far, we thought that it was more relevant to ask ourselves how these studies have approached the topic, and how they could continue to do so after some focused reflection. As for the shortage of literature we could theorise, at least, on two different reasons: first, in simultaneous interpreting we are constantly racing against time and therefore any time-consuming element has to be managed instantaneously (even to the extent in some cases of discarding or oversimplifying it), and second, if experts in simultaneous conference interpreting have devoted little time to reflect on the topic it is because it was taken for granted that any interpreter was capable of coping with humorous occurrences, as they have been doing for years, apparently without hindrance and seemingly without any specific training or reflection. In our view, it seems difficult to understand that a topic that has generated so much scientific discussion in translation studies has remained almost unexplored in interpreting.

In the dissertation we will consider that, in the same manner as Translation Studies has gone through a constant journey of reflection and discussion, Interpreting Studies should start to make that debate more widespread to facilitate a journey towards a management model of humour. Real-life experience in the teaching of interpreting has



determined the theoretical boundaries of the current dissertation, within the realm of simultaneous conference interpreting English > Spanish, although it goes without saying that the methodological ideas here presented should only be understood as an attempt to raise questions that other experts may pose in a different manner for other interpreting modalities.

As a result of the theoretical and methodological background described in the previous paragraphs, the last part of this dissertation is based on the idea that, in general terms, understanding humour is a matter of degree—involving several variables. Our hypothesis is that humour should be introduced in the early stages of the interpreting training process by designing properly scaled exercises. That training will prepare students to face humorous scenarios with the appropriate skills, but it will also sharpen their attention to other rhetorical figures, not just humour-related, that in certain cases are key components of oral speech, and it will also make students aware of the fact that the first filter of sense (of humour too) is the interpreter. Would-be interpreters should learn that they have to refrain from reacting themselves to the humorous note, while trying to convey a similar effect on the audience that listens to the interpreted translation as the effect produced on those who understand the original language. They will have to take into account that their reaction has to be instantaneous, since any delay would disrupt the handling of the rest of the utterance. Although in our dissertation we are not dealing with the emotional aspects of interpreting humour, their influence in real life cannot be overlooked. Humour makes a far from easy crossing among cultures and it is not always enjoyable for all the parties involved.

### **Research Tropes to Chart a Complex Phenomenon**

Dictionaries are a logical starting point to help us understand a complex phenomenon, but not surprisingly, if we look for definitions of humour in different sources the results vary and the answers seem to neglect important aspects. For illustrative

purposes only, we present here several definitions and some possible comments on the overlooked parts.

The online version of the *Oxford dictionary* defines humour as “the quality of being amusing or comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech.”<sup>2</sup> *Britannica.com* states “in all its many-splendoured varieties, humour can be simply defined as a type of stimulation that tends to elicit the laughter reflex”.<sup>3</sup> The definition provided by the *Diccionario esencial de la lengua española* reads “genio, índole, condición, especialmente cuando se manifiesta exteriormente”.<sup>4</sup> As a final example, we mention one of the definitions in the *Diccionario de uso del español María Moliner* “(con referencia a las personas y a lo que dicen, escriben, dibujan, etc.). Cualidad consistente en descubrir o mostrar lo que hay de cómico o ridículo en las cosas o en las personas, con o sin malevolencia”.<sup>5</sup>

We can object that the Oxford definition does not provide information about *who* or *what* possesses such quality, *amusing* or *comic* are ambiguous because it is unclear if they should be considered as synonyms or as the only two possible states and categories of humour. The literary Britannica definition raises the very important issue of *varieties* and that some reaction is sought after, however, it presents a debatable choice of words with *simply* or broad terms such as *type* and a generic *stimulation*. Again, we know that not all humour expressions are *many-splendoured* and that our laughter reflex is not necessarily automatically elicited by its presence, [see for example, Giles and Oxford, p. 35 of our dissertation].

The *Diccionario esencial* definition uses the word *wit* that can be called into question, as many examples of humour do not require any type of wisdom, especially

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<sup>2</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/humour>. (accessed 13th September 2022)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/humor>. (accessed 13th September 2022) This definition is written by a referential author, Arthur Koestler, [see pp. 139-173 in our dissertation], according to a definition he provided in 1974 (as cited in Chiaro 1992, p.4). On the webpage, however, it is stated as an updated definition. As for the laughter reflex concept, it is necessary some contextual information to fully grasp its meaning [see pp. 155-156 and 185 on *homo ridens*; on tickling, see, for example pp. 35, 163-164 and 255 in our dissertation].

<sup>4</sup> Our translation reads “wit, nature, condition, especially when externally displayed” (Real Academia Española, 2006, p. 796).

<sup>5</sup> Our translation reads “(in reference to people and what they say, write, draw, etc.). Quality that consists in discovering or showing the amount of funniness or ridiculousness in people, with or without malevolence” (María Moliner, 1990, pp. 76-77).

when there is not any creativity involved, such as when we tell jokes—fixed oral expressions that are passed on to different generations. It is interesting to note the *externally* aspect, but again, it seems to overlook, for instance, funny inner thoughts that are not necessarily transmitted to anyone, neither simultaneously nor subsequently. Finally, the María Moliner definition presents the problem of having to provide some context before offering the definition as such, although it includes the interesting idea of a possible *malevolence*, the only of the examples to do so.

This simple, and equally debatable, analysis can be performed even without being a humour scholar. Any person is in a position to find amiss or inaccurate aspects in any definition of the term, simply because humour is part and parcel of our human living experience, in different degrees and under different robes—and we are aware of how generic our comment is, in the same line as the critical remarks made in the previous paragraphs.

This partially fruitful result makes palpable the need to dive deeper into scholarly writings, to pause on terms such as *humour*, *irony* and similar expressions. After reading several of them, certain authors become recurrent—particularly Victor Raskin, the Russian forefather of the most influential research area of linguistic humour and Salvatore Attardo, Raskin's Italian disciple and co-author of the fundamental *general theory of verbal humour (GTVH)*—and it was only then that we learnt about the existence of an area called *humour* or *humor studies*, a study field that may not be well-known outside scholarly circles.<sup>6</sup> As Delia Chiaro explains (2017, p. 414) in her chapter in the *Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor*, edited by Attardo, this nomenclature dates back to the mid-seventies, when it was used as the title of a symposium in the USA.<sup>7</sup> This meeting was attended by experts in different areas that studied humour from their own scientific point of view, and after having proved to be successful and interesting, it was decided to establish a yearly encounter. The area was boosted, especially by the second half of the eighties, with the publication of reputed works, such as Victor Raskin's *Semantic*

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<sup>6</sup> We include their nationalities purposely, see, for example, pp. 321-322 of our dissertation.

<sup>7</sup> Raskin (1985, p. xiv), refers to three international meetings as fundamental to discuss the topic, and places them in 1976, 1979 and 1982 in Cardiff, Los Angeles and Washington D.C. respectively. There seems to exist some discrepancy and quite probably they refer to different symposia, in any case the dates are similar.

*Mechanisms of Humor* (1985) or Walter Nash's *The Language of Humour* (1985, or the creation of a specialised journal called *Humor*, among other milestones.<sup>8</sup>

Under the wings of these symposia, the International Society of Humor Studies (ISHS) was subsequently created to further the promotion and dissemination of humour research.<sup>9</sup> The multidisciplinary nature of the field is clearly expressed in their online minutes:

The purpose of the Society shall be to promote, stimulate and encourage the interdisciplinary study of humor; to support and cooperate with local, national, and international organizations having similar purposes; to organize and arrange meetings; and to issue and encourage publications concerning the purpose of the society.<sup>10</sup>

In order to encompass the different approaches followed by members, the ISHS states: “Our members research humor’s many facets, including its role in business, entertainment, and health care as well as how humor varies according to culture, age, gender, purpose and context”. (<http://www.humorstudies.org/>, accessed 13<sup>th</sup> of September, 2022).

The current dissertation fully embraces this idea, which we have dared to compare to a sort of United Nations of humour (see Espinoza-Saavedra 2018, 2020, 2022b) where different member states—in this case, different study fields—gather to foster debate, where agreements or disagreements about humour can be expressed.

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<sup>8</sup> Ruiz Gurillo notes that the publication of the first *Humor* journal was 1987 (Ruiz Gurillo, 2012, p. 23)

<sup>9</sup> Ruiz Gurillo states, on the same page, that the ISHS annual meetings date back to 1989 (Ruiz Gurillo, 2012, p. 23).

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.humorstudies.org/ISHS%20Documents/ISHS%20Constitution%202012.pdf?>, accessed 13th of September, 2022

## Influence of a Pedagogical Approach Shipley Young: Dissertation Project Espinoza-Saavedra 2014a

### 3.4 Interpretación

TRANSLATION PERSPECTIVE (Autor Shipley Young a partir de Raskin y Attardo)	INTERPRETING PERSPECTIVE (Sugerencia de nuestro estudio)
TimeFrame Considerations (TFC)	Simultaneous TimeFrame
Social-class and Educational Considerations (SEC)	Background Information
Cultural Awareness Decisions (CAD)	Multiculturalism and Particular Features
Public Background Information (PBI)	Interpreting Appropriateness according to Interpreting Scenario
Language (LA)	Language, Accents and Speed of Allocation
Narrative Strategy (NS)	Gisting, Coping and Summarising Strategy
Target (TA)	Target-approach Interpreting
Situation (SI)	Fill-in Strategy
Logical Mechanism (LM)	Coherence and Cohesion
Script Opposition (SO)	Crack-joking Resourcefulness
Translation	Target Interpreting

-Presentación proyecto de Tesis-Espinoza

Fig. 12. From cartoon translation to simultaneous interpreting. A pedagogical proposal. Espinoza-Saavedra, 2014a.