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Monomodal and Multimodal Humour as a Challenge in Audiovisual Translation: On the Example of the Polish Translation of the French Film *Le Petit Nicolas* (Little Nicolas)

Abstract

This study will present a few examples of monomodal and multimodal humour in the translation of the film *Le Petit Nicolas* into Polish (*Mikołajek*). The objective of our research is to identify the selected difficulties in film translation that are caused by humour and the possible ways of solving them, taking into consideration that the audiovisual translation is situated on the border of interlingual and intersemiotic translation (Tomaszkiewicz 2006). Thus, we discuss the problem of the transfer of humour, keeping in mind its verbal but also non-verbal dimension (Kaindl 2004, Rębkowska 2016). As a result of our analysis, we can conclude that in audiovisual translation the visual layer has an impact, as it carries the information, even in the reception of the language-based humour. The analysis of three examples also shows that in their case the image reinforces the activation of humour; we discuss whether multimodality is applicable in language-based jokes, which are inherently monomodal.

Keywords: AVT, complex humour, language-based humour, subtitles, dubbing, transfer of humour, multimodal humour

1. Introduction

1.1. Audiovisual translation and multimodality

The most specific form of intersemiotic translation is *audiovisual translation* (in other words, screen translation) (see e.g. Tomaszkiewicz 2006: 99), which concerns modern audiovisual media such as cinema or television as well as historically older genres such as opera. The audiovisual translation is situated on the border of interlingual and intersemiotic translation (Tomaszkiewicz 2006: 66; 126). In audiovisual

translation, the information is transmitted to the viewers via three semantic codes: language, image, and sound. These three codes together form the message; in other words, we can say that audiovisual translation (AVT) is *multimodal* by its nature (Kaindl 2004: 173). Modes are "semiotic resources" (Kress, Leeuwen 2010: 79), so multimodality consists of using at least two different semiotic systems in a message (Maćkiewicz 2017: 34). The fact that audiovisual translation is multimodal by its nature is especially visible in subtitles; since the spoken language must be translated into written form, the modus is changed from sound to visual (text) form. Hartmut Stöckl (2011: 1) states that "multimodality is an exaggerated and inaccurate concept, referring to a relatively simple and daily phenomenon". Jolanta Maćkiewicz mentions also that the majority of communication is mixed communication; even the simplest form of interpersonal communication includes words, body language, facial expressions, gestures, etc., and so is multimodal. It is important to signal that all the semiotic codes cooperate with each other to create a global message (Maćkiewicz 2017: 35). What is interesting is that even if the phenomenon of multimodal communication has been known for a long time, the English term "multimodality" appeared relatively recently at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, not only in human sciences but also in social sciences. The interest in multimodality is linked to the emergence of new technologies and thus to new media (Maćkiewicz 2017: 33, Kawka 2016: 297).

However, even if the film is multimodal, only the verbal layer is visible in translation (Tomaszkiewicz 2006: 100), meaning that if the humour comes from the image or the sound layer of the movie, the translator has to make some adjustments to the verbal layer to explain the humour to the audience in the best way possible. For example, Christopher Taylor (2016: 225) says that different languages use different forms of discourse, and the audiovisual translator has to adapt the style, avoid the pitfalls associated with the preservation of the source text pattern, and take into account body language. Taylor specifies later as well:

> [...] it is the integration of all the semiotic modes in a multimodal text that creates meaning and, although that meaning is translated into words, it is the task of the audiovisual (AV) translator to find the wording in his/her language that best expresses that integration of semiotic forces. Identifying the various semiotic resources is an important step, but they cannot be listed or categorized in a meaningful way without cross reference to each other. (Taylor 2016: 224)

Patrick Zabalbeascoa (2005: 6–13) also points out that the multimodal translation requires the translator to have a lot of knowledge not only in the fields of language, culture, or pop culture, but also in the translation of what happens in the visual and sound layer of the text. It is extremely important to adapt the translation to the target audience, especially when interpreting humour issues. All of the above, together with technical limitations, make the humour in audiovisual translation a great challenge for the translator.

Yves Gambier adds another point of view when analysing the relation between Translation Studies (TS) and AVT. He remarks that screen texts are as multimodal as any other texts, because "no text is monomodal" (Gambier 2006: 6), and that they are closer to multimedia texts than to traditional texts. As for the subject of subtitles, they often cause the loss of meaning in audiovisual translation, as AVT cannot be restricted to only verbal elements. When the audience reads the subtitles, they pay "less attention to camera moves, viewing angles, editing, soundtrack, tone of voices, facial expressions, gestures, gazes, body movements, all of which are also meaningful" (Gambier 2006: 3). Because of changes in the way of viewing films (more and more in DVD form and on the Internet), the way of translating needs to be reviewed. Gambier drew attention to the paradox of research based on film dialogues and screen translation without any pictures (focused only on the linguistic side), even though AVT is multimodal

(Gambier 2006, 2008). Thus, we decided to add to this article screenshots of the selected scenes from the movie, emphasizing the multimodality of the humour in the analysed examples, the same way as presented by Taylor (2016: 229).

1.2. Humour: definitions, classifications

Humour, as a complex human ability, is discussed in many disciplines to understand it as a linguistic, cognitive or social phenomenon (Dore 2019: 1). The fascination around humour, of first philosophers and researchers from multiple fields such as psychology, philosophy, linguistics, literature and sociology, led to the creation of a research field called Humour Studies (Giczela-Pastwa, Gorszczyńska 2019: 1–2; Rębkowska 2016: 60–63).

Yet many academics still encounter difficulties in defining what humour is (Rębkowska 2016: 60–61). Monolingual dictionaries define humour as "the ability to find things funny, the way in which people see that some things are funny, or the quality of being funny"[1]. In definitions proposed by researchers of humour we can find reference to the humour as "[...] a feature of text (film work) that refers to a specific way of presenting reality that aims to amuse the viewer" (Rębkowska 2016: 115). That is the definition that we chose for the purpose of this paper.

Thanks to the growing interest for the translation of humour we can remark on the increased publications regarding AVT of humour (Dore 2019: 1). Humour Studies and Translations Studies are however two different fields of research. The researchers in Humour Studies can have insufficient knowledge about AVT issues, especially technical limitations that translators must deal with, and vice versa; the AVT researchers are not always knowledgeable regarding Humour Studies (Dore 2019: 1–2).

In this paper, we discuss the problem of the *transfer of humour*, keeping in mind its *verbal* (linguistic) but also *non-verbal* (transmitted via other channels, for example audio or visual) dimension (Kaindl 2004: 175, Rębkowska 2016: 103). The translatability and feasibility of transferring humour between languages and cultures is often questioned (Dore 2019: 2), and was analysed not only by contemporary researchers but also ancient philosophers (Rębkowska 2016: 102). The transfer of humour is often considered as the most difficult part of a translator's work, as the humour is not only related to language but also to the mentality and culture of the source text (Górnikiewicz 2008: 91). The variety of techniques used to achieve a humorous effect entails a whole range of translation difficulties (Rębkowska 2016: 101–102). Furthermore, although humour is a common phenomenon, its perception is unique; it cannot be objectively imposed on ridiculousness, because what is funny is a subjective feeling for every person (Rębkowska 2016: 6–7).

According to Kaindl (2004: 175), humour can be *monomodal* or *multimodal*. The monomodal humour is activated only by one semiotic code (e.g. the language), whereas the multimodal humour is created by more than one semiotic code that function together to create amusement. As stated by Qiaoyun Chen and Guiying Jiang (2008: 62), "in recent decades, the surging multimodal humour has paralleled the volume of traditional verbal humour, but the scale of relevant studies does not seem to match its development." Multimodal humour is most often visible in memes, cartoons, comics, TV shows, and movies, and includes verbal with visual, audio and visual, or all three elements (Chen, Jiang 2008: 62).

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1   Cambridge Dictionary: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/humour [date of access: 2.7.2021]. Similar definitions can be found, inter alia, in *The Oxford Dictionary, The Collins Dictionary* or *Larousse*.

From the translator's perspective, Zabalbeascoa (1996: 251–255) classifies jokes into: international jokes (or better binational jokes), national-culture-and-institutions jokes, national-sense-of-humour jokes, language-dependent jokes, visual jokes, and complex jokes. From the Zabalbeascoa division, in this paper we will be focusing on those two: language-dependent jokes and complex jokes.

2. Purpose of the study and the material

For the purpose of this paper we will analyse a few examples from the French family comedy movie *Le Petit Nicolas,* focusing on the transfer of humour. We will try to answer the question of what kind of humour is shown in the movie and how the translator handled it. The purpose of our research is to identify the selected difficulties in film translation that are caused by humour and possible ways of solving them, taking into consideration that the coexistence of the linguistic and visual layer is a key for the translator to preserve the humour in the comedy translation.

Le Petit Nicolas is a 2009 French film, directed by Laurent Tirard, and is an adaptation of the 1950's best-selling (in France and in Poland) children's books series under the same name. Written by René Goscinny and illustrated by Jean-Jacques Sempé, the series chronicles the adventures of Nicolas, a mischievous French schoolboy. When Nicolas overhears his parents talking about a new arrival, he knows it can only mean one thing: a baby! Convinced they are making plans to abandon him in the forest to make room for his sibling, he enlists the help of his fellow classmates to make sure he will survive[2].

In the same way as the book series, the movie is intended for a dual audience, and so is the humour. Barbara Wall (1991) distinguishes three main audience types; single audience, dual audience, and double audience. As explained by Dominic Cheetham "a text where the implied reader is simultaneously both child and adult can be said to have a dual audience; and a text where the implied reader shifts between child and adult can be said to have a double audience" (Cheetham 2013: 19). We chose to use the term "dual audience" for *Le Petit Nicolas*, because as we will see in the examples, the humour in the same exact scenes can be understood by both adults and children but of course it will not be understood the same way (Figure 1). The Polish version we chose for analysis was a subtitled one from an anonymous author (that we can call *amateur subtitling* after Dore 2019: 3), but we will also comment on the official dubbed version created by Katarzyna Wojsz (SDI Media Polska). The three scenes' translations presented in this paper are examples of amateur subtitling, unless stated otherwise. Basing analyses on an anonymous source of translation can be considered risky because the conclusions observed (concerning specific translation difficulties) may result from less linguistic competence than from the actual difficulty in translating certain types of humour. However, since amateur translations work in parallel with "professional", there is no reason to ignore them in research (Díaz Cintas, Muñoz Sánchez 2006; Szarkowska 2009: 20–22; Włuka 2019).

3. Examples of humour in *Le Petit Nicolas*

We will present three examples of humour in the translation of the film *Le Petit Nicolas* into Polish (*Mikołajek*). In this paper we chose three most interesting scenes, from the multimodal point of view,

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2   Source : http://www.filmeducation.org/pdf/resources/primary/Filmweek2012_PetitNicolas.pdf [date of access: 2.7.2021].

from the corpus of 77 examples that we analysed in our master's thesis (Mikicin 2014). The first example is purely linguistic and thus monomodal, and the second and the third one are complex jokes which combine language-dependent and visual humour and are thus multimodal. We chose these three examples to show the differences between two types of jokes and how they were translated.

3.1. Monomodal language-dependent joke

Language-dependent jokes are numerous in the movie, and they are also a challenge for the translator because of the close connection to the language. Zabalbeascoa highlights that "language-dependent

Figure 1. Multimodal transcription from *Le Petit Nicolas*, baby scene, [time stamp: 1:21:12 – 1:22:06] Legend: © 2009 Fidélité Productions / IMAV Editions

jokes depend on features of natural language for their effect, such as polysemy, homophony or zeugma" (Zabalbeascoa 1996: 253). In Figure 1 we show an example of this kind of joke.

The pun game in the first example consists of using lexemes in a different direction than usual. The lexeme takes a meaning that is not obvious; Nicholas, asked by an adult how he likes his newly born sister, replies that his sister is not yet "finished" (*terminée*). He uses vocabulary that refers to objects and not to humans, and then he compares the baby to a pickled pepper saying that she is "all red and wrinkled" (*toute rouge et toute fripée*). Later on, the comedy also comes out of the situation when Nicolas describes how the babies always have big eyes that "look nowhere" (*des gros yeux qui regardent nulle part*) and make bubbles with the mouth. For the adults, it's adorable, but the remarks of Nicolas make adults laugh, because he is not aware why what he says is so funny (dual audience example). At the end Nicolas comments that the little girl has "four butts" (*quatre fesses*), and the adults listening immediately understand the meaning of this sentence, as opposed to Nicolas, who as a young kid, doesn't know what girls look like (dual audience again). He goes on to say that if he had known his mother was bringing "that" back he would have asked for a dog. When Nicholas is calling the baby girl "this thing" (*ça, to coś*) as opposed to a baby boy, we can assume that he thought that all babies look like him - like a boy, and that in this sense, for him this little baby girl resembles an alien or something he doesn't understand, which makes adults in the movie laugh out loud (Fig. 1E).

In this example, the comic effect is well kept in the Polish translation. The translator uses expressions that reflect the language humour in the original version, such as: "let's wait till she is finished" (*poczekamy aż będzie dokończona*), "she is all red and wrinkled, she looks like a pickled pepper" (*Jest czerwona i pomarszczona! Wygląda jak marynowana papryka.*), "mom took this thing from the hospital" (*mama wzięła to coś ze szpitala*), and finally "she looks like she had two butts'" (*wygląda jakby miała dwie pupy*). In the Polish translation, the vocabulary chosen is also traditionally referring to objects and not to humans, and the pun game consists of using lexemes in a different direction than usual.

Even though the scene (Fig. 1) is based solely on the language, because we can understand the humour without referring to the image, the visual layer influences the overall comic effect of the scene; we see the surprised, shocked and, at the same time, amused faces of adults listening to Nicholas talking about his sister as if he was talking about an ugly subject, breaking the convention that requires to speak positively about young children and babies (Fig. 1E, F).

3.2. Multimodal complex joke

The complex joke combines any two or more of the above-mentioned types of jokes distinguished by Zabalbeascoa (1996: 254), but we will focus on the combination of language-dependent jokes and visual jokes. This kind of complex joke is multimodal because it combines two different semiotic systems (text and image). In Figure 2, we present an interesting example of a complex joke where the visual layer is helping produce the humorous effect.

In this scene of the movie, we see Nicholas' friend Clotaire and his bike. Clotaire very proudly presents his bike to his friends (Fig. 2A) saying that it is "un vélo de course" which translates to "racing bike". On the screen we see the bike with a big bag attached to the back (Fig. 2B). The other boys are looking at the bike quite confused (Fig. 2C), and one of the boys asks why the bag is there on the bike, to which Clotaire replies with confidence that he just said that the bike is for running errands/for shopping (Fig. 2D), in French: "c'est pour faire des courses". At the end of the scene the boys are looking at each

Figure 2. Multimodal transcription from *Le Petit Nicolas,* bike scene, [time stamp: 1:28 – 1:41]. Legend: © 2009 Fidélité Productions / IMAV Editions

other very confused (Fig. 2E). In the original dialogue we can see the homonyms *course* (*race*) / *courses* (*shopping*). In the Polish subtitled version, the pun was translated literally and the joke was not shown because in the Polish language the words *wyścig* (race) and *zakupy* (shopping) are not homonyms.

However, in the dubbed version (Table 1) more known to the Polish public, the joke is very clear. The first part of this short interaction between three boys was translated in the same way as in the subtitled version: "un vélo de course" into "racing bike" (*rower wyścigowy*), but the second part was modified (the translator used the addition) into "race during shopping" (*się ścigać na zakupach*), which would be in French "faire des courses pendant les courses". The homonyms here are very obvious. The translator in the dubbed version accurately transferred the visual information in this dialogue, so she was able to keep the joke. She used two words from the same family, as in the French version: the adjective *wyścigowy* (*racing*) and the verb ścigać *się* (*to race*).

Table 1. Transcription from *Le Petit Nicolas* (translated by Katarzyna Wojsz)

To jest <u>rower wyścigowy</u> [the camera shows the bike with a big bag attached at the back] To po co ma bagażnik? Żeby <u>się ścigać</u> na zakupach, no nie? [the camera shows the other boys looking at each other confused]	This is a racing bike So what is the luggage carrier for? To race during shopping you see?

In the next example (Fig. 3), the effect of the visual layer on the activation of humour is more visible than in the previous example; the information provided by the visual code is necessary to read the ambiguity of the words, thus it is an example of multimodal humour.

In this scene, Nicholas, with his classmates, searches in the yellow pages (Fig. 3A) for the number of a gangster to ask him to remove the baby (that is not yet born). As we mentioned in the introduction of this presentation, Nicholas thinks that he will have a baby brother, and from the story that his friend Joachim presented it is not good news. Nicholas assumes that when the baby boy arrives his parents will need to abandon him in the forest to make room for his sibling. The boys cannot find any "gangster" entries in the book so Geoffroy proposes "Leborgne" (Fig. 3B). In French, *le borgne* means "the one eyed", but at the same time it's a family name (in an earlier scene of the movie [at 46:35] the kids saw a newspaper with the photo of the "mobster" called Leborgne[3] who escaped from prison and Nicolas decided that he is the perfect person for the job). In the next scene, we see the "Garage Leborgne" sign (Fig. 3C), and actually, Nicholas is calling a mechanic and not a gangster as he thinks. The visual layer is very important in this scene because without the image we wouldn't know that Nicholas is talking to a mechanic and not to a gangster. On the screen we see the workshop, Francis Leborgne himself, and in the background a car being repaired on a lift (Fig. 3D).

The comedy in the dialogue with the mechanic - gangster is also possible because of the linguistic layer: the polysemy of the family of the words *enlever* and *enlèvement* (1. action to abduct a person, kidnap; 2. action to remove objects[4]). While Nicolas talks about taking the baby, the mechanic thinks it's about taking the car. The humour is also reinforced because of the use of formulas neutral enough to describe the baby and the car at the same time. The additional humour in this fragment worth mentioning is that Agnan (who "is ranked first in the class and is the teacher's pet and therefore nobody likes him [...]")[5] tells Nicholas to ask if the "gangster" can also take care of the substitute teacher (she was the only teacher who didn't like nerdy kids and put Agnan in the corner).

The translator of the Polish subbed version used a vocabulary that can refer to both cars and humans: *zabranie* and *wywiezienie* (retrieve and take out), and then *załatwić to na miejscu* (deal with it on the spot), so the humour was kept. They also added some elements which reinforced the humour: "there is no Gangster name" instead of "there is no gangster", as well as the verb *skasować* "to reap" in English,

3   *Massimo Carminati, "le Borgne" qui régnait sur la mafia de Rome.* (2014). Retrieved from https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/europe/massimo-carminati-le-borgne-qui-regnait-sur-la-mafia-de-rome_1629247.html [date of access: 2.7. 2021].

4   Source: https://dictionnaire.lerobert.com/definition/enlevement [date of access: 2.7.2021].

5   Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Petit_Nicolas [date of access: 2.7.2021].
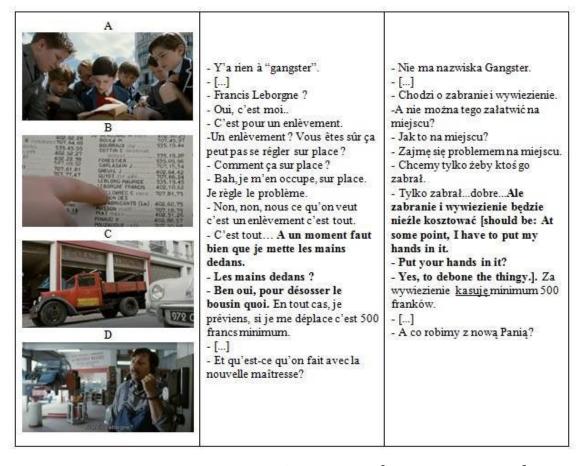
Figure 3. Multimodal transcription from *Le Petit Nicolas,* gangster scene [time stamp: 49:28 – 50:30]. Legend: © 2009 Fidélité Productions / IMAV Editions.

which is a colloquial word for making or receiving money[6]. However, the wordplay with "leborgne" was impossible to translate because we see the name on the screen in the yellow pages and then on the shop sign. Also, in this example, an important fragment in terms of humour was not translated in the Polish subtitled version (my English translation in bold). The reason for this lack of translation might be a difficulty in finding a corresponding expression in Polish for the wordplay with *désosser* (literally: debone[7]) or the technical issues related to subtitling (e.g. limitations of space on the screen; reading speed of an average viewer is slower than the perception of the sound) (Tomaszkiewicz 2008 : 112–116). However in the dubbed version by Katarzyna Wojsz this part was translated into "wybebeszyć" and the double meaning of *désosser* was kept (in monolingual dictionaries, both Polish and French, we can find the definitions for "wybebeszyć" and "désosser" that has the double meaning of the word, and it can be used for both a human: take out the bones from a dead person, and a car: disassemble, take out the content[8]).

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6   Source: https://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/;2520944 [date of access: 2.7.2021].

7   Source: https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/debone [date of access: 2.7.2021].

8   Source: https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/d%C3%A9sosser/24589, https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/wybebe-szy%C4%87.html [date of access: 2.7.2021].

So in conclusion the missing translation is most probably due to linguistic incompetence than to the actual difficulty in translating the humour in this specific scene. The Polish as well as French viewer is, anyway, able to understand this ambiguous dialogue only because of the images on the screen.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The ultimate goal of a comedy film is to make people laugh. As we showed in this paper, the Polish amateur translation of *Le Petit Nicolas* wasn't always as funny as the original version, but overall the jokes were kept, and the Polish viewer was able to enjoy the comedy. In case of problematic fragments, the amateur translator skipped a fragment of the text, or translated it but without preserving the humorous effect. Only in the example of language-dependent joke the amateur translator kept the original joke, using the vocabulary that refers to objects and not humans and applying lexemes in a different direction than usual. The professional translator however, solved the problems in a different way, by proposing a similarly funny joke, or by keeping the double meaning to maintain the joke so that the Polish viewer could have the same experience as the French viewer of the original version of the movie. As opposed, for example, to the movies *Les Visiteurs* or *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* which are heavily based on French or local culture (Rębkowska 2016), the humour in *Le Petit Nicolas* is rarely culture-dependent, but often multimodal. However, even in the case of language-based jokes (monomodal by definition, to which a visual layer is not needed to understand the humour), the image can be used to emphasize a humorous effect. In the case of multimodal complex jokes, the visual layer carries the information that helps to understand or reinforces the humour, or even, as we showed in our last example, the humour cannot be understood properly without the image. In this paper we tried to answer whether multimodality is relevant for language-based jokes, which are essentially linguistic (and for that reason inherently monomodal). The analysis shows indeed that also in their case the image adds or reinforces the activation of humour. However, the corpus being not very large, the final confirmation of the results would require a broader study.

We showed in this paper that, in audiovisual translation, the visual layer has an impact even in the reception of the mainly language-based humour. In this case, we can wonder whether they can be named "language" jokes or should be also classified as multimodal.

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