

# The perception of subtitled humor in Italy

RACHELE ANTONINI

## *Abstract*

*Despite the central place occupied by language transfer of audiovisual products, particularly in the European cinema and television sector, audience perception of both dubbing and subtitling is a largely neglected field of study and research. When, however, we start looking into the available research on the perception of translated humor and, more specifically, of the perception of humor as rendered into another language by subtitles, we realize that this is an even more neglected and unexplored field of study. This paper will attempt to address the effectiveness of subtitles in the appreciation and perception of humor, and, more specifically, will present an overview of the scant literature and research published on this subject.*

*Keywords: Audiovisual translation; subtitling; perception; appreciation; questionnaire; Father Ted.*

## **1. Subtitling humor**

It is common knowledge that the interlingual translation of instances of Verbally Expressed Humor (VEH) (Chiaro in this volume, Laurian and Nilsen 1989) is one of the most difficult challenges that a translator has to face in her work; when, in addition, the audiovisual translator has to comply with the limits imposed by the subtitling process then her work becomes an almost impossible task.

While the perception of humor has been widely studied and researched in psychology, the relationship between humor and translation, and the

rendering of verbally expressed humor has been largely neglected over the years, and only recently it has started to be addressed by scholars

The issue of the translation of humorous discourse has been largely ignored and it is likely that such neglect has been due to the sheer complexity involved in the production of adequate translations which were initially witty in intent. Hence, apart from the odd exception, . . . the translation of VEH has been generally swept beneath the carpet and ignored. (Chiaro forthcoming).

When, however, we start looking into the available research on the perception of translated humor and, more specifically, of the perception of humor as rendered into another language by subtitles, we realize that this is an even more neglected and unexplored field of study, “una parcela todavía prácticamente deserta y que perfila una presencia cada vez más notable en un área relevante en la sociedad moderna occidental como es la de las producciones audiovisuales” (Fuentes 2001: 82).

Considering the huge number of recipients of audiovisual products, why has audience perception of both dubbing and subtitling been so patently ignored?

## **2. Language transfer modes in the Italian audiovisual sector**

The European Union represents a huge audiovisual market fragmented into various linguistic regions, thus “linguistic transfer occupies a central place in the development of the audiovisual sector in Europe — where cultural and linguistic diversity go together” (Andersen 1995: 4).

According to the Eurobarometer survey (2001) on the language skills of European citizens and their attitudes towards language learning, only 30% of the respondents declared that they prefer to see foreign films and programs in the original language with subtitles. In Italy, which together with Austria, Spain, France and Germany, belongs to the block of European “dubbing” countries, more than 70% of the respondents expressed support for dubbing as their preferred form of audiovisual translation, while countries comprising the other block (Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Belgium, etc) confirmed their strong support for subtitled products.

The strong polarisation in the use of method between the “dubbing” and “subtitling” countries is of significance, as audience research has shown that television viewers are very strongly conditioned by the respective predominant methods

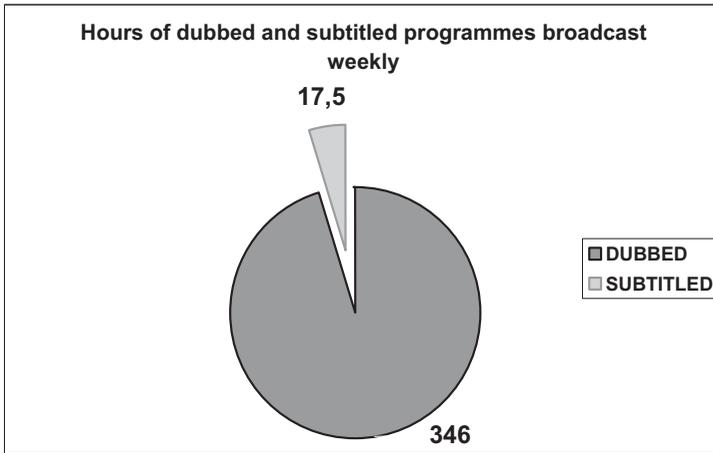


Figure 1. *Hours of dubbed and subtitled programmes broadcast weekly*<sup>1</sup>

and, therefore, attitudes to, as well as acceptance of, different or new methods take a long time to mature. (Luyken 1991: 38)

On Italian big screens feature films are shown in subtitled form only in art cinemas and film festivals. On the small screen the percentage of subtitled programs that are broadcast on the terrestrial State TV network RAI (usually in off-prime time slots, i.e. after midnight), on cable and satellite channels, represent only a tiny fraction of the total amount of foreign programs aired every week.

Nonetheless, over the past few years, the availability of subtitled programs in the Italian audiovisual market has been gradually but steadily shifting towards a multilingual approach and an increased use of subtitled programs (including non-fictional programs such as documentaries, reality shows, talk shows, etc.). This new trend was set off when satellite TVs and MTV started opting for this much cheaper form of language transfer, as “the decision to opt for subtitling is often influenced less by preference than by custom and financial considerations” (Dries 1995: 26).

The quality of the subtitles produced and available for both fictional and non-fictional programs is not very high due to the fact that there seems to be no adherence to shared conventions and standards with regard to the number of characters per line, sentence fragmentation, and the times of insertion and removal of the titles.

### 3. Formal and linguistic-textual norms in subtitling

The translation, and condensation into subtitles, of humor (be it puns, word play or punch lines) “is not as straightforward as the translation of written, totally verbal word play, or even of the interpretation of an orally produced pun” (Chiaro 2000: 32). On the screen, humor is conveyed both on a verbal and visual level and consequently it relies both on images and words to fulfil its main intent: make people laugh. This is particularly true when viewers watch a sitcom where funny remarks and situations are punctuated by canned laughter: they know that something funny is going on or has just been uttered and expect to share in the laughter.

It is necessary to be aware of the fact that laughter on screen will be needed to provoke a smile on the face of the reading viewer too. It is not always possible to translate a joke into a subtitle [but] too much canned laughter at a joke that is funny only for a home audience can produce a puzzled frown abroad. (Dries 1995: 35)

In order to fully understand the added constraint posed by subtitling to the translation into another language of humorous elements contained in audiovisual texts, it is important to outline the technical and linguistic norms that govern the creation of subtitles.

Subtitling<sup>2</sup> is one of the most used forms of audiovisual translation, and, according to one of the many definitions available in the relevant literature, it

can be defined as *the rendering in a different language of verbal messages in filmic media, in the shape of one or more lines of written text presented on the screen in sync with the original verbal message.* (Gottlieb 2001: 87)

In simpler words, this kind of audiovisual translation entails integrating on the screen, a text written in the target language (which according to the mode of projection of the translated version can be either printed on the foot of the film or, alternatively, projected either directly on the lower portion of the screen or on a black display placed below it), rendering, in condensed form, what can be heard (and read) on the screen.

The subtitler must transfer and condense in writing what can be heard (and seen) on the screen trying to adhere to the ideals of “invisibility” and “readability” in order not to make the viewer aware of the effort she is making in reading the subtitles while watching what is taking place on the screen

Paradójicamente, el logro de un buen traductor de subtítulos es pasar inadvertido. . . . Nuestro cometido es redactar un texto que sea tan fluido y armonioso con la imagen que el espectador no note el esfuerzo de lectura que está haciendo (Castro Roig 2001: 24)

Subtitling is a form of linguistic transfer characterized by the fact that only two lines of text can appear on the screen, containing, according, in general terms, to international standards and more specifically, to the subtitling system employed, a number of characters between 20 and 40 per line<sup>3</sup>. This means that a considerable amount (from forty and, in some cases, up to seventy-five percent) of the original text/dialogues must be reduced and condensed in order to give viewers the chance to read the titles and watch, and possibly enjoy, what goes on the screen.

When the aural text and the dialogue are replete with information such as personal names, cultural references, acronyms, etc, and because of the technical constraints mentioned above, the subtitler must reduce the translated text by carrying out three main operations: elimination, rendering and simplification. The first one involves depriving the target text (the subtitles) of all those elements that do not modify the sense of

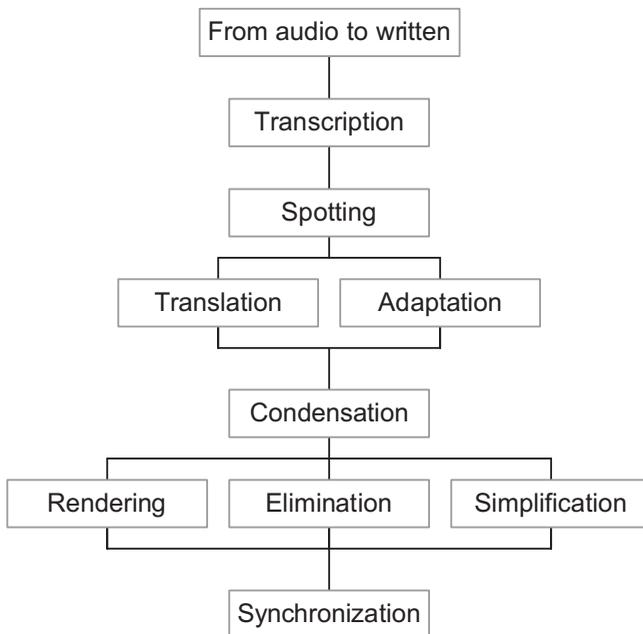


Figure 2. *The subtitler's work*

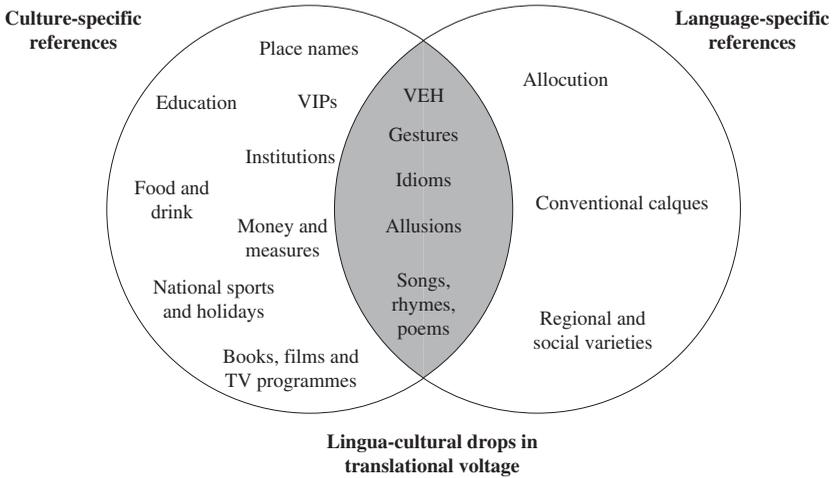


Figure 3. *Obstacles*

the message but its form (e.g., pleonasm, hesitations, repetitions, onomatopoeia, interjections, etc.) and of those elements that the viewers can gather from the visual information; the second implies reproducing or, in most cases depriving the target text, of features such as dialects, slang, humor, acronyms, taboo language, etc; and, finally, the third sees the translator operating on the translated text by simplifying and fragmenting the syntactical structure of the aural text.

“Translation for subtitles involves all of the linguistic problems which literary translators encounter together with the additional burden imposed by the constraints of subtitling” (Luyken et al. 1991: 55), that is condensing, and adapting an aural text into two lines of text, a process which on a more practical level involves, beside adhering to the spatial and temporal constraints imposed by the medium, overcoming a series of obstacles, namely the translation and rendering of culture-specific and language-specific elements and of all those elements pertaining to their area of superposition which we chose to define as culture-lingual short circuits.

#### 4. Current research on the perception of translated humor

The ample literature on the processes involved in the work of a screen translator is generally based on studies of a descriptive or prescriptive

nature based on a contrastive analysis of an audiovisual text in its original form and its subtitled version(s) in one or more languages. While uncovering and analyzing all the possible translating techniques and choices applied to screen translation and the point of view and the experience of the translator/subtitler, this approach tells us nothing at all about the end-users' perception of this form of screen translation and on its quality.

The existing, albeit scant, literature on the perception of subtitled humor consists of a few theoretical and practical studies “de corte descriptivo o prescriptivo, con limitada fundamentación o aplicación fuera del ámbito de estudio en cuestión” (Fuentes Luque 2001: 69).

One of the very few contributions to the emerging literature on the perception of translated humor in audiovisual texts focussing on dubbed and/or subtitled texts and taking the point of view of the viewers was carried out by Fuentes Luque (2001), who approached the perception of translated humor by comparing the reactions of two groups of Spanish-speaking and one group of English-speaking viewers (totaling 30 respondents, 10 per group) to, respectively, an episode of the Marx Brothers in its dubbed, subtitled and original versions.

The research hypotheses, that Spanish viewers would prefer dubbing over subtitling, that humor is lost in translation, that people of different nationalities laugh at different things, that a literal translation of word play or other allusions hinders understanding, were confirmed by the data collected with a quantitative and qualitative approach. One of the main conclusions he was able to draw was that the degree of positive appreciation of the translated audiovisual text was markedly lower in the group who has watched the subtitled version as “los juegos de palabras quedan sin resolver y la transferencia literaria de las referencias culturales hace que resulten incomprensibles al receptor, que queda desorientado, extrañado o, en el mayor de los casos, no recibe efecto humorístico alguno” (Fuentes Luque 2001: 78).

## **5. *Father Ted* goes to Italy: An empirical study on the perception of subtitled humor**

Antonini, Bucaria and Senzani (2003) used an episode from the sitcom *Father Ted*<sup>4</sup> with the aim of verifying and, subsequently, analyzing the appreciation<sup>5</sup> and the effectiveness of a subtitled audiovisual text submitted along with a questionnaire and a videotape, to a sample of Italian viewers.

This pilot study was based on the assumption that:

1. According to the socio-cultural influence of Catholicism in Italy, the humor directed at the Church and its representatives would trigger mixed reactions, i.e. amusement and/or annoyance;
2. The audience would be amused by the strong visual humor on which the sitcom relies, but would miss out on some puns and punch lines based mainly on the verbal element.

The questionnaire was designed on the basis of Ruch's (1992, 2001) 3WD test on humor appreciation, although the model underwent considerable adaptation in order to be able to rate and evaluate the respondents' (in)ability to deal with the inevitable cultural and linguistic incongruities of a subtitled filmic text. After viewing a whole episode the respondents (32 people) were asked to answer general question on subtitling (whether they were familiar with this kind of audiovisual translation, how many hours of subtitled programs they watched every week, etc) and to watch nine clips which exemplified verbal and visual humor, and humor aimed, more generically, at the church and religion. From a linguistic point of view, the quality of the subtitles is particularly poor exactly where the subtitler tried to, or avoided to make any attempt to translate puns, punch lines, and jokes. The subtitler of this particular episode put into practice one of the following options: she either opted for a word-for-word translation, or she omitted it from the subtitles.

The result was a series of mismatches between the canned laughter and the understanding and the appreciation of the program mediated by the Italian subtitles for a large part of the audience, who could only enjoy it with the aid of subtitles and for whom humor was totally lost in the transfer to subtitles.

After viewing each clip the respondents were asked to rate their appreciation of the clip on two 6-item scales aimed at assessing the funniness of and aversiveness to of each clip; then they were asked whether they had understood the joke, pun, the punch line, or the allusion contained in each clip and to briefly explain it.

The ratings attributed to each clip allowed the creation of two indexes: one summing up aversive responses to instances of VEH, visual humor and strong satire against the Catholic church contained in the nine clips and one aggregating the rates relating to the responses on the funniness of the clips.

The graph below demonstrates that while almost 90% of the respondents did not express any aversiveness whatsoever towards the clips and

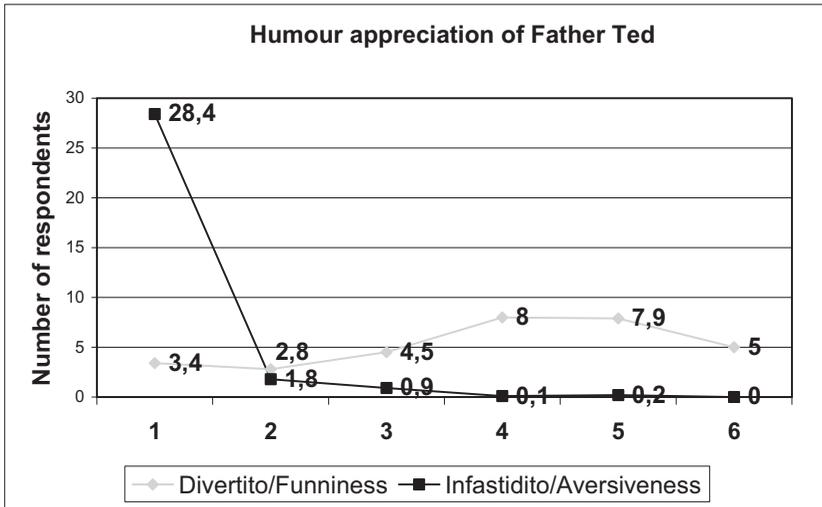


Figure 4. *How the sample perceived the humour in Father Ted*

the type of humor expressed, their ratings for funniness are higher and more evenly distributed along the whole scale.

The clips, as already mentioned, were divided into three groups according to the type of humor analyzed, and each group followed by different questions. After viewing and rating the first three clips containing examples of VEH, the respondents were invited to answer to a series of three questions asking them:

1. whether they had understood why there was canned laughter punctuating the punch line,
2. to explain in their own words what they thought the joke was about, and
3. how such understanding was achieved (through the aid of the subtitles, the original dialogue, the action on the screen, etc).

What clearly emerged from the analysis of the data is that although the majority of the respondents declared that they had understood, they actually hadn't.

## 6. Humor appreciation of VEH

The first three clips presented, respectively, two puns and an omission. In the first one Father Ted and Dougal are discussing why the holy stone of Clonrichert is considered holy.

(1)	Original version	Subtitled version
Dougal	“Wasn’t someone <i>cured</i> there?”	E’ mai stato guarito qualcuno li? (‘Has anybody ever been cured there?’)
Ted	No, someone was lured there	No, ma ci va un sacco di gente (‘No, but a lot of people visit the place.’)

Despite the options at her disposal (for instance *fregato/ingannato*, etc. which rhyme with “curato” and have a more colloquial connotation), the subtitler obviously did not even attempt to recreate the pun and, thus, maintain the same semantic opposition.

One of the direct consequences of this translating strategy is clearly illustrated by the following graph.

72% of the sample declared they had understood the pun, however their responses to the control question, asking them to explain it, showed that only 4% of them had really understood the pun. What is more interesting about this figure is that the most common explanation given to support their claim to understanding was based (by 7 respondents out

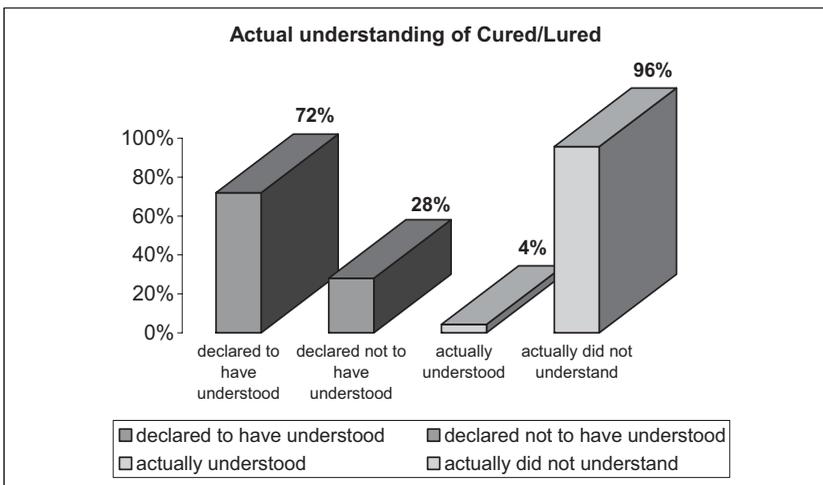


Figure 5. *Understanding of cured/lured*

of 22) on the similarity between “lured” and “Lourdes”, the renowned pilgrimage destination. Moreover, 59.4% of the respondents also stated that they had been helped in their understanding of the clip by the subtitles and the original dialogue.

In the second clip Father Ted, Dougal and the bishops discuss what is needed for the upgrading of the relic.

(2)	Original version	Italian subtitled version
Ted	Dougal, do you know if we have any incense? (after a long pause)	Dougal, sai se è rimasto un po' di incenso? (‘Dougal, is there any incense left?’)
Dougal	There was a spider in the bath last night	C’era un ragno nel bagno ieri sera . . . (‘There was a spider in the bath last night.’)
Ted	No Dougal, . . . incense, incense!	No Dougal, . . . incenso, incenso! (‘No Dougal, . . . incense, incense!’)

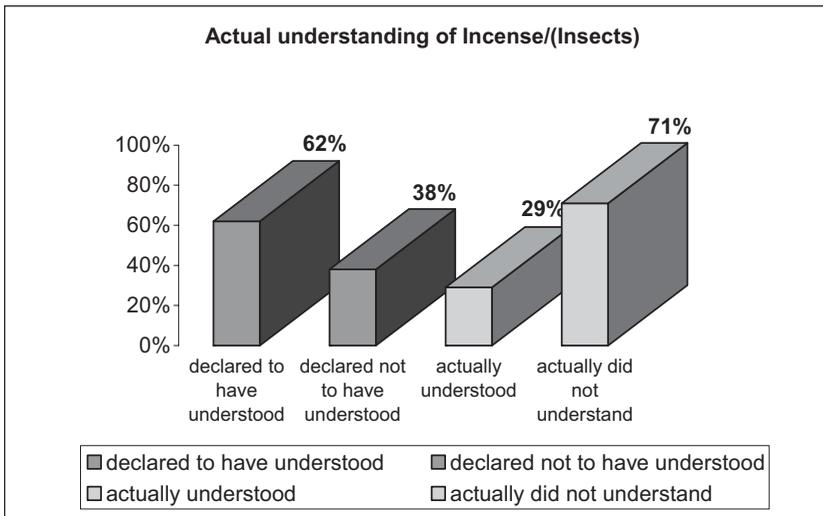


Figure 6. What did the sample really understand?

In this case we have a pun in which the second element must be inferred from Dougal's apparently nonsensical answer. The phonetic similarity between the English words "incense/insects" cannot be reproduced in the Italian translation.

As regards the reported understanding of the punch line, 62.5% of the respondents declared that they had understood it. In reality, only 29% of them actually did.

In this case the main interpretations given by respondents were justified by similarities between incense, sense, non-sense, or by connecting the pun to the second part of the scene, which was not part of the clip, where Dougal recalled a time when they used Windowlean instead of incense. Windowlean was translated into Italian with DDT, thus suggesting a connection with *ragno* (i.e., spider) and leading the audience to understanding the pun they could not make sense of with the subtitles. 43.7% of the respondents reported that they had relied on the subtitles and the dialogue in the original language to understand the content of the clip.

The third clip was chosen because of a significant omission in the translation.

In a previous scene we see Father Jack grabbing the stone with anger after having been left in the company of the verbally aggressive bishop Facks, and using it to sodomize him. In this clip we see the consequences of that action.

(3)	Original version	Italian subtitles
Ted	Ehm, ... Your Grace, ... The Holy Stone ... , will it still be a class-two relic when they remove it?	Vostra Grazia, ... la Pietra Sacra, ... rimarrà comunque una reliquia di seconda classe? (‘Your Grace, ... The Holy Stone, ... will it still be a class-two relic?’)

In the Italian subtitles the word “removed” was omitted. The levels of understanding of this particular example are as follows:

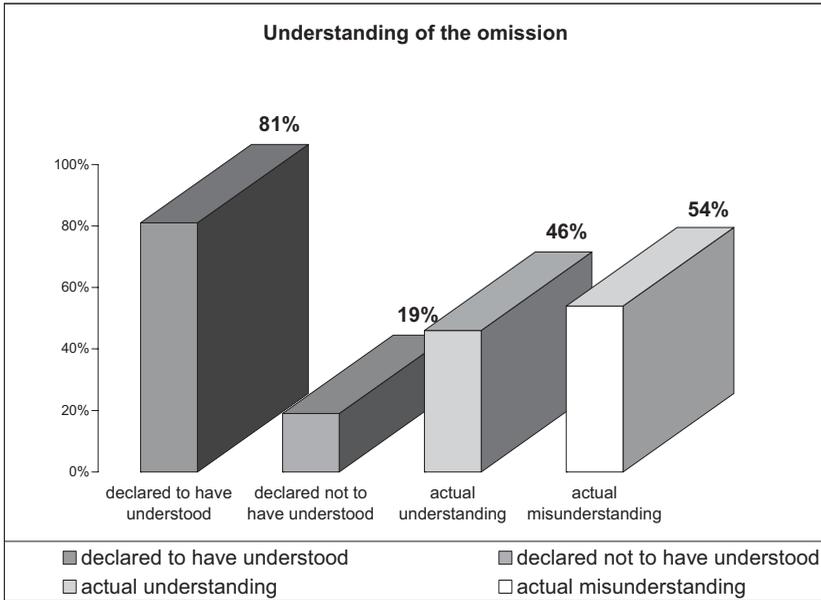


Figure 7. *Understanding of the omission*

In this case the subtitler’s choice to omit the most important part of the punch line could be seen as a sort of censorship. 81% of the sample stated that they had understood the reason for the canned laughter. In reality, according to the control question only 46% of the respondents had actually understood what had happened to the bishop (and the stone). The other 54% thought that the bishop had been simply beaten up by Father Jack. The observations during and discussion after the administration of the questionnaire and the fact that 72% of the sample reported they had based their understanding on the action and the subtitles, led us to hypothesize that the situation was too outrageous even to be conceived by an Italian Catholic audience.

**7. The perception of visual and verbal humor**

The second and third group of clips contained six instances of absurd and surreal verbal and visual humor directed at the Church, religion, and priesthood.

In this case the clips were not followed by questions asking the respondents to explain if and what they had understood the pun/punch

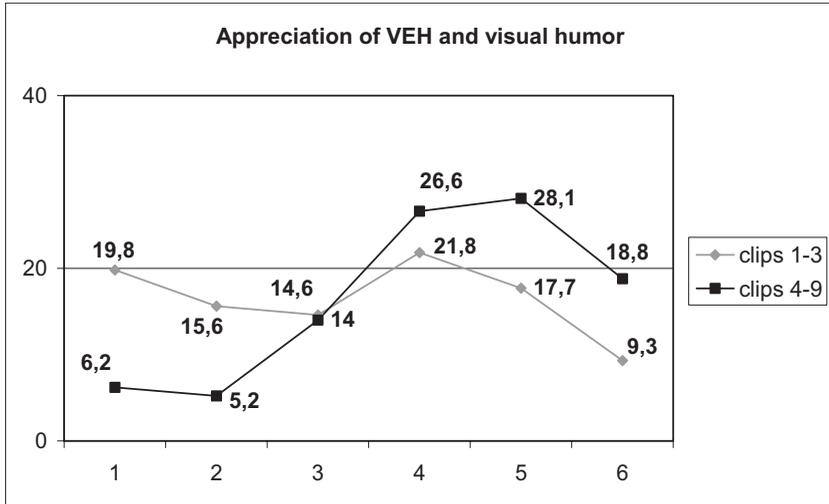


Figure 8. *Strictly VEH vs. verbally AND visually expressed humor*

line, but by more general questions asking the sample to describe the second group of clips with three adjectives, whether they thought it was an appropriate form of humor and why and whether they believed it would be possible to broadcast this sitcom on Italian national television channels.

A comparison between the funniness index of the first three clips and the other six, showed an interesting difference between the appreciation of the two specific types of humor—the lower the understanding of VEH the lower the level of funniness rated by the respondents.

## 8. Conclusions

In conclusion, our research hypothesis that the respondents would have difficulties in understanding and appreciating verbal humor as translated in the Italian subtitles was definitely proven true. The correlation between the low levels of funniness and the only partial understanding support our assumption. It is also interesting to notice that higher funniness was induced either by the understanding of the original joke or by a personal reinterpretation. In fact, almost half of the sample recreated the puns, thus overcoming the perplexity created by the presence of canned laughter in the original and the absence of a humorous element in the subtitles.

In consideration of the general results of the pilot study, we were able to draw conclusions on the processes underlying the audiences' perception of translated humor in subtitled products. In particular, it seems plausible to argue that the respondents were able to compensate for faults, omissions and inaccuracies in the translation by means of their own creativity. Specifically, when viewers are not able to understand the partially or non-translated verbal humor of subtitled filmic products and share in the canned laughter punctuating a joke, pun, etc., they will draw on what they hear but do not understand in the source language in order to find a reason to "join" the canned laughter they hear on the screen. Fuentes Luque (2001: 81) observed a similar behavior according to which in many observed cases the Spanish respondents laughed or smiled not because they had understood the word play or the allusion, but because they appreciated or found normal and typical the absurd or surreal humor of the Marx Brothers.

The quality of multimedia translation is a highly debated issue in relation to both dubbing and subtitling. In consideration of the general results of the pilot study Antonini, Bucaria and Senzani were able to assess that the faults, omissions and inaccuracies were compensated by the creativity of the respondents.

On the basis of this pilot study we think that the quality of multimedia translation might benefit from further studies in the perception of subtitled humor actively involving representatives of the target audience.

*University of Bologna*

## Notes

Correspondence address: [antonini@sslmit.unibo.it](mailto:antonini@sslmit.unibo.it)

1. This calculation excludes all other forms of audiovisual translations that are usually employed on TV, e.g. voice-over for documentaries and interviews, "dramatized" voice-over used for TV shopping and interviews, simultaneous subtitling used for CNN reports. On the other hand, it includes both fictional and non-fictional products.
2. For the purposes of this paper, the term subtitling refers only to the translation and rendering of a filmic product into another language, and does not include intralingual subtitling for the deaf and hearing-impaired people.
3. According to studies on eye-lid movements carried out in Belgium and on the basis of the average reading speed (approximately three words per second for a Spanish reader), viewers need about 6 seconds to read a 35-character subtitle. This estimate has led to the establishment of the so-called "6-second rule" (Luyken et al. 1991: 44–45; Lorenzo García 2001: 12).

4. Father Ted was and still is a very popular sitcom aired by Channel Four in the 1990's. It is an Anglo-Irish sitcom that portrays the life of three very bizarre priests, Father Ted, Father Dougal, and Father Jack, and their housekeeper, Mrs. Doyle, outcast on the remote Craggy Island. In each episode they are usually involved in very secular problems further complicated by Father Jack's constant alcoholic stupor, Father Dougal's stupidity, the housekeeper's obsession with making tea and having the three priests drink it, and Father Ted's attempts to bring the situation back to normal. Father Ted was first broadcast in Italy three years ago by a satellite channel, Canal Jimmy, in its original version with Italian subtitles.
5. Ruch (1992, 2001) proposes three types of humor: Incongruity Resolution Humor, Nonsense Humor, and Sexual Humor, which aim at drawing conclusions on the personality traits of the respondents. For a detailed list of publications on the 3WD humor test refer to the web site <http://www.uniduesseldorf.de/WWW/MathNat/Ruch/Research/Publications3WD.html>. Ruch's original terms "funny" and "aversive" were replaced by the Italian adjectives "divertente" and "fastidioso". The 3WD test had already been used in Italy by Forabosco and Ruch (1994) and the above mentioned terms translated respectively with the nouns 'divertimento' and "disturbo". "Fastidioso" was preferred over "disturbo" as the appropriateness of the latter was questioned by the authors themselves.

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