
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Translation of Dysphemisms and Cacophemisms in Film Subtitling: A Humorous Perspective

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| ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the use of humor in a cinematographic text, in which the use of foul language or dysphemisms and cacophemisms as humor mechanisms is becoming more and more common, as in the case of the comedy film *Norbit* (2007) directed by Brian Robbins and starring Eddie Murphy. The film uses crude humor, vulgar, transgressive and offensive language, which at the time of translation is complicated and presents challenges for the translator. The objective of this research is to identify the dysphemisms and cacophemisms of the original script in order to compare them with the translation in the subtitles to see if the sense and the illocutive force is preserved, omitted or changed. The methodology of this research is qualitative, using discourse analysis with a descriptive and comparative approach. Key fragments of the film where dysphemisms and cacophemisms are used were selected, as well as their translation into Spanish in the subtitling of these fragments. In addition, analysis sheets were used to compare the original and translated content in semantic and humorous terms to see what translation solutions are used for each situation where dysphemisms or cacophemisms appear. The results of this research show that the translation of dysphemisms and cacophemisms is softened by discursive mechanisms that soften the offensive effect of the original. However, it is concluded that the translator must make use of more creative and culturally adapted translation strategies to preserve the humorous effect on the target language viewers.

| KEYWORDS

Audiovisual translation, subtitling, humor, dysphemisms, cacophemisms.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

How is translation defined? There are various definitions of this concept, and some will be revisited here. For example, Nida and Taber (1974, p. 12) states that "Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style." Likewise, for Hurtado (2001, p. 41), translation is "an interpretative and communicative process consisting of the reformulation of a text using the means of another language, which takes place in a social context and with a specific purpose."

For Jiménez (2018, p. 1), "Translation is a fascinating discipline that serves as a link between languages and cultures. Thanks to it, throughout history, humanity has had access to the ideas and thoughts of intellectuals, scientist, philosophers, and writers from all over the world. Nowadays, with the advancement of telecommunications, information is created and distributed at the speed of light, allowing events occurring in a small corner of the world to reach the ears of the rest of the planet almost instantly."

Translation is an extremely important yet highly complex task. As House (2018, p. 9) points out, "Translation is a procedure where an original text, often called 'the source text', is replaced by another text in a different language, often called the 'the target text'." In other words, it requires decoding one language in order to convey the message of the source text into the target text, focusing not only on the grammatical level but also on the cultural dimension.

2. Culture and Cultural References in Audiovisual Translation

The concept of culture is crucial in the translation process; in other words, translators must have a firm grasp of this concept. As Guix and Wilkinson (1997, p. 297) state, "To the extent that translation is a technique, it is possible to make a certain kind of generalization; but to the extent that it is an art, only the intuition and linguistic sensitivity of the translator can decide whether the general solution is applicable to each specific case." Indeed, in every particular translation situation, reference is made to the specific elements that constitute culture, which is nothing more than meanings. According to Geertz, culture is:

"The concept of culture I propose, and whose utility the essays below attempt to demonstrate, is essentially a semiotic one. Believing with Max Weber that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance that himself has woven, culture is considered to be that web, and the analysis of culture must therefore to be, not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretative science in search of meaning. What I am looking for this explanation, interpreting social expressions that are enigmatic on the surface" (2003, p. 20).

This study analyzes the translation problems posed by dysphemisms and cacophemisms. These represent a real challenge for translators due to their cultural significance which, according to Sierra (2008), can cause problems when translating if the knowledge stored by the sender and receiver does not coincide, that is, if the referent is not known in the target culture. In this case, it will be useful to analyze what Molina (2006), Lotman (1998), and Mayoral (1999) suggest about referents, signs, and cultural symbols.

On the other hand, it has been found that there is an increasing need for translators, specifically in the subtitling modality, due to the high demand that exists today from audiences interested in this type of entertainment. According to Janecová (2012, pp. 17-18): "Living in an era of globalized mass media and communication a huge number of audiovisual products are being shared (...) a significant number of audiovisual products from abroad are being absorbed daily.." This demand and speed often result in negligence and the production of deficient translations, in other words, poor-quality translations, since, in some cases, the task is carried out not by professional translators but by fans of series, films or videogames, who are the ones producing the subtitles. Audiovisual translation presents a series of challenges that go beyond those posed by traditional written text. Elements such as images, sounds, and paraverbal language create difficulties for the translator when translating dialogues. Furthermore, in the case of comedy films, such as the one analyzed in this study, these are heavily loaded with cultural elements, which makes the translation process even more complex due to the cultural baggage present in the dialogues, references, and humorous context. This type of humor is based on wordplay, idioms, or local stereotypes, which further complicates the translator's task and requires the use of translation strategies to address these elements. If not adapted appropriately, the message may be lost and fail to convey its essence to the target audience.

For the purpose of this study, an analysis is carried out on the audiovisual translation of dysphemisms and cacophemisms in their subtitling in the dialogues of the comedy film *Norbit*

The cultural problem is present in both cultures, that of the source text and that of the target text. However, according with Lotman (1998), each culture possesses a cultural memory that enables the identification of referents. According to Molina (2006), and taking Nord (1994) as a reference, she creates her own definition of cultural referent: "A verbal or paraverbal element that has a specific cultural meaning in one culture and that, when it comes into contact with another culture through translation, can cause a cultural problem between the source and target texts" (Molina, 2006, p. 79).

Some examples of cultural references include offensive words that do not allow a direct translation, such wordplay, jokes, and double entendre, as well as place names, proper names, and historical events. Consequently, translators must make accurate decisions when translating these components. However, in the face of this challenge, it is appropriate to draw on what cultural theorists contribute. Lotman (1998) states that every communicative system requires the existence of a collective common memory. "Without a common memory, it is impossible to have a common language" (Lotman, 1998, p. 110).

Keeping the cultural problem in mind will help us remain judicious when it comes to making decisions regarding translation methodologies, since not all strategies work in the same way across different contexts. This awareness allows us to choose procedures that not only transfer words from one language to another, but also manage to effectively convey the original communicative intentions, respecting both the form and the content of the message; and in this case, it will make the translation of humor, wordplay, and foul language much more practical and effective.

This research presents a translation analysis of cultural references; in this case, dysphemisms and cacophemisms in the subtitling of the film *Norbit*. These elements are identified along with the problems they entail. Likewise, the translation strategies used to address them are described.

According to Chaume and Jiménez (2004), the study of audiovisual translation is important not only because it continues to gain ground in the professional field, which has increased its popularity, but also because it has a didactic dimension that could be useful for translation teachers (Chaume & Jiménez, 2004).

The demand for audiovisual translation is constantly increasing due to the speed at which products are distributed globally. The need for subtitling in order to reach audiences worldwide has led to translations being produced under great urgency.

Unfortunately, in most of these cases, this urgency affects the quality of the outcome, as sometimes it is enough to go to the cinema to notice semantic difficulties or mismatches between the images and the subtitles that accompany them. This highlights

the importance of improving audiovisual translation processes and standards to ensure a better experience when enjoying the content.

Díaz Cintas (2007, p. 8) states that “subtitling may be defined as a translation practice that consists of presenting a written text (...) that endeavours to recount the original dialogue of the speakers, [...]”. Regarding textual constraints, it is undeniable that, when moving from one medium to another, subtitles may lose content, but they cannot lose meaning. “Because of the limited space generally available for subtitles, certain elements of the soundtrack have to be omitted, and the obvious solution is to do away with redundant elements of speech.” (Georgakopoulou, 2003, cited in Díaz Cintas & Anderman, 2009, p. 25).

It is important to recall that the central concept of this study is cultural references, understood as those elements that reveal a cultural gap when attempting to translate them. These range from places with a unique meaning, their traditions and customs, to representative elements of a given culture. Therefore, there is no real equivalent that can fully convey their meaning or essence. Mayoral (1997) argues that cultural references are discourse elements that create problems of meaning because they refer to particularities of the source culture (SC). According to Agost (1999, p. 99), they are phrases “that differentiate one society from another, giving each culture has its own idiosyncrasy.”

Furthermore, Agost (1999) explains that cultural elements include the most characteristic landmarks of a city or country, situations related to history and customs, food, people, currency, and measurement units.

On the other hand, Mayoral (1999), citing his work *Estrategias comunicativas en la traducción intercultural*, claims that cultural references are “proper names, geographical names, institutional names, units of measurement, currencies, historical elements, folklore, among others” (Mayoral, 1997, p. 144).

2.1 Dysphemisms and Cacophemisms as Cultural References

Dysphemisms and cacophemisms are part of cultural references. The use of foul language in films or humorous text contributes to increase the level of humor, which at times makes audiovisual products such as movies, series, or documentaries successful and appealing to a specific audience. The presence of expressions considered inappropriate in this type of production is not precisely intended to shock, but rather its main purpose is to establish a direct, honest, and unfiltered connection with the audience.

This type of humor, based on what is improper, vulgar, or unexpected, can be attractive to viewers precisely because it breaks away from traditional discourse. For example, in Mexico, television programs such as *La hora Pico*, *Vecinos*, and *La Familia P.Luche*, among others, have large audiences and frequently employ foul language.

We can define foul language as “all those negative connotations associated with attitudes that are culturally regarded as offensive, impolite, or inappropriate” (Martínez, 2009, p. 2, citing Leach, 1994). Dysphemisms, cacophemisms, curses, swearwords, and double entendres are examples of foul language.

Dysphemism is defined as “the process which, in a specific discursive context, reinforces the most offensive or unacceptable nuances established between the taboo and its referent, through a speech act, which, as a dysphemistic substitute, reveals the speaker’s intention to offend or disturb the hearer” (Crespo, 2005, p. 136). This rhetorical device is widely used in films and comedy shows as a resource to provoke laughter. “What we call dysphemism could also be considered cacophemism” (Rodríguez & Estrada, 1999, p. 12). In this way, cacophemism is equivalent to dysphemism.

It is important to emphasize that words, in themselves, are neither good nor bad; rather, their use is considered appropriate depending on the communicative situation, the intention behind them, the relationship between the speakers, among other factors. Thus, an expression may be perfectly acceptable in an informal setting or among people who share a close bond, yet inappropriate or even offensive in formal situations or before a different audience. In this sense, language must be analyzed from another perspective, understanding that its meaning and connotation are strongly influenced by cultural, social, and situational factors.

2.2 Humor and Audiovisual Translation

Another key concept is humor, which can be understood as a combination of emotions that arise from absurd, illogical, or unexpected situations and that generate a shared reaction among those who experience them. This can be considered a certain type of universal humor capable of crossing both cultural and linguistic barriers. However, the intended comic effect is challenged when elements with a strong cultural load are involved. When this occurs, achieving the same humorous effect in the target language becomes a complex task, since it is not only about translating words, but also about adapting meaning, reference, and nuances that may or may not have an impact in the target culture.

Humour is considered an “[...] emotional response of hilarity within a social context, triggered by the perception of playful incongruity, which is expressed through smiling and laughter” (Martin, 2008, p. 35). Culture is understood as a system and a structured model for interpreting reality. Posner defines cultures as systems of signs: “Cultures are systems of signs” (Posner, 1991, p. 39). “A system of cultural signs includes individual and collective users of signs, who produce text in which messages are formulated through certain conventional codes that allow users to solve problems in their daily lives” (ibid, pp. 53-54).

Humor and culture remain deeply interconnected, as humor functions as a figurative representation of the values, beliefs, and ways of thinking of a given community. In other words, humor is not universal, but is constructed from shared cultural

references, linguistic games, and situations that can only be understood within a specific sociocultural context. Humor operates as a code that elicits emotions and creates bonds among people. The translation of humor must aim to produce a similar comic effect to that of the original, so that the target audience can laugh, feel moved, or react in the same way as those who consumed the text in its source language. As both authors point out, the true challenge lies in recreating in the translated text the same humorous impact as in the original. For this reason, the film –understood as an audiovisual text– must be considered as Brotons (2017, p. 310) notes when citing Fuentes Luque (2000, p. 61): “The unit of translation is the complete audiovisual text, and if it belongs to the humorous genre, it must be regarded as a whole in order to carry out the analysis and produce the version in the target language.”

Audiovisual translation needs to establish a precise and coherent connection between the different elements that constitute it, such as images, sound, and speech. Unlike written translation, where the text is the main component, in the audiovisual field everything is interconnected. This is why the translator must not only understand the linguistic content but also interpret how it integrates with the audiovisual and sound aspects. Therefore, when an expression appears alongside an image and also represents a cultural reference, it becomes essential to apply diverse translational skills to achieve an appropriate solution that conveys its meaning clearly and effectively.

According to Low (2011, p. 60), “Translatability does not require that the TT uses the same linguistic structures, but merely that it delivers, broadly speaking, the same joke.” Venuti (1995) argues that good translation is one that can be perceived fluently without revealing stylistic or linguistic peculiarities of the source language, so that it appears transparent and conveys the original text intention and essential message (Venuti, 1995). Both Low (2011) and Venuti (2004) suggest that, before considering which translational procedure would be appropriate for humor, it is a priority to preserve the same effect that the humorous element produced in the original audience.

3. Methodology

This research follows a qualitative methodology, “qualitative study takes advantage of the usual ways of interpreting things” (Stake, 1999, p. 67). When attempting to understand the object of study, an interpretation is carried out, not in highly rigorous manner, which implies that the ways of analyzing the collected data are not limited to a strict framework, but rather one that could be understood as subjective, although with steps that more people can follow and, therefore, have reliability.

In qualitative Methodology, “researchers use two strategies to reach the meanings of cases: direct interpretation of individual instances and the addition of instances until something can be said about them as a collection or class” (Strake, 1999, p. 69). In other words, the researcher approaches, observes the phenomenon, identifies repetitive situations, and then proceeds to categorize or group them.

To achieve a categorization of the analysis, it is necessary to repeatedly watch the film, in addition to thoroughly reviewing the subtitling and relating it to the images, the audio, and the paraverbal elements. In audiovisual translation, challenges arise that go beyond the translational process itself, such as those just mentioned. Likewise, in comedy films such as those addressed in this study, there are countless cultural elements, which makes the translator’s task even more complex.

“For a broader interpretation, a portion of the observations that are most relevant to this research is selected. It is possible that, at the beginning, these data may be classified during the observation itself, or the researcher may classify notes or a transcript; perhaps only direct interpretation will be used” (Stake, 1999, p. 72).

Stake (1999) also states that categories are established prior to data collection; however, when one is just beginning the research, direct observation and the categorization of data pose a significant challenge, since the task is not about accumulating data but rather about selecting the most appropriate ones for the research.

Generalization can be achieved within this research paradigm. Stake (1999) refers to such generalizations as naturalistic and states: “Naturalistic generalizations are conclusions arrived at through personal involvement in life affairs, or by experiencing so well constructed a vicarious experience that the person feels as if it happened to themselves” (Strake, 1999, p. 78). These generalizations are achieved through the identification that viewers may feel as their own when facing the situations presented in the film. The situations within the plot appear as everyday experiences, belonging to the way of life of African American society within the cultural mosaic that represents the United States of America. Thus, it may be easy for the audience to feel identified with the characters and situations in the plot, which is seasoned with a touch of dark humor relates to racism, gender violence, and mockery of personal flaws.

Patton (2014) states that the ideal sample is to select cases until they become redundant and no new information emerges. In this research, detailed analysis of each qualitative datum, as described by Sampieri, R. H. (2018), is constantly carried out; that is, the film is observed countless times, as well as the subtitling, to the point of detecting every detail contained in them. For this study, the most representative cases are taken in order to account for the translational complexity and its possible solutions. This research is an exploratory study, whose main focus is discourse analysis applied to the specific case of the comedy film *Norbit*. In this context, the film is conceived not only as a cinematographic work but also as a text in itself, with a narrative that can be analyzed from a linguistic and semiotic perspective. The text is, in the same way, cinematographic, just as the subtitles or the subtitling are, and it is from this standpoint that the study will be conducted.

For this reason, this audiovisual text must be approached, according to Brotons (2017, p. 310) citing Fuentes Luque (2000, p. 61), who states that “the translation unit is considered to be the whole audiovisual text. In addition, if the text is humorous, it should be addressed as a whole in order for the translator to be able to carry out the analysis and to create the new version in the target language.”

Furthermore, According to Eco (1992), cited in Vilches (1997), the text as a site of communicative production and interpretation is a “semantic-pragmatic machine that requires updating in an interpretive process, whose rules of generation coincide with the very rules of interpretation” (Vilches, 1997, p. 32).

As Vilches (1997, p. 32) rightly states. “From this unified perspective of the concept of text, novels, television programs, journalistic information, photographs, and paintings can all be studied as texts” (Lotman, 1979; Calabrese, 1980).

Consequently, a contrastive analysis was used as a technique. The instruments for textual analysis are comparative charts; that is, for data collection a comparative matrix is applied, serving as a tool for organizing the data to be analyzed. According to Becerra (2012, p. 28), matrices are a “way of obtaining and recording data and information through the development of a module or matrices that allow the researcher to gather the product of inquiry from the investigated sources” On the other hand, Van Dijk (1999) explains:

“Critical discourse analysis is a type of analytical research on discourse that primarily studies the way which social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and occasionally resisted through text and speech in the social and political context. Critical discourse analysis, with such a particular research orientation, explicitly takes a stance, and aims to contribute effectively to the resistance against social inequality” (Van Dijk, 1999, p. 23).

4. Sample

To select the sample, fragments of the film were taken. Instances of dysphemisms and cacophemisms were identified. Several examples were found, but only the most representative ones were chosen.

The methodological process included watching the film to select the sample, transcribing the original text and its corresponding subtitles, and then identifying, defining, classifying, and describing vulgar language, as shown below:

1. Viewing of the film.
2. Transcription of ST (Source Text) and TT (Target Text).
3. Identification of the use of foul language in both texts.
4. Classification and definition of the foul expressions found.
5. Description of foul language as a humorous device.

For this purpose, it is essential to define the key concepts that are analyzed and to which the qualitative methodology is applied, specifically through pragmatic discourse analysis.

The following example shows excerpts from the film Norbit, analyzed from a discourse perspective.

Table 1

Analysis from a discourse perspective

English	Spanish
“Die, you son-of-a! ”	00:02:39,712 → 00:02:40,862 ¡Una ballena!
“Bingo! Right in the blow hole! ”	00:02:44,333 → 00:02:45,532 ¡Te llegó la hora!
“Norbit, where are you going?”	00:02:47,986 → 00:02:48,947
“Why you run off like little bitch? ”	¡Bingo!
	00:02:54,400 → 00:02:56,893 ¿Norbit, a dónde vas? Corres como una niña.

There is an abundance of cacophemisms, a concept that is complemented here with the following definition: “the use of trivial, obscene, vulgar words; which are primary signs, inherited words, frequently used, polysemous, and with very extensive lexical families, which are taboos per se” (Seiciuc, 2010, p. 32). The solution to this lies in another resource called euphemism, defined as “a mitigation strategy”, which is “a complex and seemingly contradictory mechanism, as I distance myself from the message by softening it, avoiding part of what I say or do, in order to approach or not move too far away from the other, thus preventing tensions, misunderstandings, threats to one’s own image and, above all, to the image of others. It is both a strategy of linguistic distancing and a strategy of social closeness” (Briz, 2005, p. 228).

Table 2

Analysis from a discourse perspective

Inglés	Español
"Here you go, Norbit. Saved the best piece for you".	00:06:44,609→00:06:46,345 – Aquí tienes, Norbit. Te guardé lo mejor.
"What's that?"	00:06:47,199→00:06:49,659 – ¿Qué es? – Trasero de pavo.
"Turkey ass. Eat up, sucker".	00:06:50,269→00:06:51,302 Que te aproveche.
	00:06:53,580→00:06:54,541 <i>Bon appétit.</i>

On the other hand, dysphemisms are defined as "deliberate use of violent language, without researching obscenity" (Seiciuc, 2010, p. 32). Examples include: junk food, fast food; idiot box, television; quack, doctor.

Here, once again, euphemisms are used to mitigate fool language while preserving the humorous tone. Regarding the pejorative and racist phrase from the original script, "talks and sounds like a white boy", it simply disappears, and it is omitted in the subtitles. It vanishes because, in our context, it does not carry the same racist connotation as it does in North American culture. However, an equivalent could have been sought, since in our cultural context something like "you sound like a *rancherito*" (little cowboy) or "you sound *naco*" (low-class boy) would apply.

Table 3

Analysis from a discourse perspective

Inglés	Español
"I'm expecting some important calls today, Norbit,	00:07:55,438→00:07:57,804 – Hoy espero una llamada importante, Norbit.
so when you answer the phone, try and sound white".	00:07:58,563→00:08:00,421 Así que estate atento al teléfono.

The example above illustrates how translation is approached in subtitling, as well as the methodology applied in the translation analysis.

Table 4

Analysis from a discourse perspective

Inglés	Español
"Little Miss Skinny Bitch gonna be there?"	00:46:07,921 → 00:46:09,462 – ¿La pelandruja flaca va a estar ahí?
"You mean Miss Ling Ling?"	00:46:11,169→00:46:12,318 – ¿Te refieres a la Srta. Ling Ling?
"You know damn well I ain't talking about no Miss Ling Ling". "I'm talking about Miss Thing Thing from that picnic".	00:46:12,937 → 00:46:13,952 – Sabes perfectamente bien

00:46:15,443→00:46:16,950

Me refiero a la **Srta. Culín**, del picnic.

In the first example, a euphemism was applied by omitting the word *bitch* and replacing it with *pelandruja*, a creative adaptation that preserves the humorous tone. Later, omission was used; whenever content is omitted, an equivalent or adapted expression can be sought, requiring creativity. In the third example, the cacophemism was preserved with an excellent adaptation.

Table 5*Analysis from a discourse perspective*

Inglés	Español
"Kill the bitch ".	01:12:11,487 → 01:12:12,449 –¡Mata a esa perra !
"Excuse me? What did you say?"	01:12:13,753 → 01:12:15,813 –¿ Qué dijiste? Me oíste.

In this table, a literal translation is used, preserving the offensive word. In Mexican culture, the term *perra* carries strong offensive connotations; however, in a comedic context, it amplifies the humorous effect.

Table 6*Analysis from a discourse perspective*

Inglés	Español
"Those aren't dimples . Those are potholes in her ass".	00:09:32,623→00:09:34,669 – Mira ese trasero gordo.

Here, a euphemism is applied: the original emphasizes the cellulite on the buttocks, while the translation uses big butt, which is also humorous in our culture but less derogatory.

5. Conclusion

This brief study concludes that when translating dysphemisms and cacophemisms, attenuation strategies are frequently employed, such as the use of euphemisms or even other dysphemisms. In certain cases, fool terms are omitted or replaced with equivalent expressions, which is considered a more appropriate approach.

The most notable finding is that, despite these adaptations, which in some cases may involve significant changes to the original text, the humorous tone is preserved and continues to function for the audience, which is the primary goal of this comedy film. Therefore, it can be affirmed that these translation decisions and subtitling techniques, far from diminishing the comedic effect of the work, actually enhance its ability to connect with the audience despite linguistic and cultural differences.

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