

Recibido / Received: 25/06/2016  
Aceptado / Accepted: 27/10/2016

Para enlazar con este artículo / To link to this article:  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.6035/MonTI.2017.9.7>

Para citar este artículo / To cite this article:

ROLLO, Alessandra. (2017) "Linguistic and ideological-cultural aspects in the translation of humour. A case study of the comic series, *Agrippine*." In: Martínez Sierra, Juan José & Patrick Zabalbeascoa Terran (eds.) 2017. *The Translation of Humour / La traducción del humor. MonTI 9trans*, pp. 1-37.

## LINGUISTIC AND IDEOLOGICAL-CULTURAL ASPECTS IN THE TRANSLATION OF HUMOUR. A CASE STUDY OF THE COMIC SERIES, *AGRIPPINE*

Alessandra Rollo

alessandra.rollo@unisalento.it  
University of Salento (Lecce, Italy)

### Abstract

Positioned at an intersection between linguistic manipulation and the sociocultural roots of a community, humour is often considered untranslatable – an element of interlinguistic and intercultural inequivalence. This paper looks especially at the translation of humour in comics, which consists of composite, multisemiotic texts where both verbal and non-verbal components blend into a single, unified language. In our analysis, we will examine a varied selection of examples from Claire Bretécher's comic series, *Agrippine*, the humour of which is based on the use of partly genuine, partly invented slang and situations grounded in specific sociocultural and ideological contexts. We will investigate some of the main issues associated with the presence of humour (whether verbal, linguo-cultural and/or visual), as well as some strategies that can be adopted when translating from French into Italian, in order to maintain the humorous effects of the source text.

**Keywords:** Humour. Comics. Translation strategies. Slang. Cultural and ideological connotations.



## 1. Introduction

An essential element in the lives of interlocutors of all civilizations, humour<sup>1</sup> is a universal phenomenon that permeates every type of communicative act in varying degrees, configuring itself as a mode of interaction used commonly in both familiar and formal situations (Norrick & Chiaro 2009). It is a complex cognitive process with a genetically-rooted neurological underpinning which frequently, though not necessarily, finds its counterpart in laughter (Polimeni & Reiss 2006: 347).

Over the years, humour has been the subject of study in a number of disciplines such as literature, rhetoric, philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology and social psychology, so the literature on this topic is very rich. (In addition to the works that will be cited in this article, one could mention, among others: Apte 1985; Bremmer & Roodenburg 1997; Chapman & Foot 1996; Escarpit 1960; Freud 1988; Kierkegaard 1977; Martin 2007; Média 2009; Ruch 1998; and Vivero García 2013).

Within translatology, which is of closer interest to us here, the translation of humour – an interdisciplinary field that has not yet been fully explored – can be one of the major stumbling blocks for translators in whatever the channel of communication used, whether it be written, oral or audiovisual. Based on linguistic features (word play, word mutations, changes of meaning, idiolect), paralinguistic features (tone of voice, articulation) or non-linguistic features (gestures, mime), as well as sociocultural or pragmatic factors (moral values, ideologies, implicit references, allusions to religious, political or social traditions specific to each cultural context), humour is created in a multitude of ways and can take many different forms (irony, parody, caricature, hyperbole,

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1. Borrowed from the English *humour*, itself deriving from the French *humeur* (from the Latin *humor*, 'liquid') which in medieval physiology referred to bodily fluids (blood, lymph and bile), which were supposed to determine human behaviour depending on their proportions. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, starting from the sense of 'tendency, inclination, character trait', the word also took on the meaning of 'playful temperament, cheerfulness, ability to see or bring out the comedy of things'. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in a kind of terminological to-and-fro, the French language adopted the English word *humour* with its meaning of a frame of mind that is full of irony, simultaneously both fun and serious.

joke, metaphor), having primarily a playful function but also a social function, mediation or disengagement, if required (Attardo 1994: 320 et seq.).

It follows that translating humour and reproducing the same humoristic effect (or at least some kind of equivalent) for the target audience becomes all the more difficult as the distance between the two languages or cultures becomes wider. Translation issues related to humour variables such as degree of intentionality, audience, tone and function of the humour must be considered (Zabalbeascoa 2014: 26-28). Nevertheless, the challenge is not insurmountable. Translating humour can be a successful operation if the translator has a good dose of creativity and boldness along with a solid cultural background and thorough knowledge of the languages involved.

In this article, our objective is to reflect on the problems of translating humour, taking account of its linguistic and ideological-cultural components. We will also look at different solutions translators can adopt, especially in composite texts such as comic strips, where text and images interlace and converge in a synergistic fashion to make a semiotic whole. Over the years, and even more so in the modern multimodal context, comics are a genre that is particularly appreciated by the young and old alike. With a strong impact on collective sensitivities, they are a valuable vehicle of art, mass culture and ideologies “as an ethnological and sociological document” (Mouchart 2009: 146). Like other mass communication media, they are sometimes demonized and sometimes praised (Eco 1964).

After a general theoretical overview, our analysis will focus more specifically on three albums, and their Italian versions, of a well-known comic series in France: *Agrippine*, by Claire Bretécher. A major figure in the comic book world since the 1970s, whose language is full of humour and energy, the artist portrays the states of mind of a young woman representative of her time. Indeed, Loiseau (2009) declared that for two decades, *Agrippine* continuously represented “a sort of humorous archetype of a teenager bristling with futile problems of immediate existential resonance”.

## 2. Humour, comics and translation issues

Translating humour is a difficulty for every translator, due to its close ties with the specific sociocultural aspects of a community, including their beliefs, traditions, attitudes and underlying ideas (Rollo 2014). While humour is socially and psychologically a transcultural phenomenon, it is nonetheless strongly rooted in each context – we do not necessarily laugh at the same things or in the same situations, and the perception of humour can vary from one community

to another. To quote the famous French humourist Pierre Desproges, “you can laugh at everything, but not with everyone”.

Indeed, this area of investigation is traditionally considered insidious, both from a practical perspective, since humour is by definition difficult to transpose and can therefore be described as ‘untranslatable’, and a theoretical point of view, since the very principles of equivalence and translatability are at stake (Chiaro 2006). Nevertheless, humorous expressions continue to be translated in everyday practice. Moreover, increasing globalization has favoured contact between different cultures and thus increased exposure to the most typical mentalities and stereotypes of different contexts, which has facilitated our understanding of them.

In terms of linguistic theories concerning humour (in particular, *Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humor* developed by Raskin (1985), *General Theory of Verbal Humor* proposed by Raskin and Attardo (1991) and *Ontological Semantic Theory of Humor* developed by Raskin, Hempelmann and Taylor (2009)), researchers have always tended to focus their attention on verbal language – *Verbally Expressed Humor (VEH)*, including word play, jokes and funny stories – which constitutes the main vector of humour (see also: Attardo 2014). However, as Chiaro (2014: 17-18) states, other cognitive, emotional and social components are equally involved and one must keep these in mind when translating humour from one language to another.

Zabalbeascoa (2005: 188 et seq.) underlines that translators must have a good understanding of the nature of the humour and its importance in the cultural context it is received in. Jokes and pleasantries that are strictly linguistic require a knowledge of the structural characteristics of that particular language. For example, in French, where words are not spelt as they are pronounced, alliterations, rhymes and phonic puns such as homophones and paronyms are favoured, while in Italian, semic word plays such as homonyms and polysemic words are more predominant. Humour can also arise from a double meaning, a metaphorical meaning, semantic ambiguity or even a non-sense such as absurdity or paradox, which makes translation all the more difficult, not to mention jokes involving the typical traits of an ethnic group, which assume the audience’s awareness of certain clichés and national stereotypes. Finally, what counts the most in translating humour is not so much the difference between the two languages concerned, but the cognitive gap between the knowledge necessary to understand and appreciate the text and the knowledge that the final audience is assumed to possess. In other words, it is necessary to understand if the type of humour in the source text can have the same value and

effect in the target language and therefore be transposed as it is, or if it must be changed and adapted to the target culture.

Since the conventions, expectations and rules of the social game are often specific to a group or cultural milieu (Vandaele 2010: 149), translation failure, which manifests itself as a transposition incapable of soliciting laughter from its receivers, is not always attributable to linguistic incompetency or inadequate skills on the part of the translator, but instead may be due to a lack of prior knowledge of the cultural world of the source language, resulting in a lack of understanding of the original message and the non-success of the translation (Martínez-Sierra 2003: 749). Furthermore, the neutralization of humour, satire or transgressive content, for example linked to language play, may be determined not by strictly linguistic factors, but rather by ethical, moral or ideological reasons (Vandaele 2011: 181).

On a pragmatic level, in order for a humorous joke to produce the desired effect, that is, to be a source of entertainment and/or produce laughter, it is obviously necessary for a certain complicity to exist between the interlocutors. They must possess shared implicit knowledge covering linguistic, poetic, pragmatic and socio-cultural competence. It is precisely this common cultural background that creates the audience's expectations concerning the sphere of social, cultural and ideological references; an aspect underlined by Bergson in his famous essay *Le rire* (1900: 11), where he claims that behind laughter lies an ulterior motive of understanding, almost complicity, with the other people (whether real or imaginary) who are laughing at the same thing. Thus, the most important objective in translating humorous traits from one language to another is perlocutionary equivalence, or in other words, eliciting the same reaction from the audience and retaining the same pragmatic force.

When dealing with a multisemiotic text such as a comic strip, where the images cannot be dissociated from the words, the constraints particular to this 'hybrid' means of expression – one of the most characteristic of contemporary culture – add to the translator's list of unavoidable difficulties in reconstituting humour. (For the specificities of comics and the associated translation issues, cf. Podeur 2012; Rollo 2012; Zanettin 2008).

In this type of textual genre, humour is not based solely on the contradictions expressed in the verbal units but also on the complementarity between the visual and verbal signs, the whole work having a specific narrative structure; it is the product of a variation of recurring themes and subjects within a well-defined narrative framework. Particularly in long series, humour becomes a general property of the text on a verbal-iconic plane and is not limited to specific points of the narration (Zanettin 2010: 43-44).

Therefore, it can be asserted that comic strip translation shares several features with audiovisual translation (AVT), mainly because of the integration of verbal and non-verbal codes to a unitary language so as to create a multi-dimensional unit where the visual components determine the transfer of the verbal elements.

Like cinema and theatre, comics are a syncretic semiotic environment, encompassing texts, media and discourses. In comics, different semiotic systems are co-present and interplay at different levels, and are culturally determined along dimensions of space and time. (Zanettin 2008: 13).

The text and image may complement and reinforce each other reciprocally, or they may contradict one another. Similarly, word play may be supported by nonverbal signs or may simply play a supporting role in image play (Kaindl 2010: 39).

Due to this co-presence of text and image, in the late 1980s researchers such as Mayoral, Kelly and Gallardo (1986, 1988) extended the concept of *traducción subordinada* or *constrained translation* (introduced by Titford in 1982 to categorise subtitling) to other types of translations such as dubbing, simultaneous interpretation of films, translation of comic strips and advertising texts, characterized by different degrees of constraint.

This concept has so far been very widespread in AVT or comic strip translation, where the most successful translation solutions are precisely those which manage to respect the spatial or temporal limits imposed by the medium<sup>2</sup> and harmonize the dual communication channel. In fact, as Zabalbeascoa (1997: 330) underlines, all translations, whether written or multimodal, are constrained by different modalities and factors.

Furthermore, particularly with regard to comic strips, the image must be viewed as a constituent element of the text, which contributes to the creation of meaning and at times becomes a source of humour (this will be better illustrated by the examples from our corpus), rather than as an external constraint to which the translator, a “semiotic investigator” according to Celotti’s (2008) definition, must passively submit.

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2. Nevertheless, we should specify here than even if verbal language is the main component where the comic strip translator can intervene, it is by no means the only element, as is commonly believed. Modern computer technology and increasingly sophisticated graphics programmes also make it possible to change the visual plane, such as the drawings, colours, layout, size of the bubbles and lettering/font. However, such modifications are still uncommon due to time and cost constraints as well as stylistic reasons.

### 2.1. *Methods of translating humour*

As we have just noted with respect to linguistic research on humour, translators who investigate the translation difficulties inherent to comics often prioritize the verbal code in its strictest sense (word play, assonance, etc.) as the main source of humoristic effects, neglecting other factors such as irony, social stereotypes and explicit references to the culture of origin. Moreover, we tend to underestimate the expressive potential of non-verbal signs – in this case, images – which are an integral part of this type of semiotically complex text and, thus, of the translation transfer process.

Even if verbal humour, transmitted primarily by speech, is the most obvious factor of this multifaceted phenomenon, it is not the only one. It coexists with linguistic-cultural humour, characterized by interaction between verbal and cultural elements, and visual humour, conveyed through images (cf. Antonini & Chiaro 2005, Bucaria 2007). We see that it is essential to adopt a more comprehensive translation approach, taking into account the multiple multimodal implications of comics, as suggested by Kaindl (2004: 174 et seq.). Starting from the distinction between monomodal humour (based on either the verbal code<sup>3</sup> or the iconic code) and multimodal humour (a combination of the two codes), different translation modalities are envisaged: translation – which is open to various options itself, with monomodal humour and multimodal humour being able to be translated by one type or the other each time – and non-translation (omission of humorous traits, with inevitable entropy and a reduction of the overall humorous effect) due to a lack of suitable equivalents that can maintain the spirit of the original text.

Humour can also be introduced at different points of the target text to make up for possible translation gaps in other passages of the source text, thus compensating for the loss of humour in those sections.

In brief, the following combinations are possible:

- a) Monomodal humour → Monomodal humour
- b) Monomodal humour → Multimodal humour
- c) Monomodal humour → No humour
- d) Multimodal humour → Multimodal humour
- e) Multimodal humour → Monomodal humour
- f) Multimodal humour → No humour
- g) No humour → Monomodal humour
- h) No humour → Multimodal humour

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3. By this, we mean purely verbal humour and linguistic-cultural humour, the two forms being transmitted by verbal communication.



If necessary, explanatory additions (notes or precisions inserted in the paratext) can be used to clarify dissymmetry or incoherence of the humour, but this may compromise the success of the joke, whose strength also relies on its immediacy and conciseness.

Whichever the main vehicle of humour, we must always keep in mind that cultural and ideological elements are constantly implicated in the creation of funny situations, parody allusions, caricatures or sarcasm. It is the translator's job to grasp the various aspects underlying the graphic narrative and use the most suitable strategies to maintain the humorous atmosphere of the story while ensuring its accessibility to the target audience.

### 3. Introduction of the comic strip series, *Agrippine*

We shall now move to the core of our work by introducing *Agrippine*, Claire Bretécher's humorous flagship comic. The eight-volume series was published in France between 1988 and 2009, first by the author herself and then republished by *Dargaud*. With vivacity and vividness, in a visibly caricatural tone, the volumes depict the existential dilemmas of a spoiled, pestiferous '90s teenager who drags her distaste for life into the vain search of an identity and the meaning of her existence. The stories take place in a 'bobo'<sup>4</sup> Parisian environment which appears stuck between existentialism and a consumer society.

Agrippine, the eponymous heroine of the series, whose name recalls the famous Roman poisoner, is an excellent prototype of the rebellious adolescent who is primarily concerned with her appearance and flirting with boys. She is not a particularly pretty young girl; lazy, disenchanted, selfish, sometimes detestable, and yet captivating. She is perpetually torn between her overly lax parents, a younger brother whom she finds unbearable, her inseparable girlfriends that she has long chats with and a rejected eternal suitor who plays the philosopher. The adults are often represented as middle-aged hippies who try to maintain their illusion of having a free spirit and a better world while actually living a meagre, mediocre life. In a nutshell, Bretécher's characters are like caricatures of modern society, laughing at the generation of '68 – the targets (or victims) of her audacious, biting humour.

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4. The term *bobo*, a contraction of 'bourgeois-bohème', was introduced in 2000 by the American, David Brooks, author of *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*, to describe the changes of his own social group: the yuppies of the '80s, whose bourgeois lifestyles were hybridized with the anti-culture bohemian values of the 1960s-1970s. In France, the term has a rather derogatory meaning, and is used to refer to well-off people who proclaim themselves to be left-wing but whose actions contradict the values they defend.

In Italy, the series made its debut in the magazine *Linus* and was then collected into volumes by Bompiani, Comic Art and Comma 22. Three albums were published in Italy: the first volume in the series, *Agrippine*, was released in 1988 and then translated and published by Bompiani in 1990 with the title *Agrippina*; the third volume, *Les Combats d'Agrippine*, was released in 1993 and published by Comic Art in 1997 as *I conflitti di Agrippina* and in 2010 by Comma 22 under the title *Le battaglie di Agrippina*; and the eighth and last album in the series, *Agrippine déconfite*, was released in 2009 and published by Comma 22 in 2011 under the title *Agrippina sbaragliata*.

With her interest in portraying current attitudes and behaviours and societal changes, Claire Bretécher emerges through her stories as one of the greatest humourist-sociologists in the world of comics. In 1976, Roland Barthes defined her as “the best French sociologist of the year”. Even though the cartoonist herself shrugs off all sociological pretensions, as well as having an acute sense of observation, her drawings reveal “feelings of belonging to a social group” (Festraëts 2009). She constructs her characters starting from herself, her personal reactions and her own faults – which ultimately prove to be common to a large number of people. Aimed at a very heterogeneous readership and age group, her comic strips are full of irony, sagacity and dry humour.

The comic book series addresses numerous themes: curiosity about sexuality, appearance at all costs (hence the use of cosmetic surgery), relationships, the conformism of anti-conformism and the snobbery of intellectuals – all socially and ideologically sensitive topics, approached with caustic humour but also a vein of hidden tenderness. Indeed, although the author denies having any political affiliations and claims no particular ideologies, the themes of feminism, sexual liberation, parenthood and childhood appear repeatedly in her series, eliciting conflicting reactions from her readers. Moreover, together with religion and politics, sexuality is one of the three most politically incorrect forms of humour (Chiaro 2010: 19).

The distinctive feature of the *Agrippine* series is undoubtedly its use of a kind of newspeak, with singular, quick, effervescent vocabulary that is both mysterious and entertaining – a partly real, partly invented parody of modern slang. The creative force of this language relies on its shock factor: farcical, colourful expressions and back slang which punctuate the characters' adventures and the comical situations in which they interact. The protagonists' incessant verbal cascades, which are the first things to catch the reader's attention, blend with the illustrations and allow the author's humorous, caricatural vision of society to filter through.

### 3.1. *Corpus analysis: translation strategies used*

The examples in our corpus have been taken from the three albums of the series that have been translated into Italian. The first volume, *Agrippine*, introduces us to the teenage world embodied by the young heroine; we get to know the characters and their particular vocabulary. In *Les combats d'Agrippine*, the young lady battles with her first loves, futile worries and little everyday conflicts. In *Agrippine déconfite*, twenty years after the first album was published, Claire Bretécher manages to reinvent the atmosphere of the time while maintaining the series' common thread. She retraces the clichés of a generation to ridicule them better, with constant attention to the feminine world. We find Agrippine almost overcome by events: her parents are going to divorce, which awakens their eroticism; her little brother Biron goes through a transsexual phase, dressing in girls' clothing; her great-grandmother Zonzon escapes into her own world; and last but not least, Agrippine's current object of desire which she wants at all costs, a pair boots in '*tatou strassé*' (or 'stressed' before the animal is slaughtered), becomes the object of a fierce dispute with her grandmother, who then passes herself off as dead. (In the end, we discover that she is not, in fact, deceased.)

The comic strips analysed abound with piercing, incisive, often insulting expressions which reflect the characters' personalities and make reference to the cultural and ideological scenes represented. One frame after the other, like in a sequence of photograms, we find the image of the Parisian bourgeoisie, frozen for approximately twenty years, which we then see passing before our eyes with its tics, postures, neuroses and questions. Eventually, these take on a wider dimension in certain ways, transcending French borders. This is what makes Claire Bretécher's stories so popular – readers are amused and laugh because they can identify with the characters' traits.

Comparing the French and Italian versions of the comic has allowed us to note some very interesting translation examples. Based on the observation that each panel is steeped in the humorous, caricatural vein that marks the series, we have selected here some of the most significant cases which show the variety of translation strategies possible, according to the type of humour.

a. *Monomodal humour* → *Monomodal humour*

## Example 1

Agrippine : <i>maman please... il y a environ trois cent mille ans qu'on ne dit plus "génial"</i>	Agrippina: <i>mamma, please... saranno trecentomila anni che non si dice più "geniale"</i>
Mère : <i>je sais je sais on dit "giga"</i>	Madre: <i>lo so, lo so, si dice "figo"</i>
Mère : <i>un giga coup de pied au cul ça s'inscrit dans le contexte ? [...] non, j'essaie de comprendre alors : un concert giga, un giga plan ? d'accord : un giga gigot ? bien : une giga interaction un giga menu ?</i>	Madre: <i>un calcio nel sedere "figo" si inserisce nel contesto? [...] no, cerco di capire, allora: un concerto figo, un progetto figo? d'accordo: un fico figo? bene: un film figo, un menù figo?</i>
Agrippine : <i>THEU [elle rit] continue à dire génial maman (Agrippine, Feeling, p. 5)</i>	Agrippina: <i>THE' [ride] continua a dire geniale, mamma (Agrippina, Feeling, p. 7)</i>

## Example 2

Agrippine : <i>maman... ce n'est pas pour critiquer... / ...la famille one-mariage, peut-être que c'est looké mais honnêtement, c'est douleur pour les études (Agrippine, Cantique, p. 23)</i>	Agrippina: <i>mamma... non è per criticare... / ...la famiglia monomatrimoniale sarà anche di moda, ma per gli studi è un disastro (Agrippina, Cantico, p. 25)</i>
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## Example 3

Agrippine : <i>ptain pourtant personne peut dire que je suis en stage près du binion en mal de call / [...] / les morues prises de tête j'en connais des baquets doublés coquillettes et pas pour amûr lyrique / [...] / pourquoi les gnolguis xéroxent tout leur comporte sur des gourous baveux ça persécute à force / [...] / il serait cool de stopper la mantra du jalmince parce qu'instincto je le sens dommage à mort / il brioche la méringue même si ça chagrine le goémon et après il griffe à la poupée (Les combats d'Agrippine, Énigme, p. 28)</i>	Agrippina: <i>incidunque eppure nessuno può asserfare che non sto facendo uno stage di propizio cornamusa, tantoquanto i calli, arrivando in strutto, dolgono / [...] / ne conosco a secchiate di zoccolette tutte imbellettugne, e sta' sicura che non vanno in preda dell'amore stilnobovista / [...] / ma perché i facocerotti ricopiano pari pari tutto l'atteggiamento sui mentori bavanti, è una calendizione / [...] / sarebbe gagliostro inverrompare il mantra della gelosudine, perché d'istinto mi spiace altrucchio / ma lui no, lui cornetta la meringa anche se il dolore è grande, tipo Goemon di Lupin, e poi graffia la bambetta (Le battaglie di Agrippina, Pregnanza, p. 30)</i>
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Here we have chosen several examples of verbal humour, which is clearly the most productive, triggered by young, very lively, immediate speech that

5. Different frames are separated by a forward slash.

is constantly evolving, as can be seen in the dialogue between Agrippine and her mother in example 1. We can also see frequent borrowings and calques from English, sometimes retained in the translation (*please*, example 1), sometimes replaced by an Italian equivalent (*one-mariage* = ‘monomatrimoniale’, *looké* = ‘di moda’, example 2) or mutated words (*cool* = ‘gagliostro’ instead of ‘gagliardo’, *stopper* = ‘inverrompare’ instead of ‘interrompere’, example 3) which evoke humour and integrate perfectly with the typical jargon used in *Agrippine*.

The panel *Enigme* (example 3) is exemplary of the series’ newspeak – a very compact, allusive language. Translating this into Italian requires great skill in order to maintain the same linguistic level and humorous impact. In dealing with the slang mutation mechanisms associated with verbal creation (e.g. suffixation, apocope and syncope), the Italian translator shows an equally rich inventiveness and implements real linguistic acrobatic flair, even expanding the dialogue so that the target text ends up longer than the source text. Among the noteworthy strategies is the use of the phrase ‘amore stilnobovista’ as a translation of the expression *amûr* (contraction of *amour*) *lyrique*, with a clear reference to the Italian poetic current of ‘Dolce stil novo’, but where the introduction of the syllable ‘bo’, altering the standard adjectival form, appears to phonetically evoke the sound of the adjective ‘bovino’ (*bovin*). Another effective translation solution regards the common noun *goémon*, referring to marine algae collected on beaches or harvested by cutting them at low tide, used as a fertilizer. The term is not translated as its Italian correspondent ‘varech’, but by the proper noun Goemon, a fictional character in the manga series *Lupin III* who was a calm, thoughtful samurai renowned for his incredible talent at wielding sabres. Thus, there is an intertextual reference to a well-known Japanese comic series in Italy, from which several animated versions have been made.

#### Example 4

Agrippine : <i>c'est un conflit de canards</i>	Agrippina: gli alieni sono gli alieni
Mère : COIN	Madre: FONO
Agrippine : <i>ouap !... tu as entendu mamoute ? / t'as entendu ? j'ai fait un jeu de mots, t'as entendu ? "conflit, confit" "conflit de canard" t'as dégluti ? (Agrippine déconfite, p. 50)</i>	Agrippina: aap! hai sentito, mami? / hai sentito? È un messaggio cifrato, cerca di chiamare a casa, è e.t.! L'hai inghiottito? ( <i>Agrippina sbaragliata</i> , p. 108)

Above is another example of linguistic humour based on paronymic word play in French, subjected to linguistic and cultural adaptation in Italian. The shrill sound of the chip justifies the reference to extra-terrestrials and *E.T.*, the

science fiction film directed by Steven Spielberg. *E.T.* (1982) is very popular in Italy and thus easier to access conceptually.

#### Example 5

Agrippine : <i>je ne prends pas Visa... tu n'aurais pas une vieille chose pourrie, genre Gold ?</i> (Agrippine, Refrain, p. 7)	Agrippina: non prendo Visa... non avresti l'American Express? (Agrippina, Ritornello, p. 9)
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#### Example 6

Modern : <i>il y a plus giga... le flot n'est pas tout dans la vie</i>	Modern: i soldi non sono tutto nella vita
Agrippine : <i>arrête / tu pourrais faire passer six zéros sur ton compte tu ne le ferais pas ?</i>	Agrippina: piantala / potresti mettere sei zeri sul tuo conto, non lo faresti?
Modern : <i>nega [...]</i>	Modern: macché [...]
Agrippine : <i>Je peux téléphoner ?</i>	Agrippina: Posso telefonare?
Modern : <i>dans l'entrée / deux francs</i> (Agrippine, Le cerveau, p. 11)	Modern: in anticamera / due franchi (Agrippina, Il cervello, p. 13)

#### Example 7

Agrippine : <i>tante Gugu m'a filé un pascal</i>	Agrippina: la zia Gugu mi ha regalato un cinquecentone
Père : <i>remarque c'est nice d'elle</i>	Padre: carino da parte sua
Agrippine : <i>mais que veux-tu que je croque avec un pascal ? les gens sont d'un rat papa !</i> (Agrippine, Pourboire, p. 12)	Agrippina: ma che vuoi che ci faccia con un cinquecentone? La gente è di un tirchio, papà! (Agrippina, Mancias, p. 14)

In examples 5-7, we have situational humour. Money is a recurring topic around which humorous jokes are constructed, where we breathe the social and generational climate of the era that Claire Bretécher immortalized with her cartoons, especially with regard to teenagers for whom money is essential – not only for girls like Agrippine, who is proverbially selfish (as a card with no predetermined spending limit, an American Express Gold Card suits her much better than a classic Visa bank card), but also for pseudo anti-conformists like Modern Mesclun, who is not above petty calculations.

In the translation, the humour is guaranteed by the situation itself. Nevertheless, we should note the diaphasic shift from French slang or familiar language, such as *flot*, *filer*, *croquer avec un pascal*, to standardized Italian.

## Example 8

Mamie : <i>je t'avais dit que c'était pas gagné Jean-Million</i>	Nonna: te l'avevo detto che era dura, Gianmilione
Tonton Jean-Mi : <i>combien de fois te l'ai-je dit ?</i>	Zio Gianni: quante volte te lo devo dire! Non chiamarmi Gianmilione
Agrippine : <i>appelle-le Jean-Couillon ça y ira comme à une banane sa peau (Agrippine déconforte, p. 51)</i>	Agrippina: chiamalo Giancoglione, gli calza a pisello ( <i>Agrippina sbaragliata</i> , p. 101)

On the other hand, in the above dialogue, the original text plays on the semantic association between *couillon* and *banane* in the popular sense of 'nigaud, naïf, benêt'. (The word *banane*, evoking a sexual image, may also have a marked connotation in more vulgar expressions). By means of a very successful translation in Italian, a phonic pun was created *in absentia*, playing on the assonance between 'pennello', used in the expression 'calzare a pennello' (*aller à merveille / à ravir / à la perfection*) and 'pisello', in its popular sense of male sexual organ. The hilarity and humour of the target text are thus enhanced.

## Example 9

Agrippine : <i>en anglais c'est pas de ma faute si la prof a encore raté sa fécondation in vitro (Agrippine, Stances, p. 39)</i>	Agrippina: in inglese non è colpa mia se la prof è andata in menopausa ( <i>Agrippina, Stanze</i> , p. 41)
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In this case, touching on the sexual sphere, the Italian translator has replaced the reference to in vitro fertilization with a phenomenon that is natural for all women of a certain age – menopause. This is probably because in Italy at the time, IVF was a taboo topic (or in any case not a very familiar one) from a cultural, ideological and especially ethical point of view. (We should remember that the album *Agrippine* was published in 1988 and translated into Italian in 1990, while the first French baby made from this new method of artificial procreation had already been born in in 1982). By opting for a substitution, the translator avoided forcing sensitive issues and comprehension difficulties on the target audience, while still maintaining the humoristic quality of the sentence.

## Example 10

Mamie [s'adressant à sa fille] : <i>oh quand même, c'est ton frère, ton fils que j'ai nourri de mon lait</i>	Nonna [rivolta a sua figlia]: ma insomma, è pur sempre tuo fratello, mio figlio, del mio stesso latte
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Agrippine : <i>ben c'est même pas vrai pasque t'as toujours dit que t'avais jamais donné le sein à un bébé de moins de 25 ans (Agrippine déconfite, p. 51)</i>	Agrippina: non è vero, ci hai sempre detto che non hai mai dato il seno a un bambino sotto i 25 anni ( <i>Agrippina sbaragliata</i> , p. 101)
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This is another example of sexual humour. Given that it can be perfectly understood in Italian, it has been translated literally.

#### Example 11

Bergère : <i>n'empêche tu as de la chance qu'il y ait de la foi dans ta famille</i>	Bergère: comunque sei fortunata ad avere la fede in famiglia
Agrippine : <i>tu veux rire ?</i>	Agrippina: in che senso?
Bergère : <i>dans la mienne ils croient absolument à rien</i>	Bergère: a casa mia non credono assolutamente a niente
Agrippine : <i>les miens non plus ils croient à rien / par exemple tiens : maman ne croit même plus à la thalasso hein maman ?</i>	Agrippina: nemmeno i miei credono a niente / per esempio, guarda la mamma non crede nemmeno alla talassoterapia, vero mamma?
Mère : <i>LA CHAIR EST TRISTE HÉLAS ET J'AI EU TOUS LES LIFTS</i>	Madre: LA CARNE È TRISTA AHIMÉ, E IL BOTOX SOLO ILLUDE, TIÉ!
Agrippine : <i>Tu veux ma médaille miraculeuse ? (Les combats d'Agrippine, Miracles, p. 24)</i>	Madre: Lo vuoi il mio amuleto miracoloso? ( <i>Le battaglie di Agrippina, Miracoli</i> , p. 26)

We conclude this section with a case of linguistic humour with religious references. The Our Lady of Czestochowa medal, which Agrippine's aunt brought her from Hungary, provides an opportunity to speak about religious faith, but we quickly realise that the only religion Agrippine and her mother are concerned about is their appearance – care of the body and not the soul. The expression *La chair est triste* (in spite of countless facelift treatments), translated literally as 'La carne è trista', is a play on words alluding to the evangelical expression 'La chair est faible'. The humour derives from the contrast between the religious reference alluded to in the dialogue and the purely material level of conversation. In this respect, it should be noted that in the Italian translation, the world *médaille* is replaced by 'amuleto', undoubtedly to reduce the object's religious value and accentuate the profane sense attributed to it by Agrippine.

From the above episodes, we can see that ideological connotations are always latent, even in seemingly simple, funny situations, thus underlining the contradictions and ambivalences of a generation in suspense.

With regard to this first type of translation strategy, it is also interesting to note that some frames are characterized by the almost exclusive use of images



without verbal enunciation (for example, we see Agrippina obsessed with her body). In these cases, the monomodal humour is based on visual stimuli and the transposition to Italian does not require linguistic intervention. There is also an example of visual humour based on pictorial intertextuality: the strip *Un cri* in the album *Les combats d'Agrippine* (p. 33) – *Lurlo* (p. 35) in Italian – is a parodic allusion to the famous painting *Le Cri* by Munch, symbolizing the modern man carried away by a crisis of existential anguish. Each frame shows Agrippine repeatedly shouting *ma mère*, and then in the ninth frame, *maman* (in Italian, 'mia madre' and finally 'mamma').

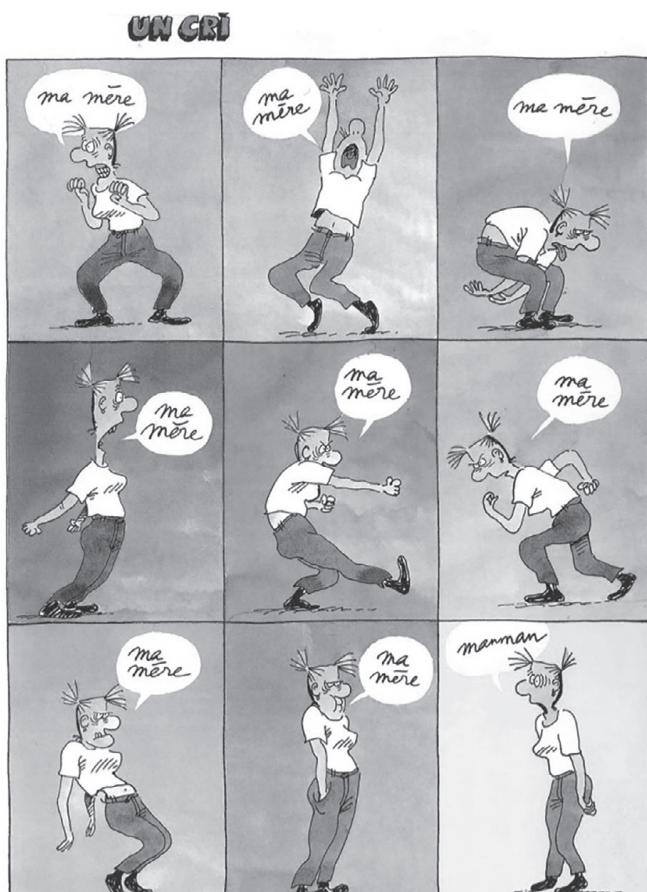


Figure 1.

## b. Monomodal humour → Multimodal humour

## Example 12

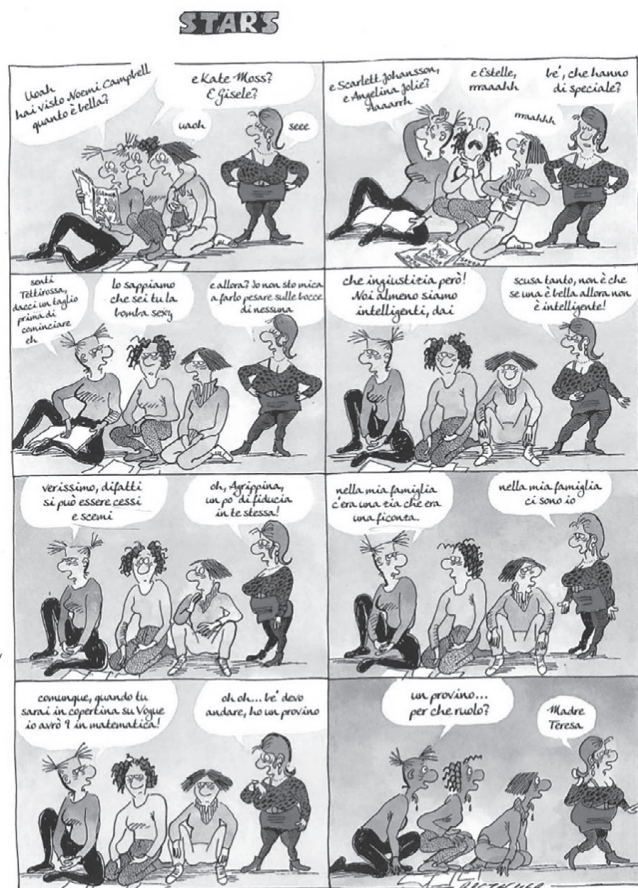


Figure 2.

Agrippina : <i>oh ça va Rouge Gorge on connait ton trip</i>	Agrippina: senti Tettirossa, dacci un taglio prima di cominciare eh
Psyché Chia : <i>on sait que c'est toi la plus canon</i>	Psyché Chia: lo sappiamo che sei tu la bomba sexy
Rouge-Gorge : <i>et alors ? j'en fais pas un miroton à l'ail (Les combats d'Agrippina, Stars, p. 30)</i>	Tettirossa: e allora? io non sto mica a farlo pesare sulle bocce di nessuna (Le battaglie di Agrippina, Stars, p. 32)

In this case, where the humour of the original text is essentially verbal, we can see that for the familiar expression *j'en fais pas un miroton à l'ail* ('je ne fais pas

d'histoires'), the Italian version becomes 'io non sto mica a farlo pesare sulle bocce di nessuna'. This makes an explicit allusion to the ample form ('bocce' = *tétons*) of the young woman, who wants to be a top model despite being rather plump, as also evoked by the translation of her name. Thus, the Italian version exploits the link between the visual plane further, which becomes more fruitful.

We can find another example of multimodal humour in Italian in the album *Le battaglie di Agrippina*. The translation of the panel *Attaque* (*Les combats d'Agrippine*, p. 17) as *Guardati le spalle* (p. 19), meaning 'look behind you', adds a verbal component to the humour carried only by images, where we see a boy follow Agrippine, who is wearing ripped jeans, draw eyes on her buttocks while she is absorbed looking in a shop window.

### GUARDATI LE SPALLE

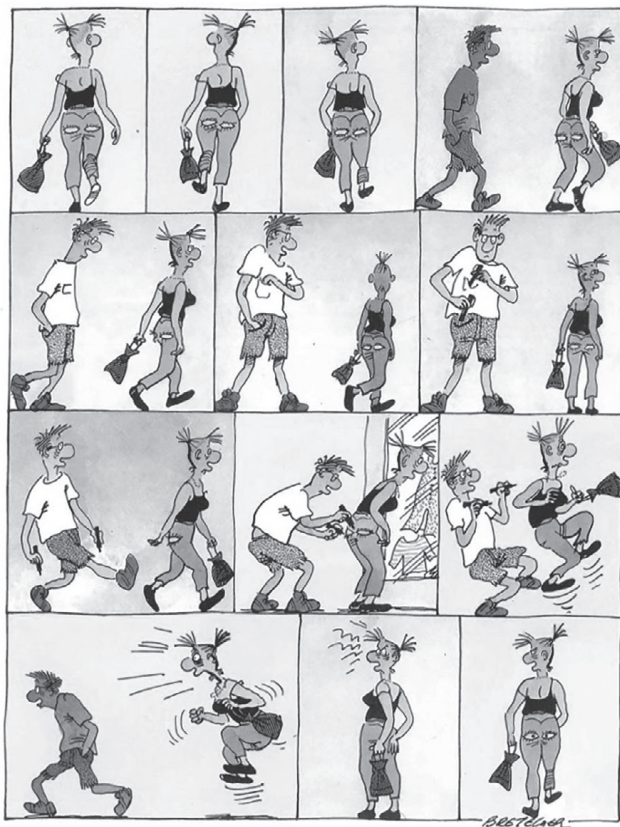


Figure 3.

c. *Monomodal humour* → *No humour*

## Example 13

Bergère : <i>il te roule des gades ?</i>	Bergère: vi baciare?
Agrippine : <i>même à toi je n'aime pas tellement parler de ça... je suis trop prude comme pouffe</i> (Agrippine, <i>Hymne</i> , p. 15)	Agrippina: non mi piace parlare di queste cose... neanche con te (Agrippina, <i>Inno</i> , p. 17)

Above is an example where the translation into Italian slides towards a standardized, more neutral solution (the slang expression *rouler des gades*, 'baciare con la lingua', gives way to the standard verb 'baciare(si)', (s)*embrasser*), accompanied by the omission of the last statement, which condenses the humorous scope of the reply, since in fact Agrippine is far from prude and reserved. The result is inevitably a less humorous translation.

## Example 14

Bergère : <i>et comme tu es sous-ex ça va tomber sur un black et là bonjour le Pen... t'as la honte !</i>	Bergère: e siccome sei sfigato andrà a finire su un negro e farai la figura del razzista!
Modern : <i>ça me prend vapeur de discuter avec des pouffes qu'ont rien sous l'Oréal salut</i> (Agrippine, <i>Le geste</i> , p. 33)	Modern: mi girano le balle a discutere con delle tipe che non hanno un briciolo di cervello, addio (Agrippina, <i>Il gesto</i> , p. 35)

The first reply provides an emblematic example of linguistic-cultural humour in French that has been neutralized in Italian. The sarcastic exclamation *bonjour le Pen* links the image of the black person with that of Jean-Marie Le Pen, a French politician known for his very hard stance on immigration in France.<sup>6</sup> The Italian translator has opted for an adaptation that favours clarity and immediacy, to the detriment of the cultural connotation and a more subtle irony. Similarly, the expression *sous l'Oréal*, metonymically referring to shampoo (the producer for the product), and therefore the hair, and thus the brain, is made explicit in Italian, thereby eliminating the humorous potential of the original. We find two occurrences of this same expression in the album *Agrippine déconfite* (p. 23, 42), translated respectively as 'sotto il rimmel' and

6. An extreme right-wing activist and one of the founders of the National Front, during the presidential campaign of 1988 – the year *Agrippine* was published – Le Pen highlighted the theme of security, which he considers the first freedom of the citizen.

'in testa' (*Agrippina sbaragliata*, p. 73, 92), the first solution being closer to the original in terms of humour.

Finally, we note the omission in the Italian version of the panel titled *Charade*, from the album *Agrippine* (p. 45). Based on word play, it revolves around a joke that the heroine recounts to her friends, although she has difficulty telling it correctly. She begins, "Long bois du moine hydrophobe oursin beur à ailes", "Long bois du bonze hydrophobe oursin de nid", and in the end, "Lon boit du cidre au faubourg Saint-Denis".

d. Multimodal humour → Multimodal humour

Example 15

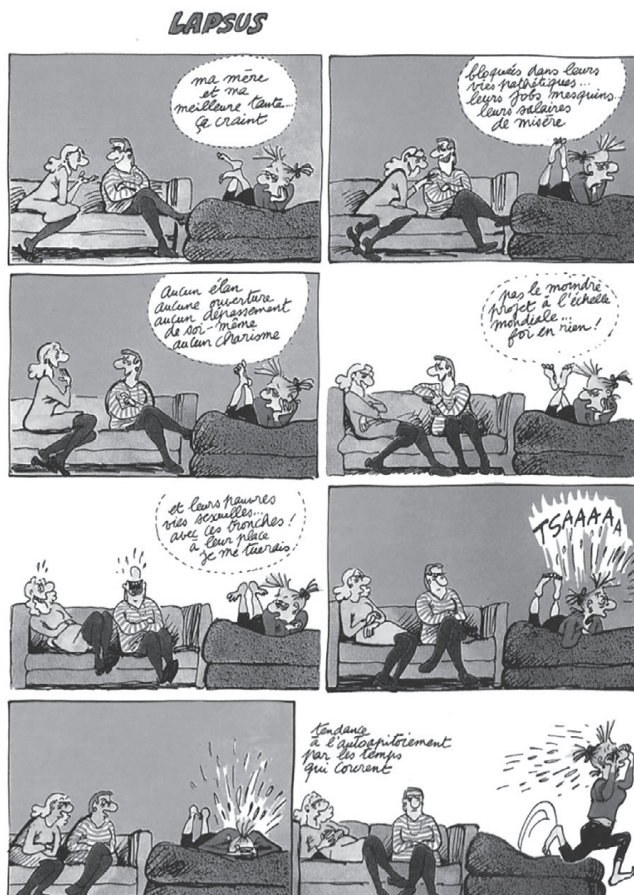


Figure 4.

Agrippine : et leurs pauvres vies sexuelles... avec ces tronches ! à leur place je me tuerais (Agrippine, Lapsus, p. 6)

Agrippina: e le loro povere vite sessuali... con quelle facce! al loro posto mi ucciderei (Agrippina, Lapsus, p. 8)

Example 16

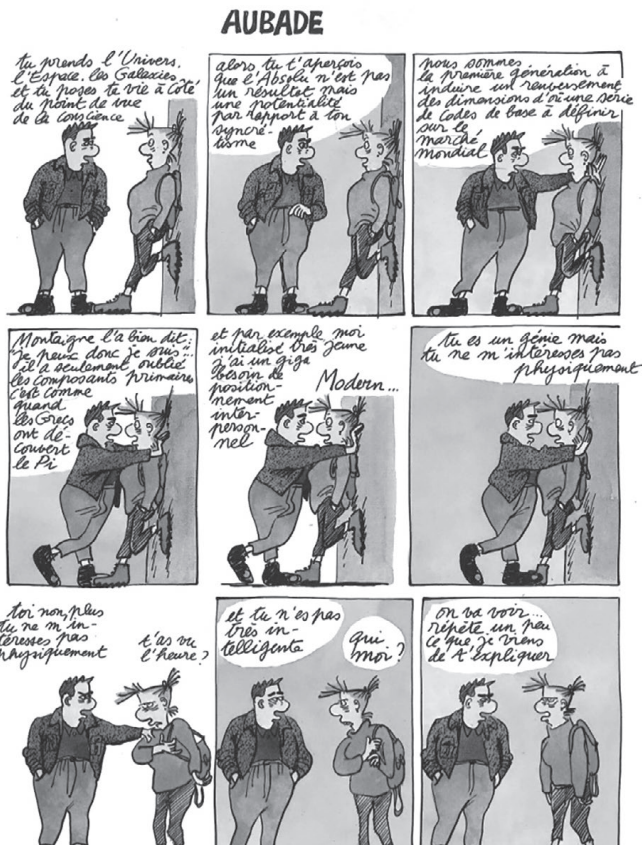


Figure 5.

Modern : Montaigne l'a bien dit : "je peux donc je suis"... il a seulement oublié les composants primaires c'est comme quand les Grecs ont découvert le Pi / et par exemple moi initialisé très jeune j'ai un giga besoin de positionnement interpersonnel

Modern: del resto l'ha detto Montaigne: "posso dunque sono"... ha solo dimenticato i componenti primari / io per esempio iniziato molto giovane, ho un gran bisogno di posizionamento interpersonale

Agrippine : Modern... (Agrippine, Aubade, p. 8)

Agrippina: Modern... (Agrippina, Concerto, p. 10)

## Example 17

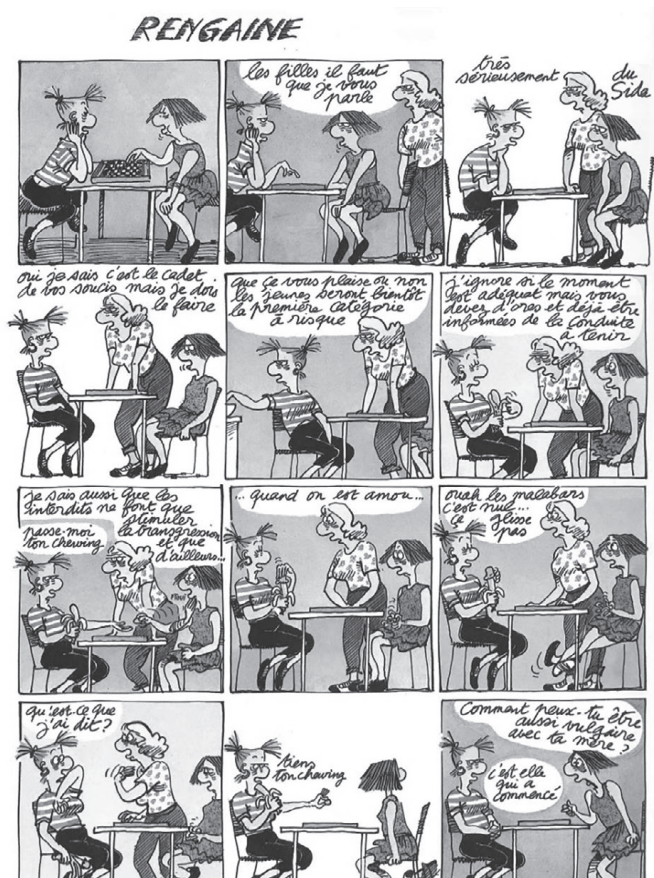


Figure 6.

Mère : les filles il faut que je vous parle / très sérieusement du Sida [...] que ça vous plaise ou non les jeunes seront bientôt la première catégorie à risque / j'ignore si le moment est adéquat mais vous devez d'ores et déjà être informées de la conduite à tenir [...]

Madre: ragazze devo parlarvi / molto seriamente dell'AIDS [...] che vi piaccia o no i giovani saranno presto la prima categoria a rischio / non so se è il momento giusto ma dovete essere informate su cosa fare [...]

Agrippine : [elle s'adresse à Bergère] passe-moi ton chewing [...] ouah les malabars c'est nul... ça glisse pas [sa mère lui donne une gifle] qu'est-ce que j'ai dit / [s'adressant à Bergère] tiens ton chewing

Agrippina: [si rivolge a Bergère] passami il chewing-gum [...] i "Brooklyn" fanno schifo... non scivolano [la madre la schiaffeggia] ma cos'ho detto / [rivolta a Bergère] toh

Bergère : <i>comment peux-tu être aussi vulgaire avec ta mère ?</i>	Bergère: come puoi essere così volgare con tua madre?
Agrippine : <i>c'est elle qui a commencé</i> (Agrippine, Rengaine, p. 42)	Agrippina: ha cominciato lei (Agrippine, Ritornello, p. 44)

Here are three cases of multimodal humour that play on both text and image in Italian as well as in French. In example 15, the humour arises from a semiotic combination of Agrippine's thoughts about her mother's and her aunt's sex lives, and the images, where we see the two decidedly unattractive women. Note, however, a slight diaphasic variation between the popular and more connoted word *tronche* ('capoccia, zucca') and the standard word 'faccia', which can, however, be employed in a derogatory manner if the case calls for such.

In example 16, there is play on the double meaning and ambiguity of the expression *positionnement interpersonnel*, whose abstract sense of 'interpersonal relationship in society', suggested by Modern, finds a concrete manifestation in the boy's attempt to get physical with Agrippine.

The humorous sequence in example 17 is decidedly more overt. Faced with her mother's advice about the risks of sexual diseases (in this case, AIDS), Agrippine simulates applying a condom with a piece of chewing gum that she slides onto her banana, causing an immediate reaction from her mother, who gives her a slap.

Apart from a few minor omissions, a literal translation of the salient passages, supported by the visual representations in the frames, makes it possible to maintain a good symmetry between the French and Italian versions, reproducing the original rather faithfully.

#### e. Multimodal humour → Monomodal humour

##### Example 18

Amie : <i>t'as vu ta tronche bigloteux</i>	Amica: che coraggio!
Bergère : <i>qu'est-ce que tu crois banane</i>	Bergère: verme
Agrippine : <i>ça va pas eh... bloc d'agglo ! on t'a rien demandé</i>	Agrippina: ma chi ti cerca, chi t'ha chiesto niente?
Amie : <i>casse-toi mètre soixante</i>	Amica: e non t'allargare!
Garçon : <i>tas de pouffes</i> (Agrippine, Madrigal, p. 37)	Ragazzo: sì proprio (Agrippina, Madrigale, p. 39)





## f. Multimodal humour → No humour

## Example 19



Figure 8.

Agrippine : non... c'est sur le pli... je trouble... touchez mes genoux (Agrippine, *Le carnage*, p. 35)

Agrippina: no... ormai sono in ballo... fate gli scongiuri (Agrippina, *La carneficina*, p. 37)

Agrippine is in the throes of anxiety because she did not get a passing grade at high school and is afraid of her father's reaction. The source text expresses her state of mind well with the word *trouille* ('fifa'), followed by the phrase *touchez mes genoux* which goes perfectly with the visual scenario; the target text

omits these elements in favour of the expression ‘fare gli scongiuri’ (*conjurer le mauvais sort*), which weakens the level of humour.

g. *No humour* → *Monomodal humour*

Example 20

Modern : <i>je te ferai des bisous dans le cou</i>	Modern: ti do i bacini sul collo
Agrippine : <i>non merci / pour les plans ringards j'ai papa</i> ( <i>Les combats d'Agrippine</i> , Terminus, p. 47)	Agrippina: no grazie / per le attività per i diversamente freschi ho già mio padre ( <i>Le battaglie di Agrippina</i> , <i>Fine corsa</i> , p. 49)

Sometimes the Italian version introduces elements that give the target product a stronger humoristic connotation. In this example, for the familiar adjective *ringards*, (‘médiocres, bons à rien’), the Italian text makes a reference to current language with the expression ‘diversamente freschi’, recalling ‘diversamente abili’ (*différemment habiles*), used as a politically correct term to refer to disabled people.

h. *No humour* → *Multimodal humour*

Example 21

Agrippine : <i>ptain fonchent à mort... et gratos en plus</i> ( <i>Les combats d'Agrippine</i> , <i>En scène</i> , p. 3)	Agrippina: Gesù piallatore, mi fanno a pezzi... e gratis poi! ( <i>Le battaglie di Agrippina</i> , <i>In scena</i> , p. 5)
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A successful translation solution was proposed by using the unusual – and a little irreverent – expression, ‘Gesù piallatore’ (*Jésus raboteur*), which replaces the most common dysphemic interjection in French here. (A similar form appears in the album *Agrippina sbaragliata*, p. 65: VACCA PIALLATRICE!, equivalent to the interjection *Darne de thon !* in *Les combats d'Agrippine*, p. 15). In doing so, a relationship is established between the spoken phrase based on the verb *foncher* (a modification of *foncer*, ‘scagliarsi contro, avventarsi su’) and the crushing action by the crowd represented in the frame. The humoristic effect that emerges is palpable.

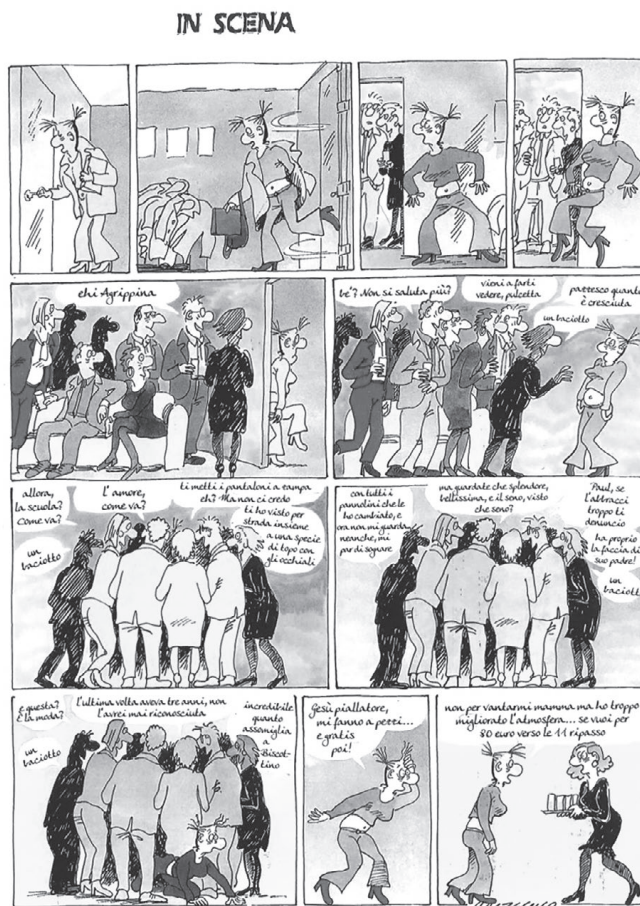


Figure 9.

### 3.1.1. Additional reflections

To finish our analysis, some additional remarks should be made.

With regard to linguistic paratexts, there is only one case of an added note in the album *Agrippina sbaragliata* (p. 73): the name of her great-grandmother *Zonzon* (a slang word for *prison* by means of apheresis and doubling the syllable) is engraved on the wall in the form of graffiti and a small asterisk refers to its translation 'Locula' (resulting from the feminization of the word 'loculo', *niche funéraire*), which makes a strong burlesque reference.

In the last album, we also see a relaxation of diaphasic shift in the translation, characterized by the presence of trivial expressions conforming to the



Figure 10.

acidic, biting tone of the series that was avoided or softened in the previous albums. This undoubtedly corresponds to an aspect taken into account by the translator, namely the evolution of the language practices of the target audience, especially the younger readers, whose interactions often belong on the negative axis (insults, vulgar language and verbal abuse) (Trimaille & Billiez 2007: 101).

As for the typographical aspect, the nervous, precise trait that distinguishes Claire Bretécher's drawings and lettering style, and supports her lucid, uncompromising humour, is attenuated in the Italian versions, where the font is more rounded and more flexible. Moreover, the bodies of the characters, which are closer to the graphics of the original in the album *Agrippina*, are visibly smaller in *Le battaglie di Agrippina* and *Agrippina sbaragliata*. In the translation



Figure 11.

of the last album, we also see the style of lettering becoming uniform at a crucial moment in the story, when we learn that Mamie is dead. The words pronounced tearfully by Agrippine's mother, *JE N'AI MÊME PAS PU LA VOIR / et voilà: Exit maman salut tout le monde* (Agrippine déconfitte, p. 36), are written shakily in the French version to portray her hiccupping voice, while in the Italian translation 'non me l'hanno fatta neppure vedere / ecco fatto, ciao ciao Mamma, ciao ciao tutti' (Agrippina sbaragliata, p. 86), this graphic variation – which plays an important auditive and expressive role as an “iconiciation du verbal” (Fresnault-Deruelle 1976: 23) – is completely absent, resulting in a reduced emotive force.



Figure 12.

#### 4. Conclusion

Using an interdisciplinary approach and various case studies, during the course of our analysis we have illustrated some major issues at the confluence of three equally challenging, complex fields of inquiry: humour, translation and comic strips. We have once again found that the issues inherent to these fields require the translator to have very solid linguistic, cultural and pragmatic skills as well as a good dose of creativity in order to transpose the source text appropriately and limit the degree of entropy in the target text.

In the *Agrippina* series, the translator, like the reader, is faced with an 'esoteric' linguistic world, a verbal frenzy based on the use of constantly renewed slang, which is very difficult to reproduce in Italian. In addition to

this inventive language imbued with the cultural and ideological atmosphere of the time, as interpreted and retraced via Claire Bretécher's volumes, the artist's corrosive humour finds another outlet on the iconic plane – images that are falsely simplistic and almost serialized (there are sequences of frames that are the same or only slightly different), but very effective and full of impact. These drawings accompany or sometimes themselves convey the albums' humorous undercurrent.

To translate the variety of forms of humour communicated through the multimodal texts of comic strips, translators have a wide range of strategies available. It is then up to them to select the most appropriate method on a case-by-case basis according to their own perception, skills, knowledge that readers are supposed to possess, dynamics triggered by humour and, of course, the semiotic dimensions involved.

The examples developed in our analysis have shown that it is possible to retain a similar level of humour through pertinent, efficient solutions playing on the verbal plane or the verbal-iconic plane. Humour can be transposed by means of various translation processes, going from literal translation if possible, to substitution and partial modification and finishing at adaptation on the other end of the spectrum, if communicative situations or references that are more familiar to the target audience are introduced. As for imagery, while it can present a restriction for the translation process, that does not prevent it from being a valuable source of humour if the translator manages to exploit the potential of their mother tongue, as witnessed in the examples from *Le battaglie di Agrippina*, where monomodal (or no) humour in the original became multimodal humour in the Italian version.

Obviously, when dealing with two close languages/cultures such as French and Italian, the differences are generally smaller than if comparing, for example, an Anglo-Saxon culture and a Mediterranean one. Moreover, it is precisely the similarities and common base of reference that guide and facilitate the success of the translations formulated.

Nevertheless, loss is sometimes inevitable when faced with expressions that cannot be transferred to the target language due to their intrinsic linguistic specificity such as slang or back slang, culture-specific allusions that are neutralised or made explicit for the purposes of intelligibility, as well as the need to soften or omit elements deemed bothersome to the target audience. However, there are also possibilities for compensation, allowing an additional humorous touch compared to the original.

In the translation of the first album of the series, we noted more eliminated passages – of familiar expressions, or even standard formulas – than in the other



two albums. This was not always justified by the lack of space or objective difficulty in terms of translation, but rather seems to be due to the translator's choice (which we feel was sometimes questionable) or possibly because of translation skills that were not yet well consolidated to rework the comic's newspeak. Such skills may have been at hand to the translator of the successive albums, who played with the Italian language more and gave priority to verbal creation, to the benefit of both the monomodal humour (which remains undoubtedly the most productive type in the three albums and corresponding translations) and the multimodal humour.

In closing, we conclude that the success of a translation requires a conscious and thorough evaluation of a number of factors – linguistic, socio-cultural, pragmatic, emotional and cognitive – which act simultaneously, albeit in varying proportions, in the translation co-text and context. Translators must on one hand use their professional knowledge and skills, and on the other hand be perceptive regarding the original message and the receptiveness of the target audience, in order to keep the humour and richness of this semiotically complex genre.

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## BIONOTE

ALESSANDRA ROLLO is a researcher and lecturer in French language and translation at the University of Salento. In 2005 she received her Ph.D. in French Linguistics from the University of Salento. In 2007 she attended a Distance Specialization Course in "Specialized economic, banking and financial translation". Her main research interests are in the areas of: Cognitive Linguistics and its implications in the domains of pragmatics and translation; specialized translation (mainly economic and audiovisual fields). She has participated in various national and international conferences. She has published three volumes (*La Linguistica Cognitiva: dalle teorie alla grammatica*, 2004, *Regards sur le français contemporain*, 2009, *Bande dessinée et jeux de mots. Enjeux et stratégies traductives dans la traduction italienne d'‘Astérix’*, 2012), besides several articles on French language and linguistics.

