Translating humorous literature from Vietnamese into Italian language: an empirical study of humour reception[1]

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Abstract

The empirical study presented in this article aims to determine some of the linguistic and cultural elements that can influence the humour reception and to verify the applicability of the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) to humorous literary translation. 60 Vietnamese and 60 Italian participants had to read and rate the level of humorousness of excerpts taken from the Vietnamese novel Số Đỏ *(Vũ Trọng Phụng, 1936) and its correspondent Italian translation (*Il gioco indiscreto di Xuan*, 2012). By comparing their feedback, it was possible to observe that one is more likely to appreciate humour when one is not part of the categories subject to ridicule/irony/satire; and that a direct contact with the original language and culture constitutes an important role in humour understanding and appreciating. Also, a comparison between the rating that the Italian participants assigned to the official Italian translation and an alternative version allowed us to analyze the role of Language Knowledge Resource (GTVH). According to the Italian participants, although the two versions of the translation, which share the first five levels of Knowledge Resources, were remarkably similar (as predicted by the GTVH), they were dissimilar in terms of humour and in readers' preferences. I therefore argue that, although the GTVH is a useful tool for analyzing and verifying the similarity between the source and target text, it has proved to be impractical and not always reliable if we want to use it as a parameter of the translation of literary humorous texts.*

Keywords: humour translation, humour reception, GTVH, Language Knowledge Resource.

1. Introduction

The translation of humour began to attract more and more attention in the academic field since the mid-twentieth century, with monographs and articles published in specialized periodicals (Delabastita 1996, 1997; Vandaele 2002; Chiaro 2005, 2010a, 2010b; Maher 2011; Dore 2019, 2020). Research carried out in the last decades on the issues of humour, language, culture and

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1 Part of the results of this research was presented at the 30th ISHS Conference in Tallinn 2018.

translation have tried to identify mechanisms and phases of the process of production and reproduction of humorous effects. The various problems confronted by authors coming from different disciplines and their proposed solutions continue to enrich the overall picture of this interlinguistic and intercultural matter.

In this context, the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (GTVH) represents a precious attempt to offer a rigorous reference model for the analysis of humorous texts. The GTVH was developed out of Raskin's *Semantic Script Theory of Humor* (SSTH), which claimed to be able to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for a text to be funny (Raskin 1985). While the SSTH contained only statements regarding jokes, the GTVH, initially formulated on the basis of studies conducted mainly on jokes and aimed to measure the similarities and differences between short humorous texts (Attardo, Raskin 1991), was later "broadened to include (ideally) all humorous texts, of any length" (Attardo 2001: 28). After thirty years it has become one of the most influential linguistic theories of humour (Saude 2018) and has made a significant impact on studies on humour (Forabosco 2016). Numerous research and linguistic experiments have used this theory as a starting point for examining texts belonging to various typologies, such as stories, tales, sitcoms, and cinematic sequences (Attardo 2001, 2017; Ermida 2008, Saude 2018; Dore 2019); as well as for discussing the applicability of GTVH in the field of literary texts translation (Attardo 2002; Antonopoulou 2002, 2004; Triezenberg 2004). However, even if the role of the GTVH as analysis model for short texts (such as jokes) is well established and partially proven empirically (Ruch et al. 1993), the possibility of applying this model to other humorous texts, in particular long texts like novels, has not yet been fully established. Moreover, most published studies used texts in English as original or target texts, which represents a limitation for the affirmation of this model's universality. Finally, so far not many experimental studies have been carried out to measure the target readers' perception and reception of humour. As a result, it is difficult to prove with certainty the effectiveness of translation choices based on the GTVH's criteria.

Driven by these considerations, this article aims to verify the applicability of the GTVH to humorous literary translation. To this end, the Vietnamese novel *Số Đỏ* by Vũ Trọng Phụng and its Italian translation *Il gioco indiscreto di Xuan* are chosen as the object of study. *Số Đỏ*, first published in 1936 in Hanoi, was written at one of the most intense social, economic, and political periods in Vietnam: the end of feudalism, the French occupation, the rising anticolonial violence, the rapid growth of capitalism, the rise of the middle class and the radical linguistic changes from the Chinese characters to the Romanized writing system (Zinoman 2002: 1-24). The protagonist of the novel is Red-haired Xuan, an illiterate vagabond who managed to blend perfectly into the emergent Francophile northern upper classes by posing as an undisputable expert in fields of fashion, medicine, sport, and religion. His unexpected transformation on the one hand reflected the contradictions within the Vietnamese colonial society, and on the other hand offered numerous verbal and situational humorous moments. The Italian translation *Il gioco indiscreto di Xuan* was published by ObarraO (Milan 2012). In the first step of the study, feedback from Vietnamese and Italian readers on the humorousness of the novel was collected. The purpose was to determine whether there are demographic factors influencing humour appreciation. The second step of the study was based on the collection of feedback by the Italian readers concerning the level of humorousness of two Italian translation versions, both made by the author of this paper. This would help verify the influence of linguistic factors on humour appreciation and, therefore, the applicability of GTVH on literary humour translation.

2.   The empirical study

2.1.   Theoretical background

In order to analyse narrative humour texts, the GTVH suggests recognizing humorous instances, and then identifying six parameters, called Knowledge Resources (KRs), in each punch line and jab line: Script Opposition (SO), Logical Mechanism (LM), Situation (SI), Target (TA), Narrative Strategy (NS), and Language (LA). These KRs are presented and exemplified in Attardo (1994, 2001, 2002). They are organized hierarchically, with SO at the first position and LA at the last one. That order also implies a metric for the degree of joke similarity: two jokes that share parameters at the higher position are more similar to each other than those sharing parameters at lower position. Language is located at the bottom of the similarity metric, therefore, two jokes that differ only at this level are perceived to be remarkably similar. From this metric, a mini-theory of joke translation was elaborated. In fact, in *Translation and Humor*, Attardo claimed that "the General Theory of Verbal Humour *already incorporates a simple theory of humour translation*" (2002: 185, emphasis in original), and considered that the simplest approach for translating humorous texts is to keep the KRs occupying the highest position in the hierarchy: "if possible, respect all six Knowledge Resources in your translation, but if necessary, *let your translation differ at the lowest level necessary for your pragmatic purpose*" (2002: 183, emphasis in original).

In Attardo (2001: 163-201) a full analysis of the jab and punch lines in Wilde's *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* was presented. In more than 95% of jab and punch lines[2], Language was considered irrelevant to the humour of the line.

Antonopoulou (2002) pointed out that the GTVH was originally modelled on jokes, in particular referential jokes, and of course the Language KR, that is the actual wording of the text, is much more important in verbal jokes than in referential ones[3]. However, she also noted that the humorous effect of certain jab lines may lie specifically in the linguistic construction, and that the idiomaticity and the conventionalized meaning of language could play an important role in appreciation of humour.

In this context, the present empirical study allowed us to observe if a small linguistic change can modify the perception and the appreciation of humour by Italian readers and therefore verify the role of LA in the translation of humorous texts from Vietnamese to Italian.

2.2.   Participants

60 Vietnamese people participated in the study. They were divided into six groups of 10:
- VW I: 10 Vietnamese women between 18 and 29,
- VW II: 10 Vietnamese women between 30 and 49,
- VW III: 10 Vietnamese women between 50 and 70,
- VM I: 10 Vietnamese men between 18 and 29,
- VM II: 10 Vietnamese men between 30 and 49,
- VM III: 10 Vietnamese men between 50 and 70.

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2 The concept of *jab line* was introduced in Attardo (1994, 2001) to distinguish between punch lines, which occur exclusively in a final position in jokes (Oring 1989, Attardo 1994) and jab lines, which, from a semantic point of view, are identical to punch lines, but occur in any other position in the text.

3 While *verbal humour* depends on the linguistic form and involves the phonemic/graphemic representation of the humorous element, *referential humour* uses language to convey meaning which is itself the source of humour and is based only on semantic/pragmatic incongruity (Attardo 1994).

Similarly, 60 Italian people participated in the study. They were also divided into six groups of 10:
- IW I: 10 Italian women between 18 and 29,
- IW II: 10 Italian women between 30 and 49,
- IW III: 10 Italian women between 50 and 70,
- IM I: 10 Italian men between 18 and 29,
- IM II: 10 Italian men between 30 and 49,
- IM III: 10 Italian men between 50 and 70.

2.3. Corpus

For the Vietnamese group:
60 humorous excerpts from the novel *Số Đỏ* (Vũ Trọng Phụng) were chosen based on the following criteria:
- Each excerpt is compatible with at least one pair of different scripts, opposed to each other. According to SSTH (Raskin 1985: 99) it can thus be considered as a single-joke-carrying text.
- All the excerpts are referential and coherent. They are presented in the questionnaire in the same order in which they appear in the novel. This helps to maintain the continuity of the narration.
- The punch line (or jab line) in each excerpt was in bold.

For the Italian group:
60 excerpts of the novel *Số Đỏ* were presented in a dual Italian translation, made by the author of this paper:
- Version A is the official translation of the novel.
- Version B keeps the first five Knowledge Resources (SO, LM, SI, TA, NA) unchanged, but differs from A in terms of wording.
- The punch line (or jab line) of each version's excerpt was in bold.

2.4. Procedure

The Vietnamese group had to read and rate the punch line/ jab line in bold on a scale of 1 to 10, from non-humorous to very humorous (even if the text contents more than one punch line/jab line, the participants must rate only the one in bold).
The Italian group had to:
- Read and rate each punch line or jab line of each version on a scale of 1 to 10, from non-humorous to very humorous (even if the text contents more than one punch line/jab line, the participants must rate only the one in bold).
- Indicate the favourite translation solution, independently of the humour level of the excerpt (version A/version B/no preference).

2.5. Results and discussion

2.5.1. *Elements that could influence the production process and the reception of humour*

To verify the reception of the Vietnamese humour in the Italian translation, I initially examined only the grades given to the official Vietnamese and Italian versions of the novel.
The tables shown below are the average grades that the 10 participants of each Vietnamese and Italian group gave to all 60 excerpts:

Table 1. Humour reception of each Vietnamese and Italian group

Vietnamese Participants	N. 1	N. 2	N. 3	N. 4	N. 5	N. 6	N. 7	N. 8	N. 9	N. 10
VW I	7,5	6,9	7,5	7,4	7,0	7,2	8,3	6,8	6,3	7,2
VW II	6,7	6,7	7,6	8,7	6,3	6,9	6,5	6,4	7,1	6,7
VW III	7,5	7,3	5,1	6,0	5,8	7,9	6,5	6,7	6,8	6,0
VM I	7,4	5,6	7,6	5,9	7,7	7,5	7,4	6,2	6,0	7,5
VM II	8,3	5,9	5,7	8,7	5,2	7,9	5,9	4,6	8,2	4,9
VM III	7,1	7,0	5,5	5,1	4,9	7,8	6,2	6,6	4,6	7,3
Italian Participants	N. 1	N. 2	N. 3	N. 4	N. 5	N. 6	N. 7	N. 8	N. 9	N. 10
IW I	7,1	6,7	6,6	6,4	6,2	6,5	6,3	5,3	5,2	5,3
IW II	7,4	7,2	6,9	6,1	6,2	6,3	5,0	4,3	2,1	5,5
IW III	7,4	6,5	6,8	5,8	5,8	4,5	5,5	5,1	4,5	2,9
IM I	6,7	7,0	7,1	6,3	3,8	5,6	4,1	5,4	5,8	4,6
IM II	7,0	7,2	6,5	5,0	4,2	4,0	5,9	3,5	5,0	4,1
IM III	7,1	7,6	6,0	5,8	4,0	3,4	4,2	3,4	4,3	6,7

The data show that, in general, the Vietnamese participants considered the 60 excerpts of the novel more humorous than their Italian counterparts did. The average grades that Vietnamese women, Vietnamese men, Italian women, and Italian men gave to the questionnaire were 6,9; 6,5; 5,8; and 5,4 respectively.

According to Hay (2001: 67), the process of appreciation of humour involves three steps: (1) humorous frame recognition; (2) understanding and (3) appreciation. It is noted that: the humorous moments were selected and presented to the participants in the questionnaires, so they could be recognized as such (the participants did not have to examine the whole text to find out the punchline/jab line). In the feedback, all the participants confirmed that they did not have problems in recognizing the humorous frame. The participants read the questionnaires in their mother tongue and their feedback showed that the participants had no difficulty in understanding either the questionnaire in general or the humorous moments. Therefore, they did not have problems of comprehension; consequently, the difference between the average vote of the Vietnamese questionnaire and the average score of the Italian one is mainly due to the last step: appreciation.

Going into detail, it is also possible to analyze some factors (either related to social variety or translation problems) that may have influenced the humour appreciation of the readers.

2.5.1.1. Genders

Gender differences in humour appreciation are an important topic of discussion. It has been demonstrated that humour with sexual or aggressive contents seems to be more appreciated by men than women (McGhee 1971, 1979). These studies, however, were conducted nearly forty years ago, when the attitude towards gender roles was different from today. A higher appreciation of sexual and aggressive humour in male subjects could be explained by the fact that women avoid laughing at these kinds of jokes for fear of being judged, especially in a conservative country (Martin 2014). For Martin (2014: 125), differences in gender-related appreciation of humour do not mean that one of the two genres has more "sense of humour". Rather, one might expect that these gender-related differences reflect cognitive, personality, and

social differences. Consequently, we should observe the various forms of humour that men and women appreciate to understand every aspect of this concept.

> "Men and women enjoyed jokes targeting the opposite sex more than jokes targeting the same sex".
> (Abel & Flick 2012: 41)

> "Sexual and aggressive jokes are frequently disparaging of women, and it is therefore not surprising if women enjoy them less than men do […] when researchers have used non-sexist sexual jokes as stimuli (i.e., jokes about sex that do not disparage either women or men), they generally have not found gender differences in enjoyment ratings".
> Martin (2007: 147)

> "Women's general disliking of sexual humor seems to be due to the sexist nature of much of this type of humor; women appear to enjoy sexual humor just as much as men do, as long as it is not demeaning toward women".
> Martin (2014: 123)

It seems, therefore, that there is a strong link between the appreciation of humour and the target of humour. In the present empirical study, women (both Italian and Vietnamese) judged the novel more humorous than their respective male counterparts. Looking at the excerpts, we found that there are at least 20 situations in which men are the target of the satire, mocking or irony; twice the amount of the situations in which women are the direct target. Excerpts whose targets are women were in general considered more humorous by men than by women, and – vice versa – excerpts whose target are men were in general considered more humorous by women than by men.

These data collected from my study are in line with studies according to which the gender of the target could have an impact on humour appreciation. We can see in the following chart that men (both Vietnamese and Italian) enjoyed humour in excerpts where a man discredited a woman, or in general when women were discredited, but show little appreciation in the opposite situation. Italian women, on the contrary, enjoyed humour more easily in excerpts where a man was discredited by a woman, or in general when men are the target of an aggressive or a sexual punch line. This phenomenon is also present, though less evident, in Vietnamese female subjects[4].

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4 Gender difference in the use of humour and in the appreciation of humour is an important subject of study (Crawford 2003, Kotthoff 2006, Chiaro & Baccolini 2014) and deserves further investigation. See also Ruch & Hehl (1986) and Ruch (1998) for studies concerning personality as predictor of humour response.
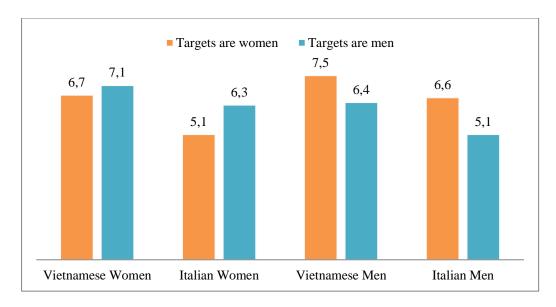
Chart 1. Gender differences in humour appreciation.

Of course, this chart represented only the average votes of each group: the results do not mean that all male and female subjects differ on this variable. Instead «because there is typically a great variability among individuals within each gender, even though the mean scores for men and women may differ, there will still be a large overlap in their contributions» (Martin 2014:125).

2.5.1.2. Age

In both Vietnamese and Italian groups, humour appreciation descends gradually as the age grows. The group that shows the greater humour appreciation are the youngest participants (18-29-year-olds), whereas the oldest (50-70-year-olds) show the least enjoyment. Even if the differences are not particularly strong (0%-10.1%), they show a general attitude toward the satirical humour style of the novel.
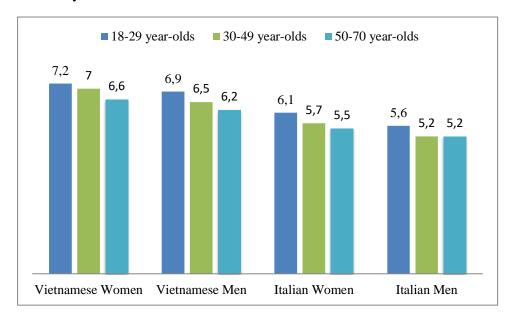

Chart 2. Age differences in humour appreciation.

There were several studies on the effects of aging on humour appreciation (Ruch et al. 1990; Shammi & Stuss 2003; Mak & Carpenter 2007). Some stated that «roughly around 60 years of age, enjoyment of humour starts to decline» (Greengross 2013). I believe, however, that in this case age-related cognitive ability has little to do with humour comprehension and appreciation. The ideal target audience of *Số Đỏ* was young adults (the author wrote this novel at the age of 24 – the same age as the protagonist). The most ridiculous characters of the novel are men of advanced age, such as police officers, journalists, artists, and doctors. The disparagement humour expects that the more one feels detached from the mocked groups or individuals, the more s/he enjoys the mockery (Zillmann 1983; Ruch & Hehl 1986; Ferguson & Ford 2008).

> Humour appreciation varies inversely with the favorableness of the disposition toward the agent or the entity being disparaged and varies directly with the favorableness of the disposition towards the agent or the entity disparaging it.
>
> (Zillman & Cantor 1976: 100-101)

2.5.1.3. Direct contact with the source culture and language

The first three participants of each Italian group have had direct contact with the Vietnamese culture and language. In total, there were 18 people that have lived (or are still living) in Vietnam (for a period of 6 months to 3 years). They also have a fair competence of Vietnamese language, from A2 to B1 levels[5]. In average, they rated much more positively the humour of the novel than other Italian participants:
- The first three participants' scores from group IW I were respectively 7,1; 6,7 and 6,6; compared to the average score 6,1 of the whole group.
- The first three participants' scores from group IW II were respectively 7,4; 7,2 and 6,9; compared to the average score 5,7 of the whole group.
- The first three participants' scores from group IW III were respectively 7,4; 6,5 and 6,8; compared to the average score 5,5 of the whole group.
- The first three participants' scores from group IM I were respectively 6,7; 7,0 and 7,1; compared to the average score 5,6 of the whole group.
- The first three participants' scores from group IM II were respectively 7,0; 7,2 and 6,5; compared to the average score 5,2 of the whole group.
- The first three participants' scores from group IW I were respectively 7,1; 7,6 and 6,0; compared to the average score 5,2 of the whole group.

As satire is peculiar for the culture and the time in which it is produced (Simpson 2003), the contact with linguistic and socio-cultural realities in Vietnam, especially in Hanoi where the novel is set, could certainly have facilitated the comprehension of the humour in the novel. For the largest part of the Italian audience, however, Vietnamese language and culture are little known. It is highly possible that this weighed on humour reception of the satire and, therefore, could partly explain why the Vietnamese participants gave the novel's humour a higher average rating than their Italian counterparts. In fact, Antonopoulou affirms that the "humorous effect may rely crucially on the degree of immediacy with which the reader can establish mental contact with the referent" (2004: 241): the presence of "extraneous" cultural elements not immediately recognized and understood by Italian readers reduces the level of immediacy with which readers can establish contact with the text, and consequently, the level of humour.

So far, the empirical results have allowed us to verify some sociolinguistic factors that can influence the perception and appreciation of humour by the Vietnamese and Italian participants. Sex, age and knowledge of the language and culture of the source text are the most important individual variables that determine the humour appreciation identified in this study.

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5 According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

The empirical study results showed that the Vietnamese subjects enjoyed the novel's humour more than the Italian subjects (Table 1 and Chart 2). Clearly, the humorous content was somehow lost during the translation process. We will now investigate more closely the impact on the reception of Italian participants of some linguistic choices made during the translation.

2.5.2. Language Knowledge Resources' role in humour translation

To verify the translation problems related to language, I decided to use the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (Attardo & Raskin 1991; Attardo 1994, 2001, 2002) as the theoretical instrument.

The average scores that the Italian participants gave to the two Italian translations were examined. As described above, there were 60 excerpts, and each of them had two translation versions: version A was the official Italian translation; version B was a different, unofficial, translation, which differs from version A at the LA level, while the two versions shared the first five Knowledge Resources (SO, LM, SI, TA, NA). In total, Italian participants had to evaluate the humour level of 120 excerpts and choose their favourite translation of each excerpt.

According to the GTVH, the LA includes all the linguistic components necessary for verbalizing a text, and any sentence can be reformulated with different words without changing its semantic content. This assumption is also applied in the translation of humorous texts (except for verbal humour, such as puns):

> The claim is made explicitly that "as any sentence can be recast in a different wording (using synonyms, other syntactic constructions, etc.) any joke can be worded in a (very large) number of ways without changes in its semantic content" (Attardo 2001: 22). The notion of meaning being kept 'intact' under paraphrase is also explicitly applied to (interlingual) translation, with puns regarded as a marginal exception, along with other 'verbal' (as opposed to 'referential') jokes.
>
> (Antonopoulou 2002: 199)

The present empirical study questions the fact that LA, even in referential texts, can be changed "freely" without affecting in any way the humorous effect and/or the other higher levels of the hierarchy. Here are some examples:

Excerpt n.1
Trên hè, dưới bóng cây gạo, một ông thầy số đã có tuổi ngồi bình tĩnh nhìn cái tráp, nghiên mực, miếng son, ống bút, với mấy lá số tử vi mẫu, thỉnh thoảng lại ngáp một cái như một nhà triết học chân chính. [...] Xuân Tóc Đỏ đỏng đảnh tiến đến chỗ ông thầy số. Hắn đứng nhìn ông già hồi lâu như một anh dân quê lần đầu đứng trước cái chuồng khỉ của bà Bé Tý, rồi nói lớn:
- Xem một quẻ đây!
Ông cụ tỉnh cơn ngủ gật tức khắc, lôi ngay cái bút lông gài ở tai xuống nhanh nhẹn chẳng kém những thầy cảnh sát lúc biên phạt.
(Vietnamese version, *Số Đỏ*, 2014 [1936]: 7)

Under the shadow of a kapok tree, an elderly fortune-teller sat quietly, arranging the tools of his trade: a small box, an ink jar, a tube of lipstick, a pencil holder, and several sample horoscope charts. From time to time he yawned, taking on the expression of a true philosopher. [...] Red-Haired Xuan sashayed over to the fortune-teller. Stopping abruptly, he eyeballed the old man like a peasant discovering Madame Be Ty's famous monkey cages for the first time.
"Read my fortune! Short term," he blurted out.
Roused from his nap, the old man peered up at Xuan and, quick as a policeman writing a ticket, drew a feathered pen from behind his ear.
(English version, *Dumb Luck* 2002: 34-35)

All'ombra dell'albero di Bombax, era seduto un vecchio indovino. Contemplava la propria valigetta, il calamaio, l'astuccio e alcune tabelle di oroscopi. Di tanto in tanto, sbadigliava come

un vero e proprio filosofo. […] (Xuan Capelli Rossi) si diresse lentamente verso l'indovino e rimase a osservarlo a lungo come un campagnolo che scopre la gabbia delle scimmie della signora Be Ty per la prima volta:

«Leggimi l'oroscopo!»

Il vecchio si svegliò di soprassalto e afferrò il pennello di piuma da dietro l'orecchio con la velocità di un poliziotto che scrive una multa.[6]

<div align="right">(Italian version A, Il gioco indiscreto di Xuan, 2012: 7)</div>

Il vecchio si svegliò subito e tirò fuori il pennello di piuma da dietro l'orecchio in modo non meno veloce di quello con cui un poliziotto scrive una multa.[7]

<div align="right">(Italian version B of the punch line in bold)</div>

The two versions share all the first five KRs (SO: fortune-teller who took out a pen/policeman who writes a ticket; LM: analogy; NS: hyperbole; SI: context; TA: the fortune-teller), they have the same meaning. The second version was the paraphrased version of the first one: the main difference between them is that the structure "con la velocità di" (literally "at the speed of") in the first version is replaced by "in modo non meno veloce di" (literally "not less fast than") in the second version. The average grade of version A was 6.4 points, while version B was graded 4.0 points on average. Version A was also much more appreciated than version B, even though version B respected the structure "*nhanh nhẹn chẳng kém*" (not less fast than) of the Vietnamese version. It is possible that the linguistic expression sounds "bizarre", "unnatural" to the Italian readers.

Table 2. Humour reception and preference between the two versions of excerpt n.1

Version A	Version B	Preference A	Preference B	No preference
6.4/10	4.0/10	85%	15%	0%

Excerpt n.10

Ty cảnh sát này là một ty sép thuộc bộ thứ 18 của thành phố mà nhà nước mới đặt thêm ra ít lâu nay thôi. Tất cả nhân viên trong sở cẩm chỉ có bảy người: một ông Cẩm Tây, một ông thông ngôn ta, một ông quản cảnh sát, và bốn người lính. Khu vực mà sở cẩm có nhiệm vụ trông coi gồm có 16 phố, toàn là phố Tây, có phố dài hàng năm cây số, phố nào cũng có vẻ thái bình. Thành thử mỗi khi bắt phạt được một đám thì nhân viên sở cẩm sướng như trúng số độc đắc.

<div align="right">(Vietnamese version, Số Đỏ, 2014 [1936]: 16)</div>

It was a small branch office for the city's newly created Eighteenth Precinct. Its seven officers included a French captain, a Vietnamese interpreter, an office manager, and four patrolmen. The sixteen streets under its jurisdiction were located in a French neighborhood that was so peaceful and secure that violations of the law were as rare as winning lottery tickets.

<div align="right">(English version, Dumb Luck 2002: 43)</div>

*Era un reparto della diciottesima circoscrizione della città, creato recentemente dal governo e composto da sette persone: un commissario francese, un interprete vietnamita, un sergente e quattro gendarmi. Questo reparto era responsabile di sedici belle strade abitate quasi esclusivamente dai francesi, alcune lunghe anche cinque chilometri, tanto calme e sicure che, **quelle***

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[6] Back translation of the punch line in bold: The old man woke up suddenly and drew a feathered pen from behind his ear with the speed of a policeman writing a ticket.

[7] Back translation: The old man woke up at once and drew a feathered pen from behind his ear in a way not less fast than the way a policeman writes a ticket.

volte in cui potevano infliggere una multa, i gendarmi della caserma erano felici come se avessero vinto alla lotteria![8]

(Italian version A, *Il gioco indiscreto di Xuan*, 2012: 15-16)

Ogni multa che potevano infliggere era per i gendarmi una vera e propria manna dal cielo![9]

(Italian version B of the punch line in bold)

The two versions shared the opposition of the scripts (normal / abnormal, fine / fortune), the target (the gendarmes), the logical mechanism (analogy), the narrative strategy (descriptive). The humour of this passage lays in the fact that something bad (a fine) was considered an incredibly lucky event. The object of the analogy in the first version (lottery winnings) has been replaced with another one (a manna from heaven) in the second version. The result shows how a change at the lexical level had a lot of influence on the readers' reception. This confirms how lexical choices can easily save or ruin a joke.

Table 3. Humour reception and preference between the two versions of excerpt n.10

Version A	Version B	Preference A	Preference B	No preference
6.5/10	5.3/10	77%	15%	8%

Excerpt n. 50

(Bà bạn) «Người ta lại đồn rằng cụ Hồng muốn gả Tuyết cho bạn nữa!»
[...] Xuân chợt nghĩ đến những cử chỉ bán sử nữ mà Tuyết đã giảng rõ ở khách sạn Bồng Lai. Nó không thích một nửa chữ trinh, mặc dầu người ấy khôn ngoan đến bực không đời nào nhẹ dạ đánh mắt cả chữ trinh. Nghĩ thế, Xuân bèn thở dài: «Rõ thật đa nhân duyên, nhiều phiền, lắm não!»
Bà bạn lại nói: «Gớm, bạn kỹ tính thật! Kén vợ đến thế thì...»
Xuân lại làm luôn một câu: «Nhưng mà tôi sợ nhất cái mọc sừng. Lấy Tuyết thì có phen người ta có thể đem tôi ra nấu thành cao ban long».

(Vietnamese version, *Số Đỏ*, 2014 [1936]: 143)

(Mrs. ILL) "They say that Grandpa Hồng wants you, my friend, to marry Miss Snow!"
[…] Suddenly, however, Xuân recalled Snow's conception of partial purity, as she had explained and demonstrated to him at the Fairyland Hotel. Although he knew that Miss Snow would never give up her virginity entirely before getting married, the idea of semi-virginity troubled him. He sighed to himself. "So many loves! Alas!"
"It must be so hard for you to decide, my friend!" Mrs. ILL replied. "Of course, you must choose carefully…"
"What scares me most is the prospect of sprouting horns. If I were to marry Miss Snow, my horn might grow so large that they could be ground into a power and sold as traditional medicine."

(English version, Dumb Luck 2002: 137)

(La signora) «Girano voci che il venerabile Hong voglia farti sposare Tuyet!»
[...] Improvvisamente Xuan ricordò le teorie di Tuyet sulla semi-verginità all'Hotel Terra incantata. Sapeva che la signorina Tuyet non avrebbe mai rinunciato del tutto alla sua purezza, ma l'idea della sua incompleta illibatezza lo afflisse. Sospirò: «Troppi amori! Ahimè!»
«Come sei attento nella scelta della donna della tua vita!» osservò la signora.

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[8] Back translation of the punch line in bold: every time that the patrolmen of this police station could give a ticket, they were as happy as if they had won the lottery!
[9] Back translation: Every fine that they could give was a real manna from heaven for the patrolmen!

*Xuan la interruppe: «Il mio più grande timore è la prospettiva di diventare un cornuto. **Se sposassi Tuyet, le corna spunterebbero sulla mia testa talmente alte e robuste da poter essere polverizzate e vendute come medicine tradizionali!».** [10]*

(Italian version A, *Il gioco indiscreto di Xuan*, 2012: 135)

Se sposassi Tuyet, un giorno si potrebbero tagliare le alte e robuste corna sulla mia testa per produrre medicine tradizionali!».[11]

(Italian version B)

The two versions of translation shared the opposition of the scripts (real/not real, faithful/unfaithful, human head/animal head), the logical mechanism (exaggeration), the target (Xuan), the narrative strategy (dialogue); and they differ only at the LA level (different lexical and syntactic linguistic components to form the sentence). Version A was more appreciated than version B, and the preferred version of the majority.

Table 4. Humour reception and preference between the two versions of excerpt n.50

Version A	Version B	Preference A	Preference B	No preference
6.2/10	5.6/10	72%	23%	5%

The following table shows the average scores that the Italian participants have assigned to the two versions of the Italian translation (version A and version B). The data show that there are differences, even if not too marked, in the humour level of the two versions.

Table 5. Italian participants' humour reception of the 60 excerpts

Participant groups	IW I	IW II	IW III	IM I	IM II	IM III
Version A	6,2	5,7	5,5	5,7	5,2	5,2
Version B	5,6	5,3	5,1	5,3	4,9	4,8

In general, Table 5 shows that minor changes at lexical and/or syntactic levels make the text less amusing to the readers. In the examples shown above, version B requires more time and effort to process, because it is either more linguistically complex than version A, or prone to sound slightly awkward for an Italian reader. As timing is an important factor in humour perception and appreciation, this added complexity or linguistic awkwardness gets in the way of said immediacy.

This is an example of how changes to the LA can actually alter the readers' reception of humour, and that even in referential humorous moments, LA plays a fundamental role in the appreciation of humour, as Antonopoulou suggested:

> In relation to the Language KR, it would be erroneous to consider that since no punning is involved here, jab lines can be freely paraphrased interlingually as the GTVH would predict for any referential joke.

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[10] Back translation of the punch line in bold: If I were to marry Tuyet, horns would spring up from my head, so tall and strong that they could be ground into a power and sold as traditional medicine! (In Vietnamese and in Italian, "having/sprouting horns" means "to be a cuckhold")

[11] Back translation: If I were to marry Tuyet, someday they could cut the tall and strong horns from my head to produce traditional medicine!

The GTVH, moreover, focuses on the similarity between texts, rather than on the readers' reception, which is a fundamental element for the translators, as underlined by Antonopoulou (2002: 197): "Humor appreciation is more important for translation scholars than it may be for linguists working on humour". The data collected by the empirical study show that Italian participants had a strong preference for one version over the other, as shown in the following table:

Table 6. Italian participants' preferences of the 60 excerpts

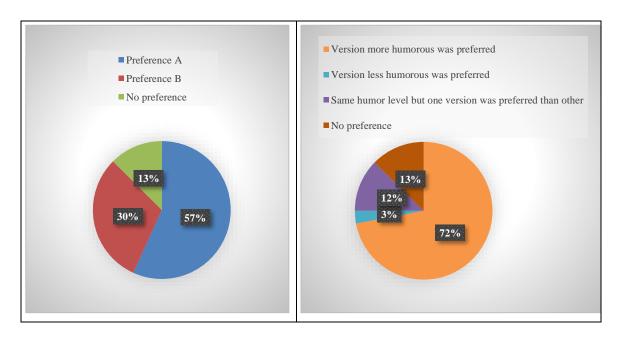| Participant groups	IW I	IW II	IW III	IM I	IM II	IM III
Preference A	340	377	312	333	311	358
Preference B	206	179	188	196	177	168
No preference	54	44	100	71	112	74
In total (60 excerpts * 10 participants)	600	600	600	600	600	600

Chart 3.Translation preference of Italian participants.

A strong preference (72%) was given to the translation considered more humorous. In a few cases (3%) the translation considered less humorous was preferred. In 12% of the cases, Italian subjects gave the same score to both versions, but still chose one of the two as their favourite translation. This reaffirms that, even in a humorous literary text, sometimes the comic effect is not the most important factor (unlike jokes, for example): it may be more important to keep as much as possible of the effect that the original text gives the reader in the target text than to maintain the formal similarity between the two texts[12]. So, in the 87% of cases, the two

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12 See the concepts of "dynamic (or functional) equivalence" in general translation (Nida & Taber 1969) and "functional manipulation" in humour translation (Dore 2019).

translations of the same excerpt were dissimilar in term of humour reception, even if they shared all the first five KRS. Feedback from readers is one of the factors that can influence translation choices and, as such, should not be overlooked in translation studies. We would therefore like to stress the need for a re-evaluation of the weight of LA in the translation of long humorous texts and, consequently, the applicability of GTVH to this field.

2.5.6. Limitations of the study and some observations

The GTVH was chosen as the theoretical framework of this research for several reasons, among which the fact that until now it is the only general linguistic theory on humour, and also that its principles are supposed to be applicable to all humorous texts, even to novels. However, this empirical study clearly shows the difficulty to verify the efficiency of a translation according to the GTVH criteria through a questionnaire like this one: on the one hand, 60 excerpts could not give the reader an overall view of the novel; on the other hand, enlarging the scope of the questionnaire to the whole novel would have had obvious practical obstacles.

Because of the impossibility to ask the participants to read the entire novel, the reception of the humour of the novel was, in fact, the reception of the novel excerpts included in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire contains 60 excerpts from the Vietnamese novel. The length of the questionnaire in Vietnamese is about 30,000 characters, the Italian one is about 70,000 characters long. Consequently, the necessary time for the participants to complete the questionnaire was quite long (on average 20 minutes for Vietnamese participants and 50 minutes for Italian participants). Also, the questionnaire was sent to the participants by email. This modality assured a high number of participants (120 subjects), regardless of their place of residence. At the same time, it meant an impossibility to control factors that could influence the reading process, both external (disturbances and interruptions of all types, such as noise), and internal (stress, fatigue, hunger, sleep, etc.).

The present research was not designed to measure psychosocial factors which can influence the participants' humour receptions (such as personality, mental health status, social situations, etc.).

From the analysis of the results of the questionnaire, we can detect a loss of effectiveness of the humorous force in translated passages, due to various factors described above. We would like to make some modest proposals to translators, especially those translating texts belonging to literatures and cultures very distant from those of the target culture and language.

First, it is essential for the translator to know the humorous style of the country of departure and arrival. The differences between the departure and arrival culture regarding the humorous style and the way it is expressed have an impact on translation strategies and on the effect that translated humour can cause in the new context. As shown above, humour is above all an intercultural question. Born in a certain culture and in a specific historical and social context, humour is presented in various nuances that are not always easy to understand. Translating humour is particularly complex, and some obstacles become more insurmountable as the two cultures are more distant from each other. The Italian readers of *Số Đỏ*, for example, even though certainly more inclined and eager to read "alternative" literature than the general Italian audience, are still much less equipped to understand Vietnamese humour than American humour. One of the most effective (as well as simple and economic) solutions to reduce the cultural gap is to provide a general framework of the novel by inserting a preface at the beginning of the translation. Basic information is often unavoidable because it allows the reader to elaborate and appreciate certain humorous themes (above all the ironic and satirical themes)

of the text. However, this is not a common practice in the Italian market, especially in economic editions[13].

> While it is important for a translation to be able to stand alone, the downside of the decision not to include a preface or other notes is that readers have only the bare essentials for understanding the text at a basic level and are not given any extra cultural background that might deepen the reading experience.
>
> (Maher 2011: 153)

Secondly, it is erroneous to attribute the same importance to all humorous moments. Recognizing and understanding humour is essential, but for the translator it is equally important to be able to measure the "weight" of humour, to understand the function and importance of each humorous element in the source text. Zabalbeascoa (2005: 186-188) calls this task *prioritizing*, that is, determining what is important in every single case and how important every single case is, so that one can then decide which translating strategy to use. This also depends very much on the kind of text the translator is dealing with. If, in the case of jokes and comedy, translating means above all maintaining its humorous strength in the target language, even at the cost of changing the meaning of the original joke; in the case of a literary text, the translator can not sacrifice the function of the text as a whole to maintain the function of humour. The dilemma of choosing between philological rigor and the gelotological effect must be tackled on a case-by-case basis, especially when translating humour conveyed via culture-specific references. On the one hand, the presence of "extraneous" cultural elements not immediately recognized and understood by Italian readers reduces the level of immediacy with which readers can establish contact with the text, and consequently, the level of humour (Antonopoulou 2002, 2004). On the other hand, the introduction of elements not belonging to the target language and culture has the advantage of being able to enrich the reader's knowledge of arrival, broadening her/his horizons. Literary scholar and translator Lawrence Venuti, borrowing from Lecercle (1990: 82) the term "remainder" – that is, minor linguistic variation over which major forms hold sway – asserts that good translation "releases the remainder by cultivating a heterogeneous discourse, opening up the standard dialect and literary canons to what is foreign to themselves, to the substandard and marginal" (2008: 11). The original text passes through the process of assimilation of the translation, without however completely losing its extraneousness in the horizon of arrival. It is Venuti's response to the dominant tendency of the "domesticate", "invisible" translation, which tends to flatten the signs of cultural differences to produce "a text so transparent that it does not seem to be translated" (Shapiro, cited by Venuti 2008: 1).

The last consideration is an invitation to the "inverse" translation, that is the translation into a non-mother tongue language. Usually, one translates from a foreign language into one's mother tongue. Until recently, "inverse" translation was seen as a taboo subject, but it has been gaining more and more attention from the academic community: Pokorn (2005), through an empirical study, demonstrates that the quality of the translation, and its precision, fluency and acceptability depend above all on the individual ability of each translator, on the strategies that he/she decides to adopt, as well as on his/her knowledge of the culture of departure and arrival, rather than their mother tongue and the direction of translation. Indeed, "inverse" translation is not an unusual practice. The need for translation into a non-native language takes place on several occasions, including cases where there is a rare combination of languages, and it is difficult to find a native speaker. Consider, for example, the Italian and Vietnamese languages and the need to translate

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[13] The translation of the novel *Số Đỏ*, for example, was published in 2002 without the preface, with a short blurb on the back cover, that only provides basic information for promotional reasons. This is not an isolated case. In general, publishers in Italian are rarely willing to include the translator's preface, except when it comes to the publications of the classics, and therefore this decision was in line with the current practice.

Vietnamese literary works into Italian. While it is possible to find translators of native English or French speakers who can translate directly from Vietnamese into their own language, as it is possible to find translators of native Vietnamese translators who can translate from Italian into Vietnamese, it is not yet possible to find Italian translators who are able to translate directly from Vietnamese. In the case of the translation of humour, it is presumed that those who translate literary works belonging to their own language and culture benefit from its familiarity with the author, the work, and the humorous style of the work. To overcome the limits posed by a translation performed by non-native speakers, the practice of combining the first translator with a second mother-tongue translator is often used.

Finally, translators should have the opportunity to provide readers and scholars with a detailed picture of the decision-making process adopted during the translation, to reflect on their experience, to meditate on the translation choices and to establish the consequences, losses, and advantages of their own decision. This process would not be important only for translation studies and for future translators – as it would give them concrete working examples (Mahner 2011: 133) –, but it would also help translators themselves to challenge their marginal position and the state of "invisibility" that they occupy in contemporary editorial culture (Venuti 2008).

3. Conclusions

An empirical study, conducted on a sample of 120 people (60 Vietnamese and 60 Italian), introduced by the description of the theoretical framework at the base of the investigation and subsequently described in terms of procedure and results, was carried out in order to identify factors that can influence the assessment of the humour level and to answer the question concerning the applicability of GTVH to humorous literary texts.

By having the participants grade the Vietnamese novel *Số Đỏ* and the Italian published translation version *Il gioco indiscreto di Xuan*, and comparing their scores, it was possible to reaffirm some socio-linguistic theories on the reception of humour. In detail, the data allow us to observe that one is more likely to appreciate humour when one is not part of the categories subject to ridicule/irony/satire. Excerpts whose target are women, for example, were judged funnier by men than by their female counterparts and, conversely, excerpts whose target are men were judged funnier by women than by their male counterparts. Further studies need to be carried out to investigate difference in scores between Vietnamese and Italian women. Also, the fact that, in both Vietnamese and Italian groups, the appreciation of humor drops gradually as the age grows can be seen as a consequence of the fact that the most ridiculous characters in the novel (policemen, doctors, artists, writers, etc.) are people of advanced age, while, originally, the ideal target audience was composed of young adults. Moreover, excerpts whose targets are the Westernization movement and Vietnamese people who boast to be "westernized" were generally much more appreciated by the Vietnamese than the Italian audience, while some few situations in which there are specific European references or satirical elements on Vietnam were considered more amusing by the Italian audience than the Vietnamese one. The results of the questionnaire also confirmed that a direct contact with the original language and culture constitutes an important role in humour understanding and appreciating. Italian participants who have spent a period of stay in Vietnam and possess a certain knowledge of Vietnamese language have in fact evaluated much more positively the humour of the novel than other Italian participants.

Moreover, a comparison between the scores that the participants assigned to the two Italian translation versions of the Vietnamese novel allowed us to carefully analyze the role of Language Knowledge Resource according to the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (Attardo 1994, 2001, 2002). The two versions share the first five levels of KRs individualized by the

GTVH and differ only in the last level. According to the GTVH, since the LA is at the end of the hierarchy, the texts that differ only at this level must be remarkably similar and, consequently, have a similar comic force. The data collected in the present empirical study have shown that, according to the Italian participants, the two versions of the translation were dissimilar in terms of humour, and consequently, in readers' preferences. In most cases (87%), in fact, the Italian participants have expressed a preference for the linguistic choices of one of the two translations (and usually the version considered more entertaining is also more appreciated stylistically). Stylistic differences, therefore, can affect greatly the humorousness of the target text. These changes happen – within the framework of the GTVH – at the LA level, which allows us to question the applicability of GTVH to the field of humour translation: although it is a useful tool for analyzing and verifying the similarity between the source and target text, it has proved to be impractical and not always reliable if we want to use it as a parameter of the translation of literary humorous texts, where every linguistic choice is potentially full of meaning and humour potentiality. The importance of LA should be reconsidered and further investigated.

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