

# Accounting for Language Humour Devices in Terms of Eugeniu Coşeriu's Theory

Gina MĂCIUCĂ,  
“Ştefan cel Mare” University of Suceava, Romania

**Abstract:** While endeavouring to document humour-generating [=HG] devices, we set out on a trek across various theories on language to see which of them – if any – could be made available for tapping in this respect. The idiosyncratic stance Coşeriu took on linguistic norms [=LN], in particular the view he advanced, that they are even apt to cause each other to be breached, greatly assisted us in blazing a trail on the comic effects that could be generated in the process. A synopsis of research on effects orchestrated by infringement of LN and ambiguity combined is presented in the second section of the contribution at hand, after reviewing a selection of theoretical rudiments of both HG devices in Section 1. The third and last section takes linguicomedy a step further, into the shifting sands of translatability, with a major focus on the translator as languacultural communicator. In the concluding remarks to the final subsection thereof we take the liberty to put forward a scale for rating translatability of LN-flouting humour (which just happens to differ – and with good reason, too – from Coşeriu's hierarchy of LN-breaching types), as well as the legitimate claim, in our view, of humour translation to a genre *per se*.

**Keywords:** linguistic norms (infringement of), linguicomedy, humour-generating devices, ambiguity, translatability (of language humour)

## I Linguicomedy: a Glimpse of the Basics

### I.1 Ambiguity: the Root of All Evil or a Blessing in Disguise?

Generally divided into ‘lexical’ ambiguity<sup>1</sup> and ‘structural’ ambiguity, the linguistic phenomenon in question never failed to

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<sup>1</sup> This type is further subdivided according to the word class to which the ambiguity carrier pertains (e.g. nouns, verbs, prepositions, etc).

attract a keen scholarly interest<sup>2</sup>. With psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology, computational and cognitive linguistics joining forces to explore the ambiguity resolution mechanisms mysteriously orchestrating sentence processing, a fairly large number of theories and models have been put forward and devised, respectively, each of which purports to best explain the former, e.g. the garden-path model (Frazier 1979), exhaustive access model, selective/direct access model, ordered and reordered access models, graded salience hypothesis (cf Giora 2003 for detailed description of the last six), referential theory (Altmann and Steedman 1988), unrestricted race model (van Gompel et al 2000).

Initially hooted by many a theorist as a most undesirable snag in sentence processing, ambiguity (henceforth A.), whether intentionally or unintentionally created, seems to have finally come into its own nowadays as a most reliable generator of humorous and ironic effects. One of the first to indicate A. resolution mechanisms as conveniently accounting for the generation of humour was Greimas (1966), who argued in favour of a bipartite structure of jokes, with one sequence containing an

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<sup>2</sup> Equally reflected by the various types proposed – in addition to the simplest, canonical lexical one – , to which theorists attached labels as diverse as: ‘syntactic’ ambiguity (Stageberg 1970, Raskin 1979, Oaks 1994, Attardo et al 1994), ‘phonological’ ambiguity (Reah 1998), ‘referential’ ambiguity (Attardo 2002). Syntactic ambiguity is further classified into ‘class’ ambiguity (Oaks 1994) and ‘attachment’ ambiguity (Hirst 1987, Oaks 1994, Attardo et al 1994), while structural ambiguity – of which syntactic ambiguity is a subtype – is considered by Hirst (1987) to include, alongside attachment ambiguity, ‘gap-finding’ ambiguity and ‘analytical’ ambiguity (an alternative label for class ambiguity), or by Trask (2007) to exhibit ‘surface-structure’ ambiguity and ‘deep-structure’ ambiguity. More idiosyncratic classifications originated with Stageberg 1971 (lexical, syntactic, class, script) and Raskin 1979 (regular, figurative, syntactic, situational, quasi).

opposition or a variation of meaning (or “isotopy”, in Greimas’ terms), and the other concealing the opposition via a connecting term, or “camouflage” (1966: 70).

A similar line of reasoning, only differently couched, seems to have been followed by Raskin (1979) on advancing his Semantic Script Theory of Humor, which lays down two primary criteria to be complied with by any “single-joke-carrying text” – full or partial compatibility of that particular text with two different scripts<sup>3</sup>, and a semantic opposition obtaining between the latter two – , in addition to assuming the existence of a semantic-script-switch trigger in the form of A. or contradiction.

Quite interestingly, both these views – i. e. Greimas’<sup>4</sup> and Raskin’s<sup>5</sup> – were later developed by Attardo (1994), who specifically focused on the elements connecting and disrupting the two semantic phases (called ‘connector’ and ‘disjunctor’, respectively) and, in particular, on their humour-generating interplay<sup>6</sup>.

A further significant, more empirically-based, approach to humour-generating (henceforth HG) mechanisms is that originating with Oaks (1994), who contributed a quite impressive array of A. ‘enablers’ to the scholarly research of humour<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Script’ is defined as an “organized chunk of information” (Raskin 1985: 99).

<sup>4</sup> S. thorough investigation of the Isotopy-Disjunction Model in Attardo 1994.

<sup>5</sup> S. in this respect the General Theory of Verbal Humour (Attardo 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Briefly described, in a first stage the connector supports a sense (called ‘sense one’), which is activated and retained until rendered invalid by the disjunctor, with immediate reinterpretation (or ‘backtracking’ of sense one and subsequent validation of the opposite sense (called ‘sense two’) taking effect in the second stage. Occasionally, disjunctor and connector are represented by the same lexical item or string of words (i.e., are “non-distinct”), which causes overlapping of reinterpretation of sense one and validation of sense two.

<sup>7</sup> The main focus of his in-depth analysis were various word classes like articles, conjuncts, verbs, etc as enablers of the syntactic subtype of class A.

Our last reference humour-theory-wise<sup>8</sup> will be to Giora's seminal study (2003) bringing a more forceful – and plausible, at that – element to bear on the semantic-script switch or disjunctive-connector nexus postulated by Raskin and Attardo, respectively, namely salience. More specifically, while keeping within the two-stage interpretation bounds, she additionally assumes the most salient meaning of a word to be first processed on reading/hearing a joke, and retained as long as contextually compatible, with subsequent suppression thereof and activation of the second, less salient meaning, when the former has been invalidated by later processed context.

In the present section an attempt was made to review a selection of the theoretical rudiments of ambiguity-based humour, on which the author grounds her research discussed *infra*.

## **I.2 Infringement of Linguistic Norms as a Major HG Device**

While still under the spell of the theory advanced by Coşeriu (1994: 31-45; for fuller details s. Măciucă 2010: 50-51) on linguistic norms, and in relentless pursuit of HG devices, the connection between the two was gradually revealed to us (cf Măciucă 2002: 11-24). Taking the reasoning one step further, we also took the liberty of assuming that comic effects could indeed be traced back to the flouting of each of the three norm types identified by Coşeriu: of congruence, correctness and appropriateness (cf Măciucă 2002 : 105-174, Măciucă 2005: 139-155), and, pre-eminently, to the fact that they are even apt to cause each other to be breached, provided, Coşeriu argues (1994: 45), a fairly rigid hierarchy is being observed, according to which: the

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<sup>8</sup> For obvious reasons of space we chose to confine our brief survey of the literature to the studies exploring strategies considered to be most relevant to – hence assumed as prior knowledge for – our research presented in this section as well as in the following ones.

norms of correctness are susceptible of violation due to enforcement of those of appropriateness, while those of congruence allow superimposition of both of the above-mentioned levels.

It became self-evident that the comicality derived can be further refined and rendered even more potent by merging ambiguity-based mechanisms with those relying on infringement of linguistic norms. Section II *infra* presents a selection of linguicomedy illustrating the main HG mechanisms identified, as well as mergers of the two types documented.

## **II Ambiguity and Infringement of Linguistic Norms at Fieldwork**

Amounting in a first phase to no less than 127 jokes extracted from various collections of English, German and Romanian humour, the research corpus was gradually reduced to about half the initial number after assigning each of the linguicomedy samples selected to the (sub)type of HG mechanisms they were found to best illustrate, with concomitant deletion of the less representative as well as of highly idiosyncratic cases. Again, for obvious reasons of space, in the present section we will briefly review a ‘shortlist’ of the examples analysed in Măciucă 2010 and Măciucă 2013, where discussion of language humour is mainly embedded in the framework of Coșeriu’s theory of language norms<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> For an in-depth discussion of translatability and subsequent analysis of translation of the language-humour samples selected s. Măciucă 2009, Măciucă 2010 and Măciucă 2013.

1. *Decomposing the non-additive meaning of an idiom (get s.o.'s goat [= make s.o. extremely annoyed]) into the independent meanings of its constituents*<sup>10</sup>

A guy goes to a restaurant and orders lamb . After more than half an hour's wait, the absent-minded waiter brings him goat instead of lamb. Customer flies into a rage, rises to his feet and cries out at the top of his voice : “I say, you’ve definitely *got my goat*, boy! When are you going to get me my lamb?” (cf Măciucă 2010 (4 f), p 59).

2. *Breach of congruence:*

“În satul acela au brațe și picioare vânjoase și păroase, poartă mustăți mari, negre și fumează lulele. Te uiți în ochii lor și vezi că sunt gata să te culce la pământ cu o labă. Iar bărbații sunt la fel de groaznici”<sup>11</sup> (Duțescu 1993:17; cf Măciucă 2010 (2), p 52)

Extending the graded salience hypothesis (cf Giora 2003) to apply to breach of linguistic norms, the more salient prototypically male features – consistently sustained, in addition, by early context – are accessed first, only to be abruptly suppressed by last-minute context feeding the female-type interpretation into the processor.

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<sup>10</sup> This is our way of describing the complex interference of idiomatic and non-idiomatic meanings underlying this particular subtype of structural ambiguity (s. for fuller discussion Măciucă 2005: 139-167).

<sup>11</sup> Verbatim translation [mine]: “In that village they have long dark moustaches, hairy brawny arms and legs and smoke pipe. You look in their eyes and see they’re just dying to knock you down with one blow. As for the men, they look equally terrifying”.

3. *Breach of congruence* (a surgeon is more likely to go to prison for stabbing his fellow humans than for dissecting dead persons, which is part of his daily routine) + *lexical ambiguity* (**hinkommen<sub>1</sub>** [= dorthin kommen] vs **hinkommen<sub>2</sub>** [= zu etwas führen]):

« Rudolph Virchow pflegte seine Studenten bei der Prüfung sehr kurz und von oben herab zu behandeln. So war er als Examiner mit Recht gefürchtet. Wieder einmal war Prüfung.

Virchow näherte sich einem Kandidaten, deutete mit spitzem Bleistift auf dessen Brust und fragte: „Wo komme ich hin, wenn ich da durchsteche?“

Der angehende Mediziner erwiderte ohne Zögern: „Ins Gefängnis, Herr Professor!“ » (Buscha 1981: 98; cf Măciucă 2013: 97)

4. *Breach of congruence + decomposing the additive meaning of a free combination as a non-additive idiomatic meaning:*

„Professor Karl Thiersch fragte einen Studenten nach verschiedenen „Innereien“, doch der Student wußte nichts. Da sagte Thiersch mißbilligend: „Wie kann ein Mensch Arzt werden wollen, der nicht einmal die Eingeweide der unteren Bauchhöhle im Kopf hat?“ (Buscha 1981 : 99; cf Măciucă 2013 (3), p 53)

The blatant infringement of the norm of congruence claiming that one's entrails as a rule occupy the lower levels of the body, not the upper storey, is here coupled with structural ambiguity allowing for two different parsing alternatives, i.e. with the segment *etwas im Kopf haben* interpreted as an idiom (“know sth (by heart)”), in the originally intended, non-humorous reading, or

as a free combination, conducive to humorous – if unintentional – effects.

5. *Breach of congruence* (abnormal position of roots (up), back (in front), wings (down)) + *lexical ambiguity* (**Wurzel**<sub>1</sub> [= Teil einer Pflanze] vs **Wurzel**<sub>2</sub> [= Teil der Nase], **Rücken**<sub>1</sub> [= Rumpf zwischen Nacken und Hüfte] vs **Rücken**<sub>2</sub> [= Teil der Nase], **Flügel**<sub>1</sub> [=eines der beiden Körperteile bei Vögeln und Insekten] vs **Flügel**<sub>2</sub> [= Teil der Nase]) + *recomposition of idiomatic meaning* (**die Nase hineinstecken** [= sich um Dinge kümmern, die einen gar nichts angehen]):

« In der Berliner Biedermeierzeit verlief kaum eine Gesellschaft ohne Rätselraten. Johann Friedrich Dieffenbach, der damalige berühmte Chirurg und Nasenspezialist, fragte bei einer solchen Gelegenheit einmal in die Runde, welches das paradoxeste menschliche Organ sei. Nach mancherlei Fehlraten gab er selbst die Antwort: „Das ist die Nase. Sie hat die Wurzel oben, den Rücken vorn, die Flügel unten, und man steckt sie gern da hinein, wo sie nicht hingehört“ » (Buscha 1981: 93-4; cf Măciucă 2013: 98).

6. *Breach of congruence* (goats are not in the habit of going to pubs to order beer) + *syntactic homonymy* (**la Țapi**<sub>1</sub> vs **la Țapi**<sub>2</sub>) + *metaphorical extension of meaning* (from **Țap**<sub>1</sub> [= a male goat] to **Țap**<sub>2</sub> [= guy with goatee] + *flouting of the Gricean cooperative principle* (cf Grice 1975) (by a highly un-cooperative waiter, whose conversational implicatures are not merely irrelevant, but positively – and ironically – misleading, with humour changing purposes from mitigating-cum-supportive to contestive-cum-competitive):



«Tip cu cioc, la o masă într-un restaurant : “Ospătar, serviți bere și la țapi?”

Ospătarul : “Noi servim pe oricine, domnule!”»<sup>12</sup>  
(Libertatea 2007 :3; cf Măciucă 2010 (3), p 53)

7. *Breach of correctness* (reference to a non-existent meaning of **capră**, **capră**<sub>2</sub> [= a special glass container for drinking beer, smaller than a **țap**; the amount such a container will hold] + *lexical ambiguity* (**capră**<sub>2</sub> vs **capră**<sub>3</sub> [= a loud young woman who would not think twice before giving a man the come-on] + *irony with face-saving function*<sup>13</sup> (as employed by the waiter):

Un grup de puștoaice exuberante invadează o terasă, agresând auzul pașnicilor consumatori cu stridența vocilor pițigăiate. Una dintre ele i se adresează cu un aer superior chelnerului : “Băiete, serviți bere numai la țapi?” La care acesta răspunde, ascunzându-și orgoliul rănit sub un zâmbet șiret : “O, nu, se poate? Și la ...capre!!!”<sup>14</sup> (cf Măciucă 2010 (5), p 54)

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<sup>12</sup> „Guy with goatee at a table in a restaurant :

READING 1 : “Waiter, do you serve *pints* here ?”

READING 2 : “Waiter , do you serve [=wait on] *goats* here ?”

Waiter : “We serve *all our customers* , sir !” (translation mine; for more illuminating glosses and further clarifications s. Măciucă 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Cf Barbe 1995, p 92: “[...] irony is employed for an indirect critical attack (an off record face threatening act). The face threat, as it appears off record and masked in politeness, becomes a means of face saving”.

<sup>14</sup> « A group of high-spirited teenage girls take all outside seats available in a café while carrying on their conversation in a sharp loud voice which obviously disturbs the other customers present. Suddenly, one of the girls waives to the waiter and asks him with a posh accent: “ Are you serving beer only *in pints* , boy?” (READING 1)/ “ Are you serving beer only to *billy goats*, boy?”

8. *Putting back in force the norm of congruence* (goats are not treated as regular customers in restaurants) + *lexical ambiguity* (**goat**<sub>1</sub> [= the animal, alive...and kicking] vs **goat**<sub>2</sub> [= its flesh as food]) + *reassignment of semantic roles to goats* ([+Beneficiary], as realized and included in the surface structure (“do you *serve goats*”) vs [+Affected Entity], as alluded to in the series of hyponyms dominated by the superordinate “(all sorts of) meat”):

Guy seated at a table in a restaurant, with a goat standing by his side: “Waiter, do you *serve goats* here?”

Waiter : “We serve all sorts of meat, sir!” (cf Măciucă 2010 (4e), pp 58-59)

### III Translatability of Linguicomedry: a Modest Proposal

#### III. 1 Translation: a Glimpse of the Basics

Whether semantically, phonetically, lexically, morphologically, pragmatically or aesthetically applied in its heyday – to name only a few of the many types, from which the referential, connotative and text-normative stand out as the most useful – , ‘equivalence’ was long viewed as both one of the key concepts and most reliable strategies in translation theory and practice, respectively <sup>15</sup> .

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(READING 2). With his ego seriously offended, the waiter retaliates : “ Oh , no, imagine that, we’re also serving beer *in XYZ !*” (READING 1)/ “ Oh , no, imagine that, we’re also serving beer to *nanny-goats !*”» (READING 2) (translation mine; for more illuminating glosses and further clarifications s. Măciucă 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Cf Stecconi (in Baker 1998: 80): “Equivalence is crucial to translation because it is the unique intertextual relation that only translations, among all conceivable text types, are expected to show”; for equivalence-based theories in translation s. also Tytler 1790 (*apud* Lefevere 1992: 128), Jakobson 1958 (*apud* Steiner 1992: 274), Catford 1965, Nida 1975.

Nevertheless, though things seemed to be running smoothly for quite a while in this particular province, the shrill voice of dissent was not long in disturbing its peace and tranquility. And with good reason, too, for the definition of equivalence (i.e. that relationship between a source text and a target text which makes it possible for the latter to be viewed as a translation of the former) implies a circularity of argumentation, more precisely, equivalence is defined in terms of the very concept whose meaning it strives to clarify. This, together with the fact that, in practice, it is not simply equivalents, but rather paradigms of possible equivalents, which translators are expected to cognitively process and select, are two of the main reasons for which equivalence of meaning can at best be assumed, but never verified, as equations in mathematics usually are (cf Ricoeur 2006)<sup>16</sup>.

Consequently, both the role of translation and the status of the translator needed to be dramatically overhauled, for, if we must give etymology its due, candidly admitting that translation originates in *translatum*, used as a supine of *transfere* (= to carry) – hence taken to denote the carrying across or over of information – , then we must also accept the fact that it has been gradually promoted from a prerequisite of language study to a *sine qua non* of contemporary life style<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> S. in this respect von Humboldt’s remark on how incredibly under-resourced languages in effect are in cognitively synonymous words: “[...] so wie man von Ausdrücken absieht, die bloss körperliche Gegenstände bezeichnen, kein Wort einer Sprache vollkommen einem in einer andren Sprache gleich ist” (*apud* Störig 1969: 20); as well as Baker’s on the relativity of equivalence: “[Equivalence] is influenced by a variety of linguistic and cultural factors and is therefore always relative” (1992: 6).

<sup>17</sup> Corroborating this view are both Ricoeur’s (2006) leitmotif suggesting that in our journey through life we transgress boundaries on a daily basis in a world in desperate need of translation itself, as well as Gottlieb’s more down-to-earth

And indeed, a moment's hair-splitting, logic-chopping reflection exposes us to the naked truth that of real consequence after all is not the translation as such, but rather the communication effected through its agency. As Gadamer adroitly put it, "where there is communication, one does not translate, but simply converses" (cf. 1993: 282).

But, if translating is tantamount to conversing, it follows that translators, too, should conform to Grice's overarching cooperative principle and the conversational implicatures derived from it (cf Grice 1975; s. also Sperber and Wilson's (1995) more recently developed 'relevance theory'), which consider adequate knowledge of the context to be a vital precondition for inference-making in communication. This is only a step away from Reiß and Vermeer's (1984) 'skopos' theory shifting the focus in translatology from meaning-oriented to function/purpose-ruled translation.

Both the 'skopos' theory and the functional approach closely related to it were conducive to dramatically reversing perspectives in translation studies, from 'top-down' to 'bottom-up', in other words, from theory- to practice-oriented translation, with the latter used as a source of inspiration for proposing general strategies and formulating new theories in a sustained effort to break away from applied linguistics, of which it was long considered to be a mere sub-branch<sup>18</sup>. The reversal, in turn, helped expose the real challenges facing translators, whose ultimate goal becomes retaining the full multifaceted impact that the original text had on the source readership and bringing it to bear undiminished on the target

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observation that: "Reflecting the ever-increasing communicational output – from cellphone text messages to live multi-media presentations – is the growing need for translation" (2005, *web*).

<sup>18</sup> This rather simplistic labelling is proved wrong by the fact that a large proportion of research into translation theory is more akin to literary criticism than to linguistics.

audience.

Which inevitably brings us to the vexed question of translatorial competence. The main difficulty with translations merely reiterates the one which theory runs into in a face-to-face encounter with reality, for what we learn, theoretically, is languages, but, in reality, it is texts – or excerpts therefrom – that need to be translated. And again, it is texts that really put a translator on her/his mettle. We can safely assume therefore that translatorial competence can be further divided into at least two subcompetences, a ‘language’ competence and a ‘textual’ competence, which Neubert (2000) defines as follows: “[Language competence is] knowledge of the niceties of the grammatical and the lexical systems of the source and target languages [...] Awareness of the continual changes at work in the two languages, which are only fragmentarily reflected in dictionaries and other works of reference [...] A knowledge of the repertoires of the languages for special purposes, i.e. terminologies as well as preferred syntactic and morphological conventions”<sup>19</sup> (2000: 7-8). ‘Textual’ competence is simply “discourse proficiency”<sup>20</sup> (2000: 8). Neubert (2000) distinguishes three further subtypes of translatorial competence – subject competence, cultural competence and transfer competence – , two of which will be briefly discussed under *infra*.

### **III. 2 The Translator as Cross-Cultural Communicator**

An accomplished translator is the one who rules supreme over

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<sup>19</sup> In the same volume, communicative and metalinguistic competence are additionally subsumed by Schäffner (2000: 146) under what she calls ‘linguistic’ competence.

<sup>20</sup> As elaborately defined by Schäffner, ‘textual’ competence is “knowledge of regularities and conventions of texts, genres, text types, including typographical regularities” (2000: 146).

vocabulary and grammar alike. Admittedly, when a meaning crops up in a text, which the translator is not exactly familiar with, (s)he can readily look it up in a dictionary. This, so to say, get-at-able solution, however, should not divert one's attention from the plain fact that one's translating skills do not extend beyond the confines of one's active vocabulary, and that any rendition by a translator suffering from 'lexical anemia' is without doubt doomed to failure<sup>21</sup>.

On the other hand, when a grammatical structure is not deeply lodged in her/his mind, then the translator will never be able to set the latter at rest.

Resuming our wider discussion of translatorial competence subtypes, we turn again to Neubert's informed opinion, who argues that translators are, to be sure, "interculturally competent"<sup>22</sup>, but "they think and feel predominantly in terms of a particular, their own culture" (2000: 10)<sup>23</sup>. A highly skilled translator, therefore, is the one who effectively obliterates the pockets of resistance – or 'rich points', in languacultural terms (cf

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<sup>21</sup> It is common knowledge that only a small number of words in any language are cognitively synonymous (s. von Humboldt's remark further above in Note 2 of this chapter).

<sup>22</sup> For further references to cultural competence by the same theorist cf: "[...] translators cannot but mediate between the culture of the sender and that of the recipient. They are the culture specialists who combine in their mindset elements of both, at least with respect to their knowledge, not necessarily their integration about what is strikingly, but also less visibly, contrastive (or identical) between source and target cultural patternings" (Neubert 2000: 10).

<sup>23</sup> Löwe (2002: 154 ff) subdivides this subtype into intracultural and intercultural competence; for an in-depth discussion of cultural competence s. also Fleischmann 2004.

Agar 1994)<sup>24</sup> – encountered while domesticating the source- or alienating the target text.

This can only be effected by putting one's transfer competence to test, a subtype taken by Neubert to refer to "the tactics and strategies of converting L<sub>1</sub> texts into L<sub>2</sub> texts" (2000:12), as well as to "the mental equipment that constitutes the translator's unique, cognitive set or ability of matching language, textual subject, and cultural competences"<sup>25</sup> (ib.). A reasonable inference to be drawn from the above would be that effecting cultural transposition successfully is tantamount to bridging the gap between source languaculture and target languaculture, or, ultimately, between source and target audiences living countries or even continents apart.

In his seminal "Multidimensional Translation: Semantics turned Semiotics" (2005, *web*), Gottlieb advances a semantically-based taxonomy of translation, with the following subtypes to be distinguished according to four parameters:

**1** intra- vs intersemiotic (according to semiotic identity (or equivalence) vs non-identity between source and target texts, with intrasemiotic further subdivided into

**2** (a) iso-, (b) dia-, (c) super-, or (d) hyposemiotic, according to changes effected in semiotic composition of the translation when (a) source text [= ST] and target text [= TT] utilize the same channel(s) of expression, (b) ST and TT resort to different

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<sup>24</sup> Interestingly and reasonably enough, Agar seems more inclined to reverse roles when defining culture as a translation between source languaculture and target languaculture (1994). For further details on the topic cf also P. Friedrich, the originator of the concept, which he termed 'languaculture' (1989).

<sup>25</sup> To the aforementioned five subtypes Schäffner adds 'research' competence, which she defines as "[...] a general strategy competence whose aim is the ability to resolve problems specific to cross-cultural transfer of texts" (2000 :146), apparently incorporated in Neubert's transfer competence; s. also Nord (2004: 173).

channels, (c) when TT uses more channels, (d) when TT uses fewer channels;

**3** inspirational vs conventionalized (according to degrees of freedom which translators enjoy)

**4** translations that (a) remain verbal, (b) introduce non-verbal elements, (c) introduce verbal elements, or (d) remain non-verbal (according to verbal material being present in or absent from ST and/or TT (cf 2005: 3, *web*).

Of special interest for our translational pursuits is the ‘inspirational’ vs ‘conventionalized’ dichotomy, which Gottlieb more narrowly defines further below in the same section. Thus, unlike the conventionalized subtype, which “ [...] uses some degree of formulaic conversion of the source text en route to the target text [...] [and] stays transparent by establishing a direct link between source and target texts”, with “criteria for evaluation that are easily established – although not always totally agreed upon” (Gottlieb 2005: 4), inspirational translation “covers situations where the existence – and reception, to be exact – of one text triggers the production of another based on the first one” (*ibid.*), with the resulting text relating “to the original in a way which is more free and less predictable than what is found in conventionalized translation” (Gottlieb 2005: 4-5). It follows from the above that, in sharp contrast to STs in conventionalized translation, the original is no longer available for reconstruction from the TT (cf Gottlieb 2005: 5).

### **III.3 Translation of Language Humour: a Genre in Its Own Right?**

Reflecting, in a transcendental vein, on the translatability of original works, Benjamin paradoxically argues that it is precisely where the translation comes up against the untranslatable of the original that genuine translation is actually produced, or rather



bestowed upon one as a gift, i.e. as a genuinely philosophical “ingenium”<sup>26</sup> (2002: 261-262). By the same token, it is in the province of linguicomedie, where translation seems to be a tall order even for one heavily armed with context-sensitive dictionaries, that a skilled translator really comes into her/his own.

Taking the reasoning one step further, since humour is at heart culture-specific, and language humour, in particular, languaculture-specific, it follows that those who most successfully ply across transnational paradigms of both language and culture are bi- or multicultural translators. Besides ‘(trad)adaptive’ strategies which must be effectively deployed when coming to grips with ‘translational’ implicatures<sup>27</sup> and linguistically or culturally intractable issues, comprehension of HG mechanisms assumed as prior knowledge can further facilitate cultural transposition in the area of language humour.

With the added incentive of verifying tenability of the theories reviewed as well as of our own views advanced in earlier stages of research conducted in the area of linguicomedie, we set out to translate a selection of examples extracted from the research corpus previously utilized. While assembling the subcorpus we made sure to include examples from all three languages documented, so that we could further compare them in terms of ambiguity enablers available.

In the present subsection discussion will merely outline the categorization of translated linguicomedie samples we proposed as a function of degree of punchline preservation, as well as main conclusions to research conducted in this particular subarea, with

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<sup>26</sup> Since it is viewed as conducive to accessing a “pure language of truth” (2002: 261-2), translation, Benjamin claims, is of necessity philosophically based.

<sup>27</sup> The term was coined by the HC on the analogy of Grice’s conversational implicatures.

the ‘case history’ of each example recorded in Măciucă 2010 and Măciucă 2013.

The ideal case, when the punchline survives intact, is that of reality-based jokes, which have been found to flout universal logic, i.e. the norms of congruence (s. Măciucă 2010 5.1, 2a, p 56).

Posing a certain amount of difficulty are jokes for which translation of the punchline implies breaking through more or less rigid language barriers and finding semantically equivalent or near-synonymous variants of ambiguously employed words, of set phrases, or de- or recomposed idioms (cf Măciucă 2010, pp 56-57, Măciucă 2013, 3.2 and 3.4, pp 101-102).

Second topmost in the untranslatability hierarchy are what we ventured to call ‘crippled’ jokes, of which the inherent semantic incompatibility can be most conveniently dealt with by punning on potential conveyors of the punchline (cf Măciucă 2010, 4a-f, pp 57-59, Măciucă 2013, 3.6, p 102).

Ranked topmost as the least true-to-punchline renditions are samples of intertextual humour, where translatability depends on a very wide cultural context stretching far beyond the linguistic context of the joke, wherefore, if we were to re-interpret translation of intertextual humour within the framework of languacultural theory (cf Agar 1994), we could define it as the “largest-rich-point”-based type of humour translation, where de- and recoding of the message must allow for really huge differences between source and target languacultures, culminating rather frequently in a culture shock.

Revealing yet a subtler facet of comicality is research in Măciucă 2015, where the shift in focus is from jokes through irony on to parody and satire, with overt transcontextualization substituting for covert intertextuality and, in addition, for fear of failed humour in the absence of such paralinguistic clues as

quizzical or smug expressions of the performers, with the audience more often than not badly in need of a laughter track.

While claiming with Giora (2003: 9) that, unlike the interpretation of jokes, which does not necessarily require retention of salient, though contextually incompatible, meanings, accurate processing of irony and metaphor does, we further hold with Hutcheon (1985: 33-34) that parody is similar to metaphor and compatible with irony (s. in this respect Note 13 of Măciucă 2015). Moreover, adhering to Yurchak's (2006) stance on late-socialist aesthetics and inspired by the highly idiosyncratic parodic type called 'stiob' which he documented (for fuller discussion thereof s. Măciucă 2015, Section 3), we analyzed several samples of stioblike parody – of which we are the proud author – in terms of cross-cultural associations connecting parodied background to parodic foreground, as well as of distinctive features most apt to steer 'politically-germane' parody away from politically-correct parody and towards the politically-incorrect type<sup>28</sup>.

With the topic of research considered from different angles in several interrelated stages, the **concluding remarks** outlined below aim to cover as many of them as possible:

- a) Though blamed by many pedantic minds for giving rise to no end of communication gaps, the far too modest English inflectional system turns out to be a real blessing in disguise both humour-generation- and humour-translation-wise, since it allows for far more ambiguity enablers than the fairly complex inflectional systems of both Germanic German and Romance Romanian.

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<sup>28</sup> 'Politically-correct', 'politically-incorrect' and 'politically-germane' are our labels for irony-hiding stiob, irony-flaunting parody and a merger of the former two, respectively.

- b) As logically anticipated, the more complex the combination of HG mechanisms involved, the more complicated the task of the translator, particularly when both types of humour generator – i. e. ambiguity and infringement of linguistic norms – are had inspired recourse to.
- c) The scale we put forward for rating translatability of linguicomedy shows the three types of humour ranking quite differently from the corresponding linguistic norms in the hierarchy suggested by Coşeriu (1994: 31 ff), namely: the congruence-flouting type ranks highest, while the correctness-flouting kind is relegated to the lowest position, with the appropriateness-flouting humour hovering somewhere in between. That should not surprise us in the least, for the norms of correctness observe the private logic of a certain language – not always in keeping with the universal one – and also reflect a particular *forma mentis* or discursive rationality which not infrequently begs to differ even from that of other sister languages.
- d) Even if translation of humour – and of language humour, in particular – is thought of by those adhering to the ‘traduttore – traditore’ stance as sadly deconstructing language, the fact that, while conducting the research, we – i.e. myself and my students – became actual creators of linguicomedy, seems to substantiate the opposite, namely that, when performed as a labour of love and not as a dreadful chore, translating humour is in fact conducive to reconstructing or recomposing the protean power of language<sup>29</sup>. Or, better still, while arguing with Walter

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<sup>29</sup> With cultural jokes the translator is even at liberty to substitute a joke from the cultural repertoire of the target language for the patently translation-defying source-language jokes.

- Benjamin (2002) the original's claim to "continued life" ("Fortleben") through translation, we might make so bold as to press the point still further and add: through the huge impact effected by combining the protean power of language with the (re)shaping power of translation.
- e) Both literature reviewed and the complexity of phenomena explored make it abundantly clear that translation of humour has in the past decades outgrown the framework of general translation and is now in a position to lay claim to a separate framework for theoretical discussions as a genre *per se*.

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