Culture-Specific Items in AV Translation: The Risk of Condescension

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Panel II: Practical Aspects

In a recent column published in the Catalan-language cultural supplement of the newspaper *El País* (7/12/2000), the novelist Empar Moliner raised—without naming it as such—the issue of condescension in AV translation. Her complaint had to do with the inappropriate substitution of one culturally specific reference for another in the Woody Allen film *Deconstructing Harry* (1997). In the ST, Harry twice compares his ex-wife to the German boxer Max Schmelling;\(^1\) in the Catalan TT, the comparison is to Cassius Clay, better known as Muhammed Ali. Evidently, in deciding whether or not to retain this reference, and if not what to substitute for it, the translator should know both who Max Schmelling was, what he looked like, and what he meant to the generation that grew up in the shadow of Schmelling’s two fights with the African-American heavyweight champion Joe Louis in the 1930s. Schmelling’s victory in the first of these contests was seized upon by Nazi propagandists as evidence of the superiority of a supposed “Arian race”; Allen’s character in the film, a Jewish New Yorker pushing sixty, no doubt carries the ‘Schmelling=Nazi brute force’ equation with him as part of his cultural baggage, the residue of his upbringing. Indeed, he first makes this remark in the course of a quarrel with his second wife, a devout Jew. Only in this light may the mechanism of Allen’s humour or characterisation be understood, and its intensity gauged. Yet both the on-screen addressees and source culture cinema-goers (auditors, to use Hatim and Mason’s [1997] terminology) were receiving another signal from Harry/Allen: by comparing his ex-wife to a

\(^1\) In fact, Moliner claims the ST reference to have been to Primo Carnera, an Italian-American boxer active in the same period. In fact, Carnera replaces Schmelling in the Spanish dubbed version of the film.
boxer whose fame was at its peak in the 1930s, Harry was (perhaps deliberately) highlighting his age, his belonging to another generation whose universe of references now seems dated and distant. The culture-specific item or CSI, to use Javier Franco Aixelá’s term (1996), is not universally or even widely known in the SC: indeed, what humour there is in the remark is effective only for viewers Harry’s age or older. In fact, the reference will have been lost on many if not most viewers of Deconstructing Harry in the US. Thus, a still well-known “universalised” SC referent has replaced an increasingly obscure one: the Catalan-language viewer has been given an “easier” AV text, dumbed-down, as though the broadcaster had chosen to condescend, to make a difficult ST easy in the TL. A black man who defied the US draft board in 1967, at the height of the Vietnam War, has taken the place of a white man who served Hitler. A strikingly handsome boxer has replaced another not known for his looks. And, equally significantly, humour has displaced characterisation.

While Moliner would appear to oppose any and all such substitutions, in this paper we will argue that some of the norms or tendencies (in a Tourian sense) and conventions (Thermans 1996) of AV translation, coupled with the speed and stress of translators’ working lives, may sometimes lead to an unfortunate and unnecessary levelling of some aspects of STs’ authors’ approach to audience design — that is, to condescension. To that end, in the remainder of this paper we will analyse a number of examples of translators’ handling of CSIs. We have deliberately chosen one high-brow, one middle-to-high brow and one low-brow text: our examples, in that order, are drawn from the Spanish and Catalan versions of Deconstructing Harry, as well the Spanish dubbed versions of The Big Lebowski (Joel Coen, 1998) and Armageddon (Michael Bay, 1998). Given an imagined profile of each film’s auditors — a well-

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2 Of course, the final TT may be the product of decisions taken by actors, dubbing directors, and linguists, as well as the “adjuster” who checks that the TL script matches lip movement on screen.
educated urban one for the Allen film, a mix of young people and knowledgeable film buffs for
the Coens’, and popcorn-muching twelve-year-olds in the case of Armageddon—we had
expected the frequency of CSI replacement to increase as the brow was lowered.

Before proceeding, a few words on the nature of the norms involved here. In Toury’s
many accounts of the mapping of a text onto a set of norms active in a target culture, or a
segment thereof, we find the affirmation that norms “determine the (type and extent) of
equivalence manifested by actual translations” (204). Toury thus tries to historicise the concept of
equivalence, and we’d like to stress that we will deal with very recent examples covering a two-
year period and drawn from a field whose norms are shifting. One agent shaping norms is, to use
Vermeer’s term, the “commissioner”, in this case dubbing studios and the Catalan public
broadcasting authority, Televisió de Catalunya. The latter has published a book of explicit
guidelines and advocates the replacement of CSIs when such items are “famous” in the SC but
not in the TC (17). Another factor in shaping the textual-linguistic norms for handling CSIs is the
set of addressees the translator has in mind, itself part of Vermeer’s concept of skopos. Vermeer
makes the rather witty observation that the method used to imagine addressees is sometimes the
self, especially in the sense that “the addressees are (almost) as intelligent as [the translator] is”
(227). The resulting convention would seem to entail the systematic replacement of CSIs which
do not ring the sort of resounding bells accorded Darth Vader or the last four US presidents.

Woody Allen has often sprinkled his works with CSIs that betray the background and
interests of his characters. In Deconstructing Harry, the title character admonishes himself for
being an inveterate skirt-chaser, and to underscore the problems this compulsion creates he states
that Raoul Wallenberg did not go around Europe throwing himself at waitresses. Wallenberg, a
Swedish diplomat posted to Budapest in 1944, is remembered for having saved the lives of some
20,000 Jews; he disappeared in the chaos of the war’s closing days, and his fate remains a
mystery. He is therefore both a twentieth-century hero and the figure of a suffering saint. In both the Catalan and Castilian versions of the film, Wallenberg becomes Simon Wiesenthal, the noted Nazi hunter. Again, the ST CSI was not familiar to all SL auditors, though newspaper reports of investigations into Wallenberg’s whereabouts do appear from time to time. The substituting TT CSI, Wiesenthal, lacks Wallenberg’s specifically humanitarian dimension, and post-dates him as a news story by nearly two decades.

Later in the film, Harry tells his young son Hilly that when he was a little boy, he and all his friends had given their penises names. To Harry’s delight, Hilly announces that he will name his Dillinger; Dillinger, the father responds, is a good choice because he excelled in his chosen profession, rather like Willy Sutton, a 1920s bank robber. Both references reveal that Harry has been initiating Hilly in the culture of his own childhood, more than fifty years past. Dillinger in both the Catalan and Castilian version is replaced by Al Capone. Now Dillinger was a gunman famous for his daring, an FBI ‘Public Enemy Number One’ and folk hero killed after his mistress had betrayed him; the nature of his fall has been dramatised by Hollywood in several films and its irony cannot have escaped Harry. Capone, on the other hand, is known in the TC as a prototypical gangland boss, better known for commanding violence then for individual prowess. The translators’ rendering of the second CSI, Willy Sutton, is Arsène Lupin, a gentleman burglar created by the French writer Maurice Leblanc in 1905. Again, Sutton is no longer well known in the SC; the substituting CSI, of declining fame in the TC, is a temporal and class mis-match, as

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3 Wallenberg shares with Winston Churchill the distinction of being the only two foreigners ever made honorary citizens of the United States.
4 Some members of the TC audience may, indeed, recall that Capone was imprisoned for tax evasion and died in obscurity.
well as being a Europeanisation of Harry’s cultural baggage, which marks him as an American Jew.  

This tendency to Europeanise occurs elsewhere in the dubbed versions. After an episode of oral sex with the prostitute Cookie, a grateful Harry tells her that her lips should be in the Smithsonian. In Catalan and Castilian ‘the Smithsonian’ is rendered as ‘el Louvre’, a natural history museum in Washington becoming an art gallery in Paris. In a later scene, Harry is accused by his devout Jewish brother-in-law of having created anti-Semitic stereotypes in some of his fiction, comparable in effect to the Nazi newspaper Der Sturmer; this, in Castilian, is kept, while the Catalan version features a generic expression, “revistes nazís” or “nazi magazines”. This allusion to Nazi Germany returns us to our opening example, Max Schmelling, and a further discrepancy between the dubbed versions in the case of this CSI. The Castilian replaces Schmelling with Primo Carnera, an equally dated reference to an Italian-American boxer who was famous in the 1930s and 1940s. It is difficult to imagine what may have motivated this choice, which eliminates the invocation of Nazism and does not contribute to the greater recognition of the CSI for TC audiences. Furthermore, as in the Catalan version’s use of “Cassius Clay”, a European reference is here Americanised for the sake of European viewers!

The second film we’ve chosen, The Big Lebowski, also abounds in CSIs which would mean little to many if not most SC viewers. The translator’s approach to these references varies: while many CSIs are kept, in a few cases the pragmatics of on-screen dialogue have dictated that they be rendered generic and so more easily assimilated. Among the former are CSIs which betoken the Jewishness of the character played by John Goodman, Walter Sobchak, who is later revealed to be a convert of Polish Catholic origin. Early in the film, Walter cites Theodor

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5 By way of contrast, in a later scene references to Eliza Doolittle and Henry Higgins are kept in both dubbed versions.
Herschel, one of the founders of modern Zionism; later, in a catalogue of Jewish contributions to American civilisation, he brings up the name of Sandy Koufax, a baseball player active from 1955 to 1966. The translator keeps both. A reference to Watts, a poor and often troubled LA neighbourhood remembered chiefly for race riots in the summer of 1965, is also kept, though the dialogue in question provides sufficient contextual information for the viewer to gather its connotations. As an example of the latter strategy, the exclaimed title of the Beatles’ song “I am the Walrus” in the ST becomes “Y los Beatles” in the TT. (Walter and Jeff Lebowski are talking of Lenin, which the Steve Buscemi character mistakes for John Lennon.) This rendering conveys enough information for the viewer to understand the other characters’ reaction, while retaining the English song title in such a fast-paced exchange would have proven disconcerting. By a similar strategy the translator sought to produce an equivalent effect in a moment of humorous incredulity: when Jeff Lebowski, aka “the Dude” (played by Jeff Bridges) confronts a man who has been tailing him, the latter tries to put him at ease by saying “I’m a brother shamus”, “shamus” being a dated word for “private detective”. Having understood imperfectly, the Dude responds “You’re an Irish monk?”. The humour rides, of course, on “brother shamus” being taken for “Brother Seamus”. In the dubbed version the dialogue is resolved neatly with an equally far-fetched “Soy de la hermandad”, to which Bridges answers, “¿Qué eres, un cura?”

Similarly reluctant to replace CSIs is the translator of Armageddon. It should be noted in passing that most of this film’s CSIs enjoy analogously high profiles in both the SC and the TC: the translator consequently keeps them. Sadam Hussein, Pulp Fiction, Han Solo and Chewbacca from the first three Star Wars films, the Loony ’Toons characters Roadrunner and Wile. E. Coyote, the chain store Toys’R’Us and the catch phrase “Beam me up, Scotty” from the 1960s TV show Star Trek are maintained or rendered via their well-established TC equivalents. Yet far more obscure CSIs are likewise respected, with a few exceptions. When NASA psychologists
interview the motley crew of oil drillers who are to fly into space and save the world, one interviewee responds to the open question “What don’t you like?” with a complaint about people who think Jethro Tull was just one member of the group. This already dated CSI — the reference is to a 1970s rock group — would have been lost on younger SC viewers and is kept in the dubbed version. An older CSI in the same sequence is not respected: faced with a huge syringe, Steve Buscemi jokes “Who’s that for? Mr. Ed?” in allusion to the 1950s US sitcom, the more generic TT being “¿Eso es para un elefante?” Yet when a space buggy is stopped in its tracks by a precipice and the characters debate a low-gravity stunt jump as their only way of crossing the canyon, the TT retains the CSI Evel Knievel, famous in the SC in the 1970s for a motorcycle jump over the Snake River Canyon on the Oregon-Idaho border. Little known in the TC, this CSI could have been replaced with a better-known cultural icon associated with vehicles that jump over gaps, such as James Bond’s.

Our next example, though dated, does not share Evel Knievel’s ephemeral fame: the surface conditions on the asteroid where the undertrained astronauts are described as being “like Dr. Seuss’s worst nightmare”. Dr. Seuss’s surreal children’s books are canonical in the SC; indeed, television and cinema adaptations have reinforced their fame. Though one Seuss character, the Grinch, currently enjoys a high profile in the TC thanks to a Jim Carrey film, its release in the Spanish market post-dated that of Armageddon by more than two years. The TT rendering is therefore “la peor pesadilla de Stephen King”. Yet the translator goes out of his way maintain a specifically cinematic intertextual CSI: in what may be a witty play for critical complicity, Buscemi’s character mounts a nuclear bomb, which he pretends to ride bareback in an imitation of the closing scene in Kubrick’s Dr Strangelove. He excuses himself by saying, “I

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6 As Mr Ed has been re-run on Televisió de Catalunya within the last ten years, it would interesting to know whether the film has been translated into Catalan and, if so, whether the Catalan translator maintained this reference.
was doing that guy from that movie, you know, Slim Pickens.” The TT keeps the CSI by supplying the title of “that movie”: “Estaba imitando al tío de Teléfono rojo, Slim Pickens”, thus facilitating comprehension for a minority of viewers.

The flat, static stock characters of Armageddon may hardly be said to depend on CSIs for their development, yet three dated and somewhat obscure instances were retained in the dubbed version. Indeed, it is in the most “intellectual” of our three texts, Deconstructing Harry, most of whose viewers are presumably culturally literate and have heard of John Dillinger, that CSIs used for characterisation seem to have been interpreted either as mere punch-lines or as beyond the auditors’ ken. This tendency seems to us illustrative of the risk of condescension, of the translator’s playing to a gallery imagined to be impatient with anything unfamiliar. As we stressed in our introduction, it is precisely because SC auditors (and on-screen addressees) are often being confronted with the unfamiliar and the obscure that translators should consider letting the difficult be difficult. Moreover, the respect for lesser-known CSIs that appear in passing in the mass-market Armageddon and mixed-market Big Lebowski suggests that Spanish film distributors already assume that audiences will tolerate a certain degree of strangeness. In our closing section, we would like to relate our findings with regard to the Catalan version of Deconstructing Harry to the peculiar status of the commissioner as a public-service broadcaster.

Underlying our approach here is the assumption that a public service broadcaster’s stance towards its own viewers should be respectful. We hold that, rather than translating systematically for the lowest common denominator, the translator should try to gauge the audience’s evolving knowledge of the ST language and culture, as well as the potential viewer profile for the TT. It is curious that the treatment of this topic in Delabatista should have suggested tagging STs either in terms of an audience whose literacy is limited, eg children or immigrants, or in terms of high prestige, eg the BBC productions of Shakespeare’s plays. The very willingness of viewers to
watch a minority AV product, whatever its prestige, should be read as a signal that in some circumstances they want to be challenged and are willing to understand as partially as would a SL audience.

Works Cited

Armageddon [Spanish version]. Dir. Michael Bay. Touchstone Home Video n.d.