

Translating phraseologisms in comics. The example of an Asterix album

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine how phraseologisms found in a comic book may be rendered in translation. The database will consist of a comic album from the Asterix series. First, a classification of possible correspondences between phraseologisms in a source and a target language will be proposed; then, the phraseologisms identified in the original and in the German and Italian translations will be analysed from a quantitative and a qualitative perspective; particular attention will be paid to such phenomena as compensation, dephraseologization and defrosting.

Keywords: phraseologism; comics; French; German, Italian

1. Introduction

This paper aims to investigate and discuss how phraseologisms found in comics are rendered in translation. An Asterix album (*La rose et le glaive*, Uderzo 1991a)¹ will serve as a corpus; the French original will be compared with its Italian and German versions (Uderzo 1991b, Uderzo 1991c).

Comics constitute a stimulating field of analysis for linguistic studies. On the one hand, they combine language and images: it may prove insightful to explore in which respect the presence of images can influence the way the linguistic component is rendered in another language (Packard *al et.* 2019, 9), especially from the point of view of phraseological units². On the other hand,

1 A short summary of the plot: the bard moves out of the Gaulish village and is replaced by a woman-bard from Lutetia, who tries to bring feminist ideas to the village women — much to the displeasure of the men, who also move into the forest. At the same time, Caesar sends a women's centuria to the Gaulish village: he hopes to defeat the Gauls, as he knows that their gallantry forbids beating women. But the plan does not work out — the bond between the village women and their men is at least as strong as female solidarity.

2 Since comics are a multimodal type of narrative combining both a visual and a textual component, one issue that may be addressed is the interplay between these two levels — namely, how multimodal cohesion (van Leeuwen 2005, 248; Schubert and Sanchez-Stockhammer

comic authors typically rely on a language variety close to conceptional orality (Fiedler 2004; Rodríguez Abella 2020; Kern 2022), although this orality is purely fictitious (*fingierte Mündlichkeit*, Berg-Henjum 2004). Asterix albums are also particularly rich in quips, puns, and idiomatic expressions. So, we may expect to encounter instances of phraseologisms, as suggested by Naciscione (2010, 92): “[a]s PU [phraseological units, A.M.] are figurative, cohesive combinations of words, they easily lend themselves to word play for every figurative constituent invariably has a literal meaning at the same time”. As for the state of the art, there are a few studies investigating how word plays or proper nouns in Asterix albums were translated into other languages (see a review in Zanettin 2014), but no paper focusing on the translation of phraseologisms could be found.

The structure of this contribution is as follows: after some theoretical premises (Section 2), a quantitative and a qualitative analysis will be carried out (Section 3). The issue of compensation will be dealt with separately in Section 4, followed by concluding remarks and further research perspectives (Section 5).

2. Theoretical premises

To identify and classify phraseologisms in the Asterix album, we will rely on a broad definition, taken from Gries (2011):

[...] a phraseologism is [...] the co-occurrence of a form or a lemma of a lexical item and one or more additional linguistic elements of various kinds which functions as one semantic unit in a clause or sentence and whose frequency of co-occurrence is larger than expected on the basis of chance. (Gries 2011, 6)

This definition includes idioms, collocations, light verb constructions as well as proverbs and catchphrases: this allows us to cover the whole spectrum of idiomatic expressions.

The analysis of the phraseological units will be carried out following an onomasiological approach, as suggested in Korhonen (2007, 575): given that semantic equivalence between the source and the target text should be possibly preserved, we will concentrate on the formal means that translators resorted to in order to achieve it. The original French text was first searched for phraseologisms; then, the corresponding items in the Italian and German translations

2022) is created and maintained throughout the narrative itself. This issue becomes even more crucial in translation, as typically only the textual component changes while the visual one remains unchanged. Due to space reasons, the question cannot be explored in depth; however, we will cursorily point out instances where translators prioritize the preservation of multimodal cohesion, i.e. the relationship between text and image, over equivalence or analogy of phraseological units, i.e. the textual level alone.

were filed³. Once the data were gathered, the question was addressed whether the constructions used in the target text (TT) were to be considered equivalent to those occurring in the source text (ST). This requires defining what is meant by ‘equivalence’ in the realm of phraseologisms in translation. For the purposes of this study, the tripartition ‘full vs. partial vs. no equivalence’ described e.g. in Korhonen (2004), Kollner (2007) and — much earlier — in Dobrovolskij (1992) served as a theoretical reference point and was rearranged to distinguish between four types of correspondence: equivalence, analogy, “phraseologism at all costs”, and no equivalence.

If we regard phraseologisms as constructions, that is, according to Goldberg’s definition, as “combinations of form and meaning” (Goldberg 2006, 1), the four types differ in the way the relationship between both sides of the construction in the ST is preserved (or not) in the TT. Equivalent phraseologisms show a 1:1-correspondence in form and meaning in the original and the translation, the form side possibly displaying some minor structural or lexical divergences; instead, analogous phraseologisms exhibit a different form, but have the same meaning. In (1)⁴ the German translation is equivalent to the original French with slight syntactic differences and a different sentence polarity (negative vs. affirmative: ‘We should not scream before it hurts.’ vs. ‘We should only scream when it hurts.’); instead, the Italian counterpart relies on a formally different phraseologism (lit. ‘We should not bandage our head prematurely.’), which, however, has the same meaning as the original one. So, the Italian translation of (1) would be an example of analogy.

(1)

Bah ! Ne crions pas avant d’avoir mal, Astérix ! (16)

Bah! Non fasciamoci la testa anzitempo!

Na na! Erst schreien, wenn es wehtut, Asterix!

As Korhonen (2007) remarks, equivalence is often ‘naturally’ given when phraseologisms in different languages are based on famous quotations or catch-phrases, which may hint at a shared cultural background. This can be found in our data, too: the sentence in (2), uttered by the woman-bard, is a modified quotation from the film *Spartacus* by Stanley Kubrick (1960), «Slaves you were and slaves you remain», whereas (3) recalls the translation in the three languages of *All’s well that ends well*, a play by William Shakespeare.

3 The following sources were used, among others, as references to identify and classify phraseologisms: TLFi (n.d.) for French, Treccani (n.d.) for Italian and Quasthoff (2011), Schemann (2011) for German.

4 In the examples, the original French is quoted first, followed by the Italian and the German translation. The page number given in brackets refers to Uderzo (1991a, 1991b, 1991c): it is the same in the original and the translations.

(2)

Pff !!! Esclaves vous étiez, esclaves vous resterez ! (32)

Tzè!... Schiave siete e schiave resterete.

Pfff!!! Sklavinnen seid ihr gewesen, Sklavinnen werdet ihr bleiben!

(3)

Tout est bien qui finit bien. (48)

Tutto è bene ciò che finisce bene!

Ende gut, alles gut.

The third type of correspondence between phraseologisms was provisionally labelled “phraseologism at all costs”: this category includes occurrences in which the translators’ priority was to insert a phraseologism in the TT – e.g. one containing a particular lexical item – irrespective of the fact that the phraseologism they selected had the same form and meaning as the one in the ST. For instance, in (4) a villager is commenting on the fact that the chief of the village was hit by his wife and now has a black eye. In French, the phraseologism *taper dans l’œil* is used, which can have two readings, a literal (‘to hit in the eye’) and a figurative one (‘to catch someone’s eye’). Also, it contains the word *œil* ‘eye’ with direct reference to the picture, in which the chief appears with a black eye. So, both meanings of the phraseologism are realised: the chief’s wife hit him in the eye and – as a consequence – she must have caught his attention.

(4)

On dirait que Bonemine lui a tapé dans l’œil ! (20)

A quanto pare Beniamina gli ha dato nell’occhio!

Das sieht aus, als wär’s ins Auge gegangen!

The German and Italian translators were keen on recreating the cohesion between image and words of the original: both chose phraseologisms containing the word ‘eye’: *dare nell’occhio* (lit. ‘to give in the eye’, meaning ‘to attract someone’s attention’) and *ins Auge gehen* (lit. ‘to go in the eye’, meaning ‘to take a bad turn (of situations)’). Both have a figurative meaning; a literal meaning is not given but is somewhat forced by the presence of the chief having a black eye in the picture⁵: this way the double meaning of the original can be regarded as be-

5 In the Italian translation, the literal meaning may also be hinted at by the insertion of an indirect object (*gli*), which is actually not part of the valency of the phraseological unit and in some way contributes to dephraseologising the idiom.

ing preserved in the translations through picture-induced dephraseologisation, i.e. the actualisation of the literal (i.e. compositional) meaning of the idiom⁶.

The last type is the absence of correspondence between ST and TT. In some cases, neither the form, nor the (exact) meaning are rendered through a phraseologism in the TT, like in (5), where *pas de quartier* ‘no mercy’ is translated as ‘no exceptions’ in Italian and ‘Do not think! Sink the ships!’ in German: in neither language a phraseologism is used⁷.

(5)

César a dit pas de témoins, donc, pas de quartier ! (19)

Cesare ha detto niente testimoni... perciò niente eccezioni!

Cäsar hat gesagt, keine Zeugen, also nicht denken! Schiffe versenken!

In other cases of no equivalence, the form is not rendered through a phraseologism, but the meaning is preserved, as in (6): instead of using a corresponding idiom, the Italian and German translators paraphrase the meaning of the original (‘this is not fair’) through a non-idiomatical expression⁸.

(6)

Ouais! Si les Romains s’assomment entre eux, ça c’est pas du jeu ! (28)

Sissì, ma non è mica giusto che si faccian fuori tra di loro!

Jau! Wenn die Römer sich gegenseitig verprügeln, ist das ungerecht!

3. Analysis

After introducing the categories used to classify phraseologisms, in this section it will be observed how they were rendered in translation. From a quantitative point of view, the majority of phraseologisms in the ST appear as equivalent or analogous phraseologisms in the TT. Italian shows a higher percentage

6 We distinguish between phraseologisation as a process leading frequently co-occurring lexical items from compositional to idiomatic meaning (i.e. creating a semantic unit, as in Gries’s (2011) above citation) and dephraseologisation (or dual actualisation) as the opposite process, re-actualizing the compositional meaning of the combination of co-occurring lexical items, i.e. semantically disassembling the semantic unit into its constituents (Polyakova 2017, 384). Dephraseologisation is potentially intrinsic to any phraseologism and may particularly occur in literature, journalism, advertising, and any text genre in which the sender aims at catching the receiver’s attention (Jaki 2015, 70).

7 On the other hand, both translators try to preserve the parallelism *pas de... pas de...* in some way: in Italian we have the parallelism *niente... niente...* as well as the nearly-rhyme *testimoni/ eccezioni*; in German we only have rhyming words, *denken/ versenken*.

8 We may notice that the Italian translation of (6) contains an idiomatic expression (*far fuori*, lit. ‘to make out’, meaning ‘to kill’), which may be regarded as an instance of compensation (see section 4).

of equivalents (see Table 1). In fact, only in few cases do we have a parallel correspondence (i.e. a phraseologism is rendered through an equivalent or an analogous one both in Italian and in German). This does not surprise: as mentioned above, perfect equivalence is most likely given when quotations or catch-phrases are involved which derive from works with broad diffusion within a (socio)cultural space, as it may be the case with the Bible.

We may notice as well that about one third of the phraseologisms show no equivalence in German, whereas this percentage in Italian is about 20%. The reasons behind these cases remain inscrutable, as we cannot know the translators' intentions: still, we may suppose that they could not find a suitable equivalent phraseologism and decided to render the plain meaning of the original in order to preserve semantic equivalence between the ST and the TT; also, they may have selected an alternative rendering for stylistic reasons or because they found a phraseologism would not be the best translatory solution in a given linguistic, situational, or figurative context.

Table 1: The rendering of the phraseologisms in the TT

	Italian		German	
	Occurrences	Percentage	Occurrences	Percentage
Equivalence	20	37,7%	15	28,3%
Analogy	14	26,4%	12	22,6%
Phraseologism at all costs	8	15,1%	9	17%
No equivalence	11	20,8%	17	32,1%
Total	53	100%	53	100%

As Table 1 shows, “phraseologisms at all costs” constitute the least frequent occurrences. Still, they will be granted particular attention in the following: the translators' choice to give up semantic equivalence between ST and TT to preserve the mere presence of a phraseologism must have had quite compelling reasons, which may have to do with contextualisation. Kollner (2007) and Dobrovol'skij (2011) state that phraseologisms cease to exist as isolated units when they are embedded in a text: they enter a relationship with the co-text and the context, which may eventually lead to dephraseologisation or defrosting⁹. Concerning comics, this relationship may be of textual and/or extra-textual

⁹ The term ‘defrosting’ (Yakubovich 2015) is used in this contribution to refer to a phraseologism undergoing structural changes but preserving, at least on a subtextual level, its original meaning: it can be regarded as successful if the receiver can recognize it as a modified version of a phraseological unit. So, whereas dephraseologisation changes the meaning side of a phraseological construction, making it compositional, defrosting plays with its form side, but leaves its original meaning basically untouched.

nature, i.e. it may involve multimodal cohesion. One example has already been discussed in section 2: in (4), three different phraseologisms containing the word ‘eye’ were used to maintain the link between the figurative and the linguistic dimension. The same holds true for cases like the one reported in (7).

(7)

On me tape dessus *à tout bout de chant* et en plus, on me remplace par une étrangère ! (6)

Visto che senza un... motivo mi piazzano in un... canto e mi rimpiazzano con una straniera, [...]

Beim geringsten Ton zieht man mir eins über, und dann ersetzt man mich noch durch eine Fremde!

The bard is complaining that when he begins singing, he is immediately hit by some of the villagers. The expression *à tout bout de chant*, literally meaning ‘at any beginning of singing’, contains a phonetic-phonological pun, as it has the same phonetic realisation as the phraseologism *à tout bout de champ* ‘all of the time, at all times’: the bard contextualizes (defrosts) it by referring it to himself and his experience (he immediately – i.e. *at all times* – gets thumped when *he starts singing*). The non-defrosted phraseologism has analogous counterparts in Italian and German: *a ogni piè sospinto* (lit. ‘at every step’, meaning ‘at every moment’) and *beim geringsten Anlass* (‘on the slightest pretext’). While the Italian one doesn’t lend itself to defrosting, the German translator changes *Anlass* with *Ton* ‘sound’, thus adapting the idiom to the context on the one side – the phonetic-phonological pun cannot be preserved, though – and preserving a direct link to the original, non-defrosted phraseologism on the other. The Italian translator gives up semantic equivalence (lit. ‘Without a reason they put me aside’, instead of ‘I get thumped at all times (when I begin singing)’) but plays with homonymy: *motivo* and *canto* can mean respectively ‘reason’/‘melody’ and ‘side, corner’/‘singing’¹⁰. Additionally, *gettare in un canto* ‘to put aside’ is a phraseologism in Italian, so this can be eventually regarded as an instance of “phraseologism at all costs”, as the translator preserves the link between words and the (figurative) context: the bard, i.e. the village’s official singer, is speaking.

Example (7) is not the only instance of a “phraseologisms at all costs” used to maintain puns and wordplays: in (8) Obelix (O) is complaining that he is feeling *rouillé*, i.e. ‘rusty, not fit’, because he gets continuously wet due to frequent rainfalls in the forest; a Roman soldier (S) answers that, in spite of this, the Romans are being beaten, which in French sounds as *nous dérouillons* ‘we are

¹⁰ The intended multiple readings are highlighted by three dots of suspension in the Italian translation.

getting a hammering'. So, the French original has a wordplay based on the figurative meaning of two lexemes sharing the root *rouille* 'rust'.

(8)

O: Je me sens un peu rouillé ! S: En attendant, c'est nous qui dérouillons ! (44)

O: Mi sento ancora un po' a pezzi [...] S: Figurati noi!

O: Ich fühl' mich ein bisschen ingerostet! S: Alte Hiebe rosten nicht!

To preserve the wordplay, the German translator relies on the same expression as the original, *ingerostet* 'rusty', when Obelix speaks; in the soldier's answer, instead, a phraseologism is defrosted and adapted to the context of the soldiers being beaten: instead of *Alte Liebe rostet nicht* 'old love never rusts' it reads *Alte Hiebe rosten nicht* 'old strokes never rust'. The Italian translator gives up reference to 'rust' and plays with possible readings of the idiom *sentirsi a pezzì* (lit. 'to feel in pieces', meaning 'to feel broken'): in Obelix' utterance it can be interpreted as 'My strength is not back yet (and I cannot fight as hard as I would like)', in the soldier's reply (lit. 'Imagine us', meaning 'Imagine how we feel in pieces!') as 'We are feeling broken (because we are being beaten)'. This way, multimodal cohesion is successfully rendered in translation as both the phraseological link between the utterances of the two characters on the linguistic level and reference to the narrative context on the figurative level are preserved.

Another interesting instance of defrosting-based "phraseologism at all costs" is the following one: in (9) a woman is commenting on the fact that the bard moved to the wood, leaving his hut empty, and that the hut itself will be assigned to the new woman-bard.

(9)

Qui joue des flûtes perd sa hutte! (9)

Chi va al bosco perde il posto!

Das ist des Sängers Fluch!

In the woman's utterance a phraseologism is defrosted and adapted to the narrative context: instead of *Qui va à la chasse perd sa place* (lit. 'Go hunting and you'll lose your place', meaning 'Leave your place and you'll lose it') an alternative (non-idiomatical, but still rhyming) expression is used (lit. 'Play flute and you'll lose your hut'), which better suits the visual-narrative context. Although the form of the idiomatic expression is different, readers can grasp its meaning through a connection to the non-defrosted, original phraseologism, which is still present at a subtextual level. In the Italian translation the phraseologism *Chi va via perde il posto all'osteria* (lit. 'Go away and you'll lose your place in the tavern', with the same meaning as the original French) is defrosted, obtaining

a modified, assonant version (lit. ‘Go to the wood and you’ll lose your place’). Both in French and in Italian defrosting is used to create a reference to the narrative context. The German translator could have used a semantic equivalent of the original French idiom, *Weggegangen, Platz vergangen* ‘Go away and you’ll lose your place’, adapting it to the context. Instead, she opted for a quotation, the last line of a poem by Ludwig Uhland (1787-1862) meaning ‘This is the singer’s curse’. Although formally identical to the original quotation, the meaning is slightly different: while in the poem we have a subjective genitive (the singer curses a town, i.e. semantically he plays the agent role), the context of the comic album forces an objective genitive interpretation (the singer, i.e. the bard, will be cursed in that he will be taken away his hut, a tangible consequence of his decision to leave the village: in this sense he plays the patient role), more adherent to the original French.

This is not the only case in which the German translator relies on so called “winged words”, i.e. famous sayings or quotations. In (10) the original French and the Italian translation are equivalent (‘Wash your own (dirty) linen at home’).

(10)

Lavez votre linge en famille ! (18)

Lavateli in famiglia i panni sporchi!

Macht euren Dreck alleene!

German possesses a similar idiom, *seine schmutzige Wäsche vor anderen Leuten waschen* ‘to wash one’s own dirty linen in public’, which, though, has the opposite meaning, i.e. someone talks of private matters in front of other people. So, one solution would have been to use this idiom in the negative form; instead, the translator relied on a saying allegedly uttered by the last king of Saxony, Friedrich August III, when he abdicated in 1918: he wanted to have nothing more to do with ruling, so he invited his successors to make their “dirty work” by themselves. As in the previous example, the meaning of the German-specific winged words is close, but not identical to the original phraseologism. In both cases, we may regard the translator’s choice as an attempt to adapt the original to the target language not only on a mere linguistic level, but also from a cultural point of view.

We may sum up the main results of the analysis as follows: while the quantitative analysis revealed that most phraseologisms are preserved as equivalent or analogous ones in the translation, it was interesting to observe from a qualitative perspective how the translators proceeded when they felt compelled to preserve a phraseologism but could not find any equivalent or analogous ones; additionally, it emerged that dephraseologization and defrosting may act as solutions to

ensure textual and multimodal cohesion and coherence and that this, too, has to be taken into account when translating phraseologisms in comics.

4. Some remarks on compensation

One last remarkable point – both from a quantitative and qualitative perspective – concerns cases of compensation. For the sake of this study, “compensating” will be understood as weaving phraseologisms into a text in passages where there is no phraseologism in the original, so as to make up for cases of no equivalence. To detect instances of compensation, the Italian and German translations of *La rose et le glaive* were searched separately for phraseologisms, irrespective of their presence in the original: as a result, 13 occurrences in Italian and 10 in German were spotted. If we compare these figures with the row “no equivalence” in Table 1 above, we notice that the Italian translation compensates for all cases of non-equivalence in terms of number, though not necessarily in contextual or semantic equivalence, while the German one only compensates about two thirds of non-equivalent phraseologisms.

Again, the question remains open as to whether this was a deliberate choice of the translators: we cannot know which reason may lie behind their translatory decisions. However, since compensation is acknowledged as one of the strategies translators may revert to in order to obtain a text of equal impact as the ST (Baker 2011, 86), we may suppose that those choices were not made by chance. For instance, in (11) the German version shows the phraseologism *jemandem schwillt der Kamm* ‘someone’s comb is swelling’, a metaphor taken from the behaviour of poultry, to convey the meaning of the original (non-idiomatic) *être coléreux* ‘to have a temper’.

(11)

Regardez-moi ce fier petit Gaulois, comme il est coléreux ! (18)

Schaut mir diesen stolzen kleinen Gallier an, wie ihm der Kamm schwillt!

In (12), the Italian translator renders the original (non-idiomatic) *avoir envie de donner des baffes* ‘to feel like slapping people’ through *a qualcuno prudono le mani* ‘someone’s hands are itching’, which idiomatically conveys the same meaning.

(12)

Astérix, j’ai une énorme envie de donner des baffes ! (21)

Asterix, mi prudono le mani in un modo...

5. Conclusions

We may summarize the main points made in this paper as follows: from a quantitative perspective, most phraseologisms were rendered through equivalence or analogy. In German, we have a higher number of cases of no equivalence (over 30%) than in Italian (20%); however, cases of compensation could be found in the translations that make for the totality of occurrences of no equivalence in Italian and for about two thirds of the occurrences in German. From a qualitative point of view, discussing instances of “phraseologisms at all costs” as well as defrosted phraseologisms proved quite insightful: it was possible to show that the decisions made by the translator may be tightly knitted with the relationship between words and images on the one side and with the need to stick to the narrative context on the other. The aim to preserve puns and wordplays, too, may influence translators’ choice: again, strategies like dephraseologisation or defrosting may prove to be useful tools to achieve this goal. Taking a broader view, the comparison of translations for the same comic album across different languages has surfaced several thought-provoking questions and issues. However, these could be only superficially addressed: additional research would be needed in this domain. For instance, expanding the scope to include more translations in various languages would allow us to identify common patterns in the translation of individual phraseologisms. Also, exploring the connection between translators’ choices and the reading audience’s cultural background may deserve more thorough investigation, just like the textual, extra-textual and translatory implications of phenomena like dephraseologisation and defrosting. Finally, given the inherently multimodal nature of comics — where meaning arises from the interaction of verbal and visual elements — the role of phraseological strategies should be further examined within both linguistic and semiotic contexts.

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