

The Limits of the Play Text: Translating Comedy

Cristina Marinetti

University of Warwick, UK

ABSTRACT

This article explores how the translation of puns and humoristic language in a dramatic text stretches the boundaries of the written text, raising issues of performance and delivery. For this purpose, three functionally different English translations of Goldoni's *Il servitore di due padroni* are looked at to investigate how each deals with the traditionally untranslatable aspects of Goldoni's comedy: his reliance on improvisation and on the expressiveness of the vernacular.

KEYWORDS: Carlo Goldoni, drama translation, humour, performance, comedy.

Introduction

In the closing statements of his 1985 seminal work on the language of humour, Walter Nash underlines the inextricable link between humour and performance:

The language of humour is powerless without the speech of humour. Jokes are told; somewhere beyond the text is a voice, telling, delivering, timing (Nash 1985:172).

As Nash (1985:20) maintains, some important distinctions need to be made between the style of oral and textual humour, the most immediate of which is that textual humour 'expands through elaborative networks rarely if ever found in oral humour'. Oral humour, on the other hand, tends to be syntactically simpler and very reliant on performance. As recipients of humour, we are instinctively aware of a correspondence between the joke and its delivery. Such correspondence becomes evident in the case of those types of humour that are intended for performance, such as humoristic stories, jokes, or puns that play with sound. The translation of jokes has often been compared with the translation of poetry for the density of the language and the layers of meaning that tend to get lost in translation (Chiaro 1992:88). However, if we look at the relationship between the joke and its delivery, the language of humour seems much more similar to the language of plays. Like plays, humour is often time-bound and context-generated, it depends on and works within the here-and-now of its eventual performance. On the basis of this similarity, the dialectical relationship between the pun and its delivery might benefit from being further explored in the context of dramatic texts.

Theatre semioticians see play texts as indissolubly linked to their performance. Ann Ubersfeld (1978:153), for example, describes the play text as a text *troué*, full of gaps, in that it cannot be separated from the 'synchronic signs' of its realisation. From this perspective, the linguistic element of the play text is only one of the semiotic systems that make up the theatrical event and its very existence relies on its relationship with the other systems. This paper intends to investigate humour in a comedy scene in a way that will take into account the complex and compound nature of the dramatic text underlined by semioticians. In recent years, works on translation and punning have tended to consider humour in dramatic texts principally from a literary perspective (Delabastita 1994; 1996; 1997). Here, I will attempt to address the translation of humour from a theatrical perspective, drawing on recent studies on

the translation of theatre text (Bassnett 1990; 1998; Heylen 1993; Aaltonen 2000) and also on some of the literature that deals with the translation of humour and wordplay (Chiaro 1992; Delabastita 1994; 1996; 1997). The second part of the essay will consist of an analysis of the translation of humour in three English versions of Carlo Goldoni's *Il servitore di due padroni* – one primarily designed for publication and two composed with distinct types of performance in mind. I will explore how some of the traditional methods of describing humour translation work when confronted with the composite notion of the dramatic text proposed by theatre semiotics.

Humour and the translation of dramatic texts

Most of the theoretical work on theatre semiotics focuses on the relationship between text and performance. Tadeusz Kowzan (1985:1-2) distinguishes three main types of relationships between a written text and a theatrical show:

1. When the written text exists *a priori* and its oral performance requires a certain intonation and facial expression.
2. When the written text has no dialogue (or monologue) but is effectively a series of stage directions, and the performance consists in the acting out of these directions on the stage (e.g. dumb shows and mime).
3. When the writing of the text is done *a posteriori*, by collecting the speeches – often developed through improvisation – that accompanied the performance (e.g. *Il servitore di due padroni*, which Goldoni wrote down *a posteriori*).

While for Kowzan written texts can function outside the theatrical system and the theatrical system can function without written texts, Ann Ubersfeld (1978:154) emphasises the interdependence of written text and performance and sees in this the starting point for the historical prioritisation of the verbal over the other sign systems that constitute the theatrical event. A third position is represented by Patrice Pavis (1992:138), who dismisses the idea of a textual potential to be met in performance, but at the same time does not see text and performance as non-related systems that can exist on their own. He postulates instead the existence of two separate entities with two different semiotic systems, the *mise en signe* and the *mise en scène*, which are not interdependent but simultaneous, thus avoiding the risk of prioritisation of one element over the other.

The complexity of the dramatic text and the intricate relationship between text and performance have also been at the centre of the theoretical debate on theatre translation. In the first phase of her work on the problems of translation for the theatre, Susan Bassnett (1978; 1980b; 1981; 1985) identified the complex, multisemiotic nature of the play text as the key issue to be concerned with when finding one's way through the 'labyrinth' of theatre translation. Drawing on contemporary Italian work on theatre semiotics which advocated the idea of a 'grammar of performance' (Pagnini 1970:127) embedded in the text, Bassnett (1980a:124) developed the concept of 'gestural understructure', a sort of blueprint of an 'ideal' performance, which the translator was to recognise in the source text, decode and recode in the target text.

In a second phase of her work on theatre translation, which significantly coincides with the 'cultural turn' in translation studies, Bassnett (1990; 1998) gradually moves away from the structural idea of 'gestic subtext'. Undoubtedly influenced by post-structuralism and reader-

response theories, she argues that it is impossible for a translator to deduce any 'gestural understructure' from the source text, on the grounds that there cannot be one single 'grammar of performance' embedded in a text when there are as many potential translations of the text as there are different readings. Moreover, Bassnett recognises the limits of the concept of gestic subtext as the product of a specific approach to a specific type of text, namely a structural approach to 'the theatre of psychological realism', and she adds:

What is left for the translator to do is to engage specifically with the signs of the text: to wrestle with the linguistic units, the speech rhythms, the pauses and silences, the shifts of tone or of register, the problems of intonation patterns: in short, the linguistic and paralinguistic aspects of the written text that are decodable and reencodable. (Bassnett 1998:107)

Bassnett underlines that the written text is not fundamental to performance but that it is only one element of an eventual performance. It follows that the task of integrating the written text with the other sign systems that constitute the theatrical event is not the translator's but the director's and the playwright's.

Another work focussing on the subject of plurality of readings in translation is Sirkku Aaltonen's (2000) latest book on the translation of theatre texts. With Octavio Paz, Aaltonen believes that texts do not have fixed readings and that every reading of a text generates a new text (1992:159). Aaltonen sees theatre texts as apartments, spaces to be occupied and manipulated for periods of time by different tenants. This is particularly true of the theatre world where, for every performance of a text, several different readings of the same text are required¹:

Playwrights, translators, stage directors, dress and set designers, sound and light technicians as well as actors all contribute to the creation of theatre texts when they move into them and make them their own. (Aaltonen 2000:32)

Useful here is Aaltonen's application of Lefevere's (1992:14-15) concepts of 'rewriting' and 'patronage' to the theatre system. The notion of rewriting, like the literary system, is an artificial construct where texts are objects that are read and rewritten by human agents. Through rewriting, texts are manipulated to suit the constraints that the system imposes on foreign objects which enter it. These constraints are determined by a 'double control factor', namely, the veto of the professionals and what Lefevere calls 'patronage'. From within the system, the professionals – academics, translators, editors etc. – deal with the aesthetic component of the foreign texts while the 'patronage' controls the choices of text in terms of the dominant ideology, the economic return and the status that belonging to a certain social/intellectual group produces.

The strategies used by translators/rewriters to bring foreign texts in line with the conventions of the target system are described as 'acculturation' and 'neutralization' (Aaltonen 2000). In the theatre system, the degree of acculturation needed for a text to be accepted in the canon tends to be higher than in the literary system. Aaltonen explains this by arguing that if the play text is seen as one of the elements that constitute the theatrical event, it is impossible to avoid a certain degree of acculturation in translation, and she adds that due to the very nature of the medium of theatre, the manipulation of the original is more visible here than elsewhere. Romy Heylen (1993:23), on the other hand, sees the acculturation of the play text in terms of degree. Heylen talks about a descending 'scale of acculturation' that goes from the so-called 'foreignised' texts, where no attempt is made to acculturate the source text, through various stages of 'negotiation', up to a complete acculturation, where problematic elements of the

source text are normalised and domesticated to suit audience expectation and the constraints of the receiving theatre system.

Another strategy that has been used by theatre translators for a long time and which has been highly criticised by translation theorists as vague and critically ineffective is ‘performability’ – often paired with ‘speakability’ and ‘playability’. Developed by theatre semioticians, who saw the centrality of performance in drama translation, the idea of ‘performability’ is traditionally related to rhythm of speech, easy graspability and simplicity of pronunciation. Bassnett (1990; 1998) draws attention to the tendency of theatre translators to hide behind ‘performability’ – or the equally nebulous ‘requirements of the stage’ – whenever they feel the need to justify radical changes of the source text.

In a way that is similar to that of theatre translators, translators of jokes have to be constantly aware of a whole series of contextual and socio-cultural elements. As Chiaro (1992:83) maintains, it is particularly vital for the translator of humour, as for their theatrical equivalent, to be up-to-date in their knowledge of the ‘day-to-day affairs’ of both the source and target culture. Another element that is equally important to the success of the joke is style. While explaining the importance of lexical choice in the translation of a joke, Chiaro underlines the inextricable link between the successful delivery of a joke and the use of the right style. As Chiaro (1992:96) suggests, it is not just the punchline in a joke or the gag in a comedy scene that makes the audience laugh; the success of a joke or a gag depends on the style of the text as a whole.

Three ways of translating Goldoni’s comedy

Let us consider three translations of a classic of Italian theatre, Goldoni’s *Il servitore di due padroni*. The three translations that I have chosen vary greatly in terms of strategy. Susan Bassnett distinguishes five types of drama translation strategies:

1. Treating the theatre text as a literary work.
2. Using the SL cultural context as a frame text.
3. Translating ‘performability’.
4. Creating SL verse drama in alternative forms.
5. Cooperative translation.

(Bassnett 1985:90)

Edward J. Dent’s text is a literary translation. Although it was originally translated in connection with a performance by the ADC drama society at Cambridge in 1928, this is the text that remained for decades the canonical English language translation of *Il servitore*. Unlike any other translation of *Il servitore*, Dent’s translation was reprinted several times (1952, 1958, 1969, 1970, 1982 and 1986) and included in anthologies of Italian theatre classics (Bentley 1958; 1986). Our second translation, Frederick H. Davies’ 1961 version, was composed with a very definite type of performance in mind. It was designed for ‘the boys and girls who will act in the play’ to whom Davies forward is addressed. His strategy is that of ‘translating performability’, in that he claims to have taken into account a specific performance dimension. The third translation, by Hall and Pandolfi, is the result of what Bassnett terms cooperative translation. The Royal Shakespeare Company commissioned a ‘literal translation’ – as stated in the frontispiece – from the bilingual translator Gwenda Pandolfi and then passed it on to Lee Hall, the playwright, who, working with, among others,

the translator, the theatre company and the director (Tim Supple), ‘adapted’ the text for performance.

The first extract we shall look at is from Act I, Scene I. Here, the knave-servant Truffaldino (Harlequin in traditional *commedia dell’arte*) has been ushered into Pantalone’s house to announce the arrival of his master, Sig. Federigo Rasponi of Turin. Federigo, the betrothed groom of Pantalone’s daughter Clarice, has actually died a week earlier in a duel in Turin. Pantalone, who has been informed of Federigo’s death, has made agreements with Dottor Lombardi to marry his daughter to the doctor’s son, Silvio. Though Truffaldino is not aware of this, his master is actually Federigo’s sister, who has disguised herself as her brother to obtain from Pantalone the dowry that he had promised her brother and to elope with her beloved Florindo.

PANTALONE: Andè via, che sè un pezzo de matto. Sior Federigo Rasponi da Turin el xe morto.
TRUFFALDINO: L’è morto?
PANTALONE: L’è morto seguro. Pur troppo per elo.
TRUFFALDINO: (Diavol! Che il me padron sia morto? L’ho pur lassà vivo da basso!) (*da se*)
Disì da bon, che l’è morto?
(Goldoni 2002:11)

(1)
PANTALONE: Away! You must be mad. Signor Federigo Rasponi da Turin is dead.
TRUFFALDINO: Dead?
PANTALONE: To be sure he’s dead, worse luck for him.
TRUFFALDINO, *aside*. The devil! My master dead? Why, I left him alive downstairs!
To PANTALONE
You really mean he is dead?
(Dent 1958:85)

(2)
PANTALONE: The fellow *is* mad! Signor Federigo Rasponi of Turin is dead!
TRUFFALDINO: Dead?
PANTALONE: Yes, yes of course.
TRUFFALDINO: My master – dead! He was quite alive when I left him downstairs. You really mean it? Quite – dead?
(Davies 1961:5)

(3)
PANTALOON : The man’s out of his mind. Federigo Rasponi is dead.
TRUFFALDINO: Dead?
PANTALOON: Dead. Defunct. Deceased. Demised. Kaput. No more, sir.
TRUFFALDINO: Are you sure?
(Hall and Pandolfi 1999:6)

The first thing to be said about Goldoni’s text is that, like most of his plays, it is partially written in dialect. Unlike his later plays, which were written solely in Venetian, *Il servitore* was written in a mixture of dialect and literary Tuscan. This is mainly because it is a ‘text of passage’ between classic *commedia dell’arte* and the realist play that Goldoni would later introduce to the Italian scene. The text in fact retains the characters/masks of *commedia* and with them their different regional vernaculars – a reminder of the itinerant nature of its medieval origin (Mangini 1965). In this scene, for instance, Pantalone is speaking Venetian whereas Truffaldino replies in a quasi-Bergamask dialect,² which was perceived at the time – and to a lesser extent still today – as the language of servants and ill-educated country people. Much of the humour in this extract derives from the sound of the language itself. When Truffaldino says in an aside ‘Diavòl! Che il me padròn sia mòrto? L’ho pur lassà vivo da

basso!’ the humour springs from the accent and intonation that are encoded in the line. The accented vowels in the first part of the line and the double ‘s’ in the second part, give a specific rhythm to the passage which exaggerates the characteristics of the *zanni*’s dialect, and consequently reinforces the typicality of the mask of Truffaldino, the Bergamask dim-wit knave. As in traditional *commedia*, the comedy of the text arises from the physical and verbal interaction of the stereotyping masks. This is because the text originated as a *scenario*,³ developed through improvisation, and was only later written down by Goldoni. Having originated from performance, the text is extremely reliant on the *mise en scène*. It is a perfect example of the type of text that Kowzan describes as written *a posteriori*, and of Ubersfeld’s notion of the text *troué*. The gestural humour of *commedia* is encoded in the text in a way that makes the *mise en signe* and the *mise en scène* almost indistinguishable. So, in the source text, most of the comedy comes, on the one hand, from quintessentially linguistic elements, namely the contrast of two vernaculars, and on the other, from a set of extra-linguistic elements that are also extremely culture- and genre-determined.

Dent’s approach to the humour of the text is very conservative. He maintains, as far as he possibly can, the grammatical structures of the original, without paying attention to either speech rhythm or delivery. Although he neutralises the language so that there is no noticeable difference in the tone or register of the two characters, he makes no attempt at acculturating the humour embedded in Truffaldino’s last line. Davies, on the other hand, does tackle Truffaldino’s aside as he inserts a punning element ‘quite alive/quite dead’ that was not in the original, thus partly compensating Truffaldino’s neutralised speech. Hall and Pandolfi tackle the problem in a different way altogether. They do not try and recreate the effect of Truffaldino’s last line but rewrite the passage and introduce new punning material. They rewrite Pantalone’s line as ‘Dead. Defunct. Deceased. Demised. Kaput. No more, sir’, adding a reverberating effect through intertextual reference to the legendary ‘dead parrot scene’, by the celebrated British comedy group Monty Python.⁴ Here acculturation is complete. The style of humour that made translation so difficult because of being too embedded in the source culture and language is substituted with a style that is peculiar to the target humour. Moreover, the rhythm of speech, which in the source text was so beautifully underlined by accents and sounds typical of Romance vernaculars, is transformed here into a peculiarly Germanic rhythm consisting in alliteration and climaxed delivery.

Let us now look at an example of wordplay from *Il servitore*. We are now in Act II, scene 12 and Truffaldino is at Brighella’s inn. They are discussing the menu of the famous dinner scene, where Truffaldino has to run to and fro to attend to his two masters.

BRIGHELLA: La seconda ghe daremo l’arrosto, l’insalata, un pezzo de carne pastizzada e un bodin.

TRUFFALDINO: Anca qua gh’è un piatto che no cognosso; coss’è sto budellin?

BRIGHELLA: Ho dito budin, un piatto all’inglese, una cossa bona. (Goldoni 2002:12)

(1)

BRIGHELLA: For the second course the roast, the salad, a meat pie – and a trifle.

TRUFFALDINO: *indignant*. What’s that? A trifle? My master and his guests are gentlemen of substance; they won’t be satisfied with a mere trifle. A trifle indeed!

BRIGHELLA: You don’t understand. I said

Impressively.

a trifle! That’s an English dish, a pudding, my very own speciality; there’s not another man in Venice knows how to make it! (Dent 1958:125)

(2)

Davies cut out the dialogue between Brighella and Truffaldino.

(3)

BRIGHELLA: Then we could do you a roast, a nice salad, a game pie and then follow it all up with a spotted dick.

TRUFFALDINO: There's no need for that, sir. My master is a man of some standing.

BRIGHELLA: It's an English dish, sir.

TRUFFALDINO: I don't care where it's from, sir, a dick's a dick in my book. I think we'll have a trifle. (Hall and Pandolfi 1999:50)

Before starting our analysis I would like to briefly comment on some of the strategies that translators tend to use when tackling wordplay. In the study of the translation of wordplay, a strong emphasis has been traditionally put on the question of untranslatability. Delabastita (1997:10) explains the 'untranslatability' approach to wordplay as the recognition 'of the incontestable fact that wordplay tends to resist some kind of translation'. The kind of translation that Delabastita is referring to is the Jakobsonian notion of equivalence, according to which, poetry, and by extension punning and wordplay, are 'by definition untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible' (Jakobson 1992:151). In the introduction to the 1996 special edition of *The Translator* – an issue entirely dedicated to the translation of puns – Delabastita (1996:134) identified eight different types of techniques at the translator's disposal when faced with the translation of puns or wordplay:

- PUN → PUN: substitution of the source text pun with a target-language pun.
- PUN → NON-PUN: the pun is translated into a non-punning phrase.
- PUN → RELATED RHETORICAL DEVICE: substitution of the pun with a wordplay-related rhetorical device (e.g. – repetition, alliteration, irony).
- PUN → ZERO: the portion of text containing the pun is omitted.
- PUN ST = PUN TT: literal rendering of the source text pun in the target language.
- NON-PUN → PUN: introduction of a pun in a textual position where the original text has no wordplay for compensation or any other reason.
- ZERO → PUN: introduction of new punning material which has no apparent precedent or justification in the source text except as a compensatory device.
- EDITORIAL TECHNIQUES: explanation of the pun in the paratext – footnotes, endnotes or introductions.

In the above example, the punning element in the extract from the source text is – typically of *commedia dell'arte*'s pranks – the result of mispronunciation. In his constant fixation with food and bodily functions, Truffaldino mishears the word *budin/bodin* (chocolate pudding) as *budellin* (bowels). The pun here lies in Truffaldino's mispronunciation of the word, which sounds comical due to the diminutive suffix and the word itself, in its typically coarse *commedia* fashion, makes the audience visualize bowels on a plate.

The three translations of the pun in question offer interesting approaches. Dent opts for a pun-to-pun translation. He transforms a case of mispronunciation into a case of misunderstanding due to homophony. He chooses to play on the word 'trifle' with its double meaning of

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‘pudding’ and ‘small amount’. Davies, probably for reasons of length, imposed by the educational nature of the edition, omits this passage. Like Dent, Hall and Pandolfi adopt a pun-to-pun approach. They, too, substitute the mispronunciation – *budin* becomes *budellin* – with misunderstanding through homophony – dick (the part of the body) and the English dessert ‘spotted dick’ – , but they do so in a way that is closer to the humour-making of the source text. They manage to retain the theatrical effect of the rude, bodily-functions related ‘*budellin*’ by using the allusive ‘spotted dick’, which aims at the same effect on the audience, that of making them visualise the spotted body part in question served on a plate with some fanciful garnish. Although both Dent’s and Hall and Pandolfi’s translations apply the same strategy, the difference between the two renderings is rather significant. Unlike Hall and Pandolfi’s, Dent’s translation tackles the source language pun from a purely linguistic perspective, not taking into account the traditional characteristics of the mask of Harlequin – hunger, bodily baseness and overt sexuality. In terms of performability, there is also a considerable difference between the two texts. As a result of the collaborative nature of the translation effort, with its constant interaction between *mise en scène* and *mise en signe*, Hall and Pandolfi’s recoding of the source pun takes into account the delivery and delivery effect that are encoded in the source-text pun, thus successfully transposing a *commedia* prank into British theatrical language.

Let us now consider Truffaldino’s monologue. We are in Act I, scene 4. Truffaldino is waiting for his master Beatrice/Federigo Rasponi in front of Brighella’s inn.

TRUFFALDINO: I alter subit che i arriva in qualche città, la prima cossa i va all’osteria. Lu, sior no, el lassa i bauli in barca del corrier, el va a far visite, e nol se ricorda del povero servitor. (...) Qua gh’è una locanda quasi quasi anderia a vedere se ghe fuss da divertir el dente (...) Voi andar, ma adess che ghe penso, gh’è un altra piccola difficultà che non me arrecordava; no ho gnanca un quattrin. Oh Povero Truffaldin! (Goldoni 2002:19)

(1)

TRUFFALDINO: With my other masters the first thing they did, as soon as they came to a town, was to go to a tavern. This gentleman – Lord no! He leaves his trunks in the boat at the landing stage, goes off to pay a visit, and forgets all about his poor servant. (...) Here’s an inn. I’ve half a mind to go in and see if I can find something to tickle my teeth (...) I’ll go in – but now I come to think of it, there’s another little difficulty that I hadn’t remembered; I haven’t a penny. Oh poor Truffaldin! (Dent 1958:93-94)

(2)

TRUFFALDINO: With my other masters, the first thing they did as soon as they came to a town, was to go to an inn and get a good meal. But this gentleman – oh no – he leaves his trunk at the landing stage, goes off to pay visits, and forgets all about his poor servant. I’d go into this inn and get something to eat myself only I haven’t got a penny to my name. (Davies 1961:12-13)

(3)

TRUFFALDINO: I mean the first thing you do when you get into town is put your feet up and get some decent scran down your neck, don’t you? But oh no, not Lord Anorexia, here. No, he’s pissed off down the quay to get his trunk, et cetera, et cetera (...) If I only had some dosh I’d sod the skinny sod, nip in there and give me gnashers a bit of training out of me own back pocket. But have I seen any wages? Have I buggery. (Hall and Pandolfi 1999:14)

In the excerpt from the source text the humour rests once again on the characteristics of Truffaldino’s speech. The tones and rhythms of his language, which spring from his quasi-Bergamask vernacular, identify him as the half dim-wit, half cocky servant-knave. Most of the humoristic effect plays on his daftness and his obsession with food (*‘se ghe fuss da divertir el dente’*). Specifically, in line two, Truffaldino uses the vernacular expression ‘*Lu, sior no.*’, which would be paired in performance with a series of comic gestures. The same

expression would not have the same impact in contemporary Italian and its comic value is strictly connected to linguistic and genre-related elements. Truffaldino then concludes his speech with the rhyming formula which sums up his condition, '*no ho gnanca un quattrin. Oh Povero Truffaldin!*'

In his approach to the translation of register features, Dent has opted once again for normalisation. In fact, Dent does not seem to have made any effort to characterise it according to the servant-knave nature of Goldoni's comic lead. On the contrary, by keeping very close to the linguistic structures of the source text he partially subverts the tone of the passage. Expressions such as 'if I can find something to tickle my teeth' or 'This gentleman – Lord no!', contribute to construct an image of Truffaldino that is very distant from that of Goldoni's uneducated and sometimes vulgar servant-knave.⁵ Dent's lack of attention to the different aspects of Goldoni's language becomes apparent in his translation of the last line, which reads: 'I haven't a penny. Oh poor Truffaldin'. The formulaic expression is lost and the rhyme disappears, but Truffaldino's truncated name unnecessarily remains.

Davies's approach to the passage also shows an attempt at normalising the language. Parts of the speech are omitted, figurative language is simplified – '*se ghe fuss da divertir el dente*' becomes 'to get a good meal' –, and the formulaic rhyming closure becomes a direct assertion 'I haven't got a penny to my name'. Interestingly, the strategy of the translation – translating performability – becomes graphically visible in this passage with the italicised *he*, suggesting the position of the stress in the delivery. Here, Davies is perhaps attempting to translate the comic element of the source text through a suggestion for performance on the stage.

Hall and Pandolfi's translation, on the other hand, resounds with acculturation. Having worked towards the production of a script for a specific performance, the problem of the characterisation of Truffaldino becomes central to their translation. From his language springs most of the comedy and on his mishaps and fooleries hinges the entire plot. In their version, Truffaldino becomes a Del Boy scallywag, who speaks his mind in cockney slang, resents his masters and tries to get the most out of every situation. But he also becomes a sort of mediator, a negotiator between Goldoni's text and the audience. Truffaldino's '*andar a divertir il dente*' becomes 'give me gnashers a bit of training' and his master leaving him there with his luggage becomes 'he's pissed off down the quay'. Goldoni's vernacular immediacy is successfully replaced by cockney directness. And the audience laughs (Billington 1999). The success of Hall and Pandolfi's total acculturation approach is, I believe, visible in their tackling of Goldoni's 'Lu-sior no' passage. In their recoding process the translators took into account not only textual, but contextual and theatrical elements. Behind Goldoni's vernacular expression is the distinctive Italian tradition of accompanying humour with gesture. In recoding this particular passage then, the translator had to reinvent the comic element in accordance with the English tradition of theatrical humour which is much more verbal and punning than gestural. From a textual point of view, the result seems to be a zero-to-pun translation (Delabastita 1996), because in the translation the humoristic element had to be made verbally explicit. On the other hand, if we look at it from a theatrical perspective it is a pun-to-pun translation, since there is a punning element already in the source text, but it is the result of a combination of verbal and gestural language.

Conclusion

The success of Hall and Pandolfi's translation of Goldoni's humour is the result of a series of factors. The conditions of production of the translated text are very similar to those of the source text. In both cases the text is the result of a theatrical work of staging and improvisation. The *mise en scène* and the *mise en signe* are simultaneous. Both texts are very much the product of their time and theatrical culture. Goldoni's humour functions because it plays with a very specific language and represents a very specific world. So does Hall and Pandolfi's translation. Their acculturation of the text within the contemporary situation of the performance renders this remote 18th century play accessible and enjoyable for a contemporary audience. As Chiaro (1992) suggests, the greater the shared knowledge between the joke-teller and the audience, the better the effect is likely to be. Humour works at its best when it is localised. However, the variables that come into play when an actor delivers a joke are so many that even a change of venue could make a 'perfect' translation of theatrical humour unsuccessful, as Gardner reports:

It is still sharp and funny, and Hall's easy, colloquial version makes the whole affair seem contemporary. It plays like a dream, allowing room for the actors to improvise and elaborate. But somehow you can now see all the artifice in it. At the Young Vic, audience and actors were engaged in a complicity of enjoyment, but at the New Ambassadors that has somewhat evaporated (Gardner 2000).

The ultimate ambition for a joke teller, a comedian or a translator of theatrical humour – the 'complicity of enjoyment', as Gardner calls it, between the comic and the audience – can ultimately be achieved only through performance. In this brief analysis of the translation of humour, I hope I have managed to draw attention to the problems of translation of theatrical comedy. Italian *commedia* humour and, I would argue, other types of theatrical comedy, are so reliant on the *mise en scène* that they can only really be made to work through the actor's performance on the stage for a specific audience at a specific point in time. And as such, I would suggest, they defy the limitations posed by the self-sufficient *a priori* written text. Like translation at large, the translation of comedy in a dramatic text is far too complex a phenomenon to be reduced to a literary versus performance opposition. If we are to succeed in the translation of this type of theatrical humour we need to abandon the clear-cut distinction between literary and performance strategies in the translation of drama, and strive towards maintaining the theatrical dimension of the dramatic text.

Author's address
C.Marinetti(a)warwick.ac.uk

Notes

¹ Six, according to Bassnett, namely: the post-performance reading, the director's, the actor's, the designer's, plus the dramaturgical reading and the rehearsal reading (Bassnett 1998:101).

² Traditionally, the two servant masks of *commedia*, also called *zanni*, were from the Bergamo Valley, in Eastern Lombardy. However, the dialect spoken by Goldoni's Truffaldino, typically of later *commedia*, is considerably closer to low-class Venetian than to actual Bergamask.

³ *Scenario* was an outline of the plot development that was usually pinned to the side of the stage from which the *commedia dell'arte* troupe would improvise the play.

⁴ Monty Python or *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, arguably the most famous British television comedy series, was broadcast by the BBC from 1969 to 1974. The Python's 'dead parrot sketch' – which became such a classic of British comedy that it was once used by Margaret Thatcher to attack the Liberal Democrats in a conference speech in 1990 – portrays a confrontation between an unhappy customer (played by John Cleese) and a shopkeeper (Michael Palin) about the 'vital state' of a Norwegian Blue parrot. For background information on the Pythons and a full transcription of the sketch, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_Parrot_Sketch (last accessed on 28 April, 2005).

⁵ Although, as it happens, one of the reasons that persuaded Goldoni to write the play down and to undertake his 'reformation' of *commedia* was his aversion to the exaggerated vulgarity of certain *commedia* actors, as we can see from the admonition to future actors included in the forward to the play (Goldoni 2002:5).

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