The rendering of Japanese comedy

The case of culture-specific references in the English subtitles of *Hitoshi Matsumoto presents Dokyumental*

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This study focuses on the linguistic and socio-cultural components in the translation process of Japanese humour. The cultural apparatus plays a key role in the development of humour exchanges but is still insufficiently explored. Heydon and Kianbakht (2020) argue that there is no greater challenge than to deal in translation with references directly related to cultural aspects of other, often distant and different languages. All of this contributes to historical theories on the untranslatability of humour (Delabastita 1994), even though more recent research favours a predominantly functional approach especially in the field of audiovisual translation (Dore 2020).

In this context, this study, in addition to providing a brief examination of the main characteristics of Japanese-made humour - an area almost unexplored by previous studies - has the primary aim of intercepting the rendering in English subtitles of culture-specific references (CSRs) in the Japanese comedy programme *Hitoshi Matsumoto presents Dokyumental*. The programme counts thirteen seasons, but now only two are available in translation on the *Amazon Italia* platform. In particular, I try to analyse the strategies adopted by the translator to convey a type of humour that often significantly transcends Western canons (Davis, 2006; Swan, 2022b). As Ranzato (2010: 42) points out, the problem of cultural references has not been exhaustively explored in the context of audiovisual translation yet. Although research in cultural references has been fruitful in the recent years, the statement of Ranzato remains valid for what concerns the Japanese context. This is why the present study may prove significant in the fields of *Audiovisual Translation Studies*, *Humour Studies* and *Japanese Studies*.

Keywords: Japanese humour, audiovisual translation, culture-specific references.

1. Japanese verbal comedy and the concept of *context*

The scarce presence of publications on Japanese comedy in the panorama of non-Japanese literature inevitably makes it complex, but necessary, to provide the theoretical basis for research. In this section I try to illustrate what are the fundamental prerogatives of linguistic humour peculiar to the Japanese context.

As Ōshima (2006: 39) explains, the basis of comedy and laughter is strongly linked to the type of society. Following Hall (1976), the author introduces the concept of *social context* to compare the types of humour observable in different cultures, where the term *context* refers to the ideas and information shared between members of the same social group. Scholars divide cultures into those with high and those with low context and, as Ōshima (2006: 39) indicates, Japanese society is considered to be high context. Such would be the motivation behind the difficulties in understanding Japanese comedy encountered by people from different contextual backgrounds. To quote the author:

> The higher the level of context, the greater the degree of dependence on it, leading to less need to rely on linguistically expressed information. In other words, this leads to the so-called cultures where 'you don't need to specify to understand each other.' Instead of linguistic signs, therefore, one manages to understand each other by communicating with looks, pauses, and, above all, through shared knowledge, the 'common sense' (Ōshima 2006: 40).

The first obstacle when trying to understand humour thus lies in the anthropological characteristics that form the background of a particular society. Japanese culture, as well as language, is usually defined as high-context due to the scarcity of information explicated by the verbal sign that constantly needs contextual examination to be interpreted correctly.

In analysing humour as a social phenomenon in Japan, on the other hand, Tsukawaki *et al.* (2009a), proposed a taxonomy of motives that underlie the appearance of humorous phrases in communication: *stabilisation of the relationship*, *expression of disappointment*, *moral support of others*, *manipulation of the impression*, *support of the self.* These motives are analysed from the perspective of the three types of humour identified by the authors: *playful humour*, *aggressive humour* and *self-deprecating humour* (Tsukawaki *et al.* 2009b). For reasons of space, this categorisation will not be discussed. However, it is important to make further considerations about the first of the listed motives: *stabilising the relationship* (falling under the category of *playful humour*). In the specific case of the dialogue between Japanese speakers, the use of humour is a means of creating a more intimate relationship with the interlocutor and, at the same time, raising the level of sharing emotions and opinions. In high-context cultures most people share information and knowledge, so it is precisely from this aspect that derive the two main patterns of conversations where laughter is most likely to occur: the *conversational* type and the *individual experience* type (Ōshima 2006: 45).

Firstly, it should be noted that joking conversation between Japanese tends to occur between speakers with a certain degree of intimacy, where there is sufficient mutual information and knowledge. In the case of laughter arising from a conversational pattern, we will have two or more speakers intervening collaboratively through a simple conversation where each participant is

involved. Although these dialogues are often not necessarily intended for humorous purposes (Ōta 2002: 76-77), the co-participation and emotional closeness between the participants causes laughter. This is different for linguistic exchanges based on the so-called *experiences of the individual*. To quote Ōshima:

> The speaker's sharing of his experiences provokes laughter. Telling normal stories or unfortunate events from one's own experience with self-mockery (...) is a strategy that allows one to get to know oneself better. If one of the interlocutors had a similar experience, it would also be a means of sharing emotions and opinions and thus deepen the intimate bond (Ōshima 2006: 113).

This strategy contrasts sharply with the style of humorous dialogue in European or American cultures that, for instance, prefer the telling of a joke or a story that is not necessarily related to the speaker. According to Ōta (2002: 76), the spread of the practice of personal storytelling and sharing of experiences can be traced back to the so-called *manzai boom* phenomenon of the 1980s, which erupted thanks to the popularity of comedians employed by the Yoshimoto Kōgyō theatre production company and their shows aired by private televisions. The typical conversational exchange in *manzai*—the Japanese-style stand-up comedy originating in Ōsaka—involves the presence of the *boke*, who makes absurd, illogical, or otherwise irrelevant statements in the *common sense*, and the *tsukkomi*, who points out the absurdity of such statements and severely reprimands the *boke*. As Murase (2015) and Takahashi (2022) point out, the audience's laughter at *manzai* performances very often depends precisely on how the *tsukkomi* reacts to the *boke*'s absurdities, i.e. how he points out and corrects such deviations by relating them to information and values known and shared by the social majority (the *common sense, jōshiki* in Japanese).

The topics of conversations in Japanese stand-up comedy are designed to function in the context of the so-called *uchiwa-uke*, i.e. a type of ghettoising laughter that aims to make only a certain social group that shares the same information or experiences laugh (Ōta 2002: 78). Thus, we can find conversations based on the cartoons one watched in childhood, the menu of the company canteen, news of the moment or any other topic easily shared by the participants. As can be seen, therefore, context plays a fundamental role in the production and understanding of society. In the following chapters, I try to emphasise how it is often difficult to handle this aspect of Japanese comedy in the translation phase, especially because of the inevitable and frequent recourse to culturally specific elements of the Japanese comic micro-context, which in many cases represent the very comic core, i.e. the element that should trigger laughter.

2. Classification and translation of CSRs

In recent decades research in the field of *Audiovisual Translation Studies* has shifted the focus from the analysis of textual humour to multimodal and audiovisual humour (Martínez Sierra and Zabalbescoa 2017). In other words, in addition to the fundamental interest in the linguistic analysis of verbal humour exchange, scholars have implemented the analysis of extra-linguistic channels, such as the soundtrack or the expressions of the protagonists. As Attardo (2020: 342-343) points out, it is important to remember that the text is humorous in its verbal and non-verbal components as a whole; nevertheless, from a methodological point of view, it is preferable to focus on only one of these during analysis. However, the state of the art inherent in the translation of Japanese humour is to be considered deficient (Lo Cigno, 2022b). For this reason, at this initial stage of analysis, I decided to set the focus of this study on verbal humour and on the manipulation of CSRs in the interlinguistic transition from Japanese to English. In Ranzato's (2010: 39) research, CSRs are defined in the following terms:

> By culture-specific references are meant those elements within a text that have a, precisely, cultural, non-linguistic content. In films and other audiovisual products, such references are the verbal and non-verbal signs [...] that are specific to the socio-cultural content of origin and may not be known to the target culture. They are the elements that contribute the most to conveying the colour and flavour of the original texts, as well as characterising their style.

As can easily be deduced from the definition, CSRs are frequently a problem from a translation perspective. The greater the difference between cultures, therefore, the greater the likelihood that the importation of such elements into the target language will prove complex, if not impossible. Several taxonomies already exist with regard to CSRs (Newmark 1988; Rantanen 1990; Osimo 2011), however one of the most detailed—also due to the inclusion of the dichotomy *Real-world cultural references* and *Intertextual cultural* references proposed by Ranzato (2016)—is to be found in Díaz Cintas and Remael (2021: 203):

- Real world cultural references
    - Geographical references
        - To certain phenomena: mistral, tornado, tsunami, calima;
        - To physical, general locations: savannah, downs, plateau*, plaza mayor*;
        - To physical, unique locations: Lake Tanganyika, St. Andreas Fault, Yellow River;
        - To endemic animal and plant species: sequoia, silky sifaka, platypus, pandani;
        - ...
    - -Ethnographic references
        - To food and drinks: *tapas*, *trattoria*, 豆腐 tofu, Glühwein;
        - To objects from daily life: *lederhose*, igloo, sticky buds, *bukhnoq*;
        - To work: farmer, gaucho, machete, man of the cloth, ranch;

- To art, media and culture: blues, Thanksgiving, it girl, Permeke;
- To groups: gringo, Cockney, frat boys, Orang Asli, Sami, Miao;
- To weights and measures: dollar, ounce, feet, pound, stone;
- To brand names and personal names: SMI, Einstein;
- ...

- Socio-political references
  - To administrative or territorial units: country, *slum*, constituency;
  - To institutions and functions: *Reichstag*, sheriff, congress;
  - To socio-cultural life: Ku Klux Klan, Prohibition, landed gentry, kowtowing;
  - To military institutions and objects: Feldwebel, marines, Smith & Wesson;
  - To personal names and institutional names: Che Guevara, Gandhi, NHS;
  - ...

- Intertextual cultural references
  - Overt intertextual allusions: an explicit reference to Hamlet or *Games of Thrones*.
  - Covert intertextual allusions: all types of parody or other allusions taking the form of not explicitly identified references to other cultural artefacts, such as 'A car, a car, my kingdom for a car,' playing on the original 'A horse, a horse, I'd give my kingdom for a horse' from *Richard III.*

A simple examination of the classification shows that some elements are repeated in different categories, but this feature is to be considered unavoidable, especially for what concerns proper names. In addition, as the authors themselves emphasise (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2021: 204), from a translation perspective, the taxonomy would not provide any indication of possible *impasses* in the interlingual passage of a given CSR. This manifests in cases of the so-called *rich points*, i.e. moments of translation awkwardness that arise at times when the cultural distance between two language-cultures is large (Vitucci 2016: 35). In the case of CSRs, therefore, the lack of a precise referent in the *target language* obliges the translator to find the most effective strategy to try to overcome the translation obstacle. In this regard, scholars have attempted over the years to analyse this phenomenon and propose translation strategies specifically calibrated to the cultural elements. We must think first about the concept of *transculturality* (Pedersen 2011)—i.e. the way in which cultures are interconnected—which appears to be the parameter behind translators' choices when importing CSRs. Then we have also the

concept of *centrality* (Pedersen 2011), which refers to the importance of a CSR within the narrative genesis and which I have already pointed out in reference to the audiovisual translation of the Kyoto diatopic variation in a feature film where the local dialect was fundamental in terms of narrative development (Lo Cigno 2021).

Regarding translation strategies, there are numerous taxonomies proposed by scholars over the years. Mention may be made of the pioneering one by Lappihalme (1997), focusing on proper names and so-called key-phrases, or those by Cuéllar and Garcia-Falces (2004), Pedersen (2007), Gottlieb (2009), Ranzato (2016) and Díaz Cintas and Remael (2021).1 In 2020, Dore attempted to summarise the different taxonomies, which often featured similar terminology and concepts, by proposing the following strategies for the interlingual transference of CSRs (Dore 2020: 190-191).

1. Transference (loans, literal translation, official equivalent, etc.)
2. Explicitation:
    a. by specification
    b. by generalisation
3. Lexical recreation
4. Substitution:
    a. by source culture CSR
    b. by target culture CSR
    c. by international CSR
5. Omission

The proposed taxonomy is, as already mentioned, only one of several elaborated so far, and in fact condenses many of the strategies that have gained greater consideration by scholars. In general, the major problem with such classifications remains the inevitable existence of ambiguities in certain cases. For the analysis of the television programme that will follow in the following chapters, I've chosen the solution proposed by Dore as it is already the result of a condensation of the previous taxonomies and calibrated to the culturally specific elements of humour.

Finally, attention should be drawn to the relative—at times subjective—nature of CSRs. This characteristic, as Ranzato also points out (Ranzato 2010: 48), makes them extremely dependent on the subjective choices and interpretations of the translators. Consequently, since fruition of the cultural element is based on shared experiences, the translator's linguistic rendering—however skilful—can

[1] Based on the original work dating back to 2007.

happen to fail to stimulate the target culture audience in the same way. In the audiovisual context, the search for the most effective rendering of CSRs in the target language is now more necessary than ever due to the global distribution of feature films and fiction (Vitucci 2016: 37). As far as the context of Japanese language and culture is concerned, Vitucci's assertion was already valid in 2016, but today it assumes even more significance given the exponential increase in the distribution of original products (almost entirely available only in subtitled versions) on streaming platforms such as *Netflix*, *Disney+* or *Amazon Prime*.

3. Data collection and analysis

For the data collection, I chose to draw on the fourth and fifth seasons of the programme *Hitoshi Matsumoto presents Dokyumental*, available on the *Amazon Prime* platform with the original Japanese audio and English subtitles.[2] The programme in question features ten comedians who, for six hours, must stay locked in a set and try to make each other laugh when the only rule in force is precisely not to laugh. The well-known programme *LOL – last one laughing*, also being aired on *Amazon* outside Japan from 2021, is explicitly based on the Japanese format, which originated from the idea of the famous comedian Matsumoto Hitoshi. The so-called 'the one who laughs gets punished' structure originally dates back to a programme devised by the same comedian (who, together with his partner Hamada Masatoshi, still forms the duo *Downtown*) called *Downtown no gaki no tsukai ya arahen de*, which started in 1989 and developed in the series *Waratte wa ikenai* (en: forbidden to laugh), aired every New Year's Eve from 2003 to 2020.

Hitoshi Matsumoto presents Dokyumental started in 2016 on *Amazon Prime* and reached its thirteenth edition in December 2023. It is basically a reminiscence of the programme mentioned above except for the fact that each comedian is required to pay a million yen to participate, and that the final winner receives the entire sum collected. While the TV version is devoid of any prize money component, the *Amazon* format really puts the comedians to the test as they must do anything to make the contestants capitulate and grab a huge sum of money. This inevitably creates situations that sometimes exceed the border of decency, with scenes that include explicit nudity and moderate physical violence.

Besides being one of the few Japanese shows currently available in translation, the reason why I considered it appropriate for the analysis lies mainly in three factors:

[2] The data were extrapolated between March and April 2023, over time Amazon programming may change. So far, only the two seasons used for the dataset in this study are available.

- Relative ease in identifying passages that result (or might have resulted) in laughter.
- Complete improvisation
- Evident reactions of participants

By observing the reactions and facial expressions of the comedians joke after joke, it was possible to identify the exact point at which there was a so-called *conversational* joke, i.e. jokes produced in context as part of a conversation which tend not to have a narrative introduction (Attardo 2020: 14).[3] At the same time, the very nature of the programme involves the total absence of a script, entrusting everything to the skills of the participating comedians: this aspect made it possible to observe free conversations, which did not necessarily follow the prototypical structure of Japanese stand-up comedy. Another important structural element to help identify such moments is the role of the host Matsumoto, who observes the comedians from a separate room and detects breaches of the rules: in the editing on *Amazon*, his comments on the progress of the conversations can often be heard as well as his laughter.

Based on these assumptions, I carried out a *mapping* process (Zabalbescoa 2005: 187) in order to locate the significant elements in the text according to humour and, above all, an analysis of the priorities on which to base the translation. Every translation is a bearer of priorities and restrictions, where the former are the goals to be achieved, while the latter are the obstacles that motivate the choices made in translation (Zabalbescoa 1996: 243-244). Each text, therefore, present different priorities. In the case of *Hitoshi Matsumoto presents Dokyumental*, we are faced with a purely comic TV programme where humour is at the top of the scale of priorities. It is locally relevant in a continuum of comic acts, and it must also be relevant globally as the aim is to instil laughter. In other words, to quote Vermeer's theory of *skopos* (1989), it would be desirable a translation appropriate to the function required by the recipients of the product in the target culture (all countries where it is available outside Japan) and those who commissioned it (Amazon): the translator must try to offer the target audience an enjoyable Japanese comedy product.

Regarding data collection, each scene was extrapolated according to the act of comedy that either ended in laughter, somehow failed due to the evident endurance of the participants or was marked by the laughter of Matsumoto. From the perspective of analysis, it was essential to identify scenes in which there was at least one humorous CSR within the conversation, an element which has the specific

[3] Think of them in contrast to *canned* jokes, such as jokes or riddles, which always include a short narrative introduction before the *punch line*.

function of encouraging laughter (Lappihalme 1997). In total, it was possible to extrapolate 70 scenes—understood as an exchange of jokes of short to medium length—out of approximately 10 hours of transmission, while 152 CSRs were isolated (each scene could contain more than one). In the following analysis, I will discuss three of the most significant passages from a translation perspective and their relevance within the context of Japanese humour in order to propose a typological categorisation of CSRs along the lines of Díaz Cintas and Remael (2021) and verify their rendering in the *target language,* where comedy should be preserved.

4. Scene analysis

In this and all the following Tables, the CSR are underlined.

N°	*Talking*	*Japanese*	*English*
1	Tamuken	*Mō kigaeru wa. Shindoi kara, kore.*	Then I'll go change. This is uncomfortable.
2	All	*You have.*	OK.
3	Tamuken	*Na? Mō warawan yaro?*	Right? This isn't funny anymore, right?
4	Jinnai	*Mō tte.*	What do you mean 'anymore'?
5	Tamuken	*Mō warawahen yo.*	It's not funny anymore.
6	Jinnai	*Mō tte nan desuka?*	Anymore?
7	Takahashi	*Ikkai honma no 'Cha' mitara warau kamoshirenai.*	We may laugh if you do a real 'Cha' in that outfit.
8	Akiyama	*Zenkai non.*	With full force.
9	Junior	*Honki de yatten non.*	/
10	Tamuken	*Cha.*	Cha.
11	Akiyama	*Akan wa.*	Nope.
12	Tamuken	*Akan na. Mō muri ya tte.*	You're right, it won't work anymore.
13	Tamuken	*Ore, ōgiri kirai nansuyo.*	I hate ōgiri games.
14	Junior	*Ōgiri chau yaro?*	It's not ōgiri.
15	Tamuken	*Ōgiri ni kikoemasu, Junior san ga iuttara.*	It sounds like ōgiri when you say it.

Table 1. Scene 1 – *Tamuken and the* Cha *gag* (Season 5, episode 1, minute 37:59).

In the dialogue in scene 1 (Table 1), we find an exchange where—as is often the case in the programme—several speakers participate in a complex and rapid alternation of turns. Tamuken (nickname of comedian Tamura Kenji) makes his appearance on stage wearing black *ray-bans* and half-naked—his private parts covered only by the *mawashi* (the underwear typically worn by sumo wrestlers)—to try to make his opponents laugh but fails in his attempt (Line 3 and 5). After the ironic approval by the other comedians regarding the lack of comedy of the intervention, Takahashi (Line 7) proposes Tamuken to try again in the same guise to make them laugh but implementing the *Cha* gag. A *gag* is defined as a short, funny and often nonsensical phrase or performance that comes between the comic dialogue. In the case of Tamuken, *Cha* is the gag phrase that made him famous. This performance, where he not only pronounces a meaningless word but also strikes a bizarre pose, has also been used in several TV commercials. In general, it can be said that he built his image as a comedian on it. Given such premises, we can consider gags to be CSRs for all intents and purposes because, as Ranzato defines: "they are elements within a text that have a content that is, precisely, cultural, not linguistic. (...) specific to the socio-cultural content of origin and which may not be known to the target culture" (Ranzato 2010: 55).

Analysing the English translation, it appears immediately clear that in the subtitle there is a transference of the name of the gag by means of transliteration (Table 1, lines 7 and 10), which, however, appears as an alienating element as it has no counterpart in English (as in other languages). The viewer of the receiving culture might be bewildered to read a word that would seem relevant and meaningful—also finding a match in the visual channel—but is in fact meaningless as a mere gag. In the translator's defence, however, such a choice could almost be considered obligatory given the restrictions imposed by the visual channel and inseparably linked to the audio-visual translation process: in the video, Tamuken is clearly seen in the performance of the gag, so it would be impossible and incorrect to omit this sequence. Perhaps it might have been possible to choose an explication by removing the name of the gag from the subtitle - as it is insignificant for any target culture - and intervening in line (7) as follows.

1. We may laugh if you do *your famous gag* in that outfit.

In the same sequence, between lines (13) and (15), we find the term *ōgiri*, again left untouched in translation. By *ōgiri* is meant the comic art of bringing about laughter by responding with a witty motion to an assigned theme (Nakagawa et al., 2019). It is a performance that originates from the theatrical form of *kabuki* as a final anchor, but which, thanks to television, has taken on a purely humorous twist becoming increasingly popular over the years. Particularly interesting from the point

of view of quotations is the joke in line (15): Tamuken directly addresses Junior (nickname of the comedian Chihara Kōji) with a deeply connoted sentence, not so much from the cultural point of view, but of the micro-context of Japanese comedy. Junior, in fact, is known to be particularly skilled in the art of *ōgiri*. Without knowledge of this implication, it is impossible to understand the humour in Tamuken's joke. The same principle could also be applied in the exchange between Jokes in lines (3), (4), (5) and (6): when Tamuken states that his gag is no longer funny, it is implied the viewer's knowledge of the source culture regarding the micro-context of Japanese comedy and the history of the gag *Cha*.

N°	*Talking*	*Japanese*	*English*
16	Akiyama	*Rusu dakara saki ni haitteta dake.*	I only came in because nobody was there.
17	Kanō	*Rui XIV sei, kyō aiteru?*	Louis XIV, are you open today?
18	Tamuken	*Nani sore? Mise ka?*	What's that? A shop?
19	Kanō	*Tomodachi.*	His friend.
20	Tamuken	*Tomodachi?*	His friend?
21	Kanō	*Rui XIV sei, kyō aiteru?*	He asked Louis XIV his plans for the day.
22	Tamuken	*Rui XIV tte koto? Honma no?*	The real Louis XIV? The actual guy?
23	Tamuken	*Ruriko chan ja arimasenka?*	My, my. Is this sweet Ruriko?
24	Takahashi	*Sore wa dame desu.*	You can't say that.
25	Jinnai	*NG wādo?*	It's a banned phrase?
26	Tamuken	*Nande nan?*	Why?
27	Takahashi	*"Ja arimasenka" wa tabun minna iwan yō ni shiteru.*	I think we're trying to avoid the 'My, my' bit.

Table 2. Scene 2 – *Gag of another comedian* (Season 5, episode 3, minute 22:17).

Several issues are present in scene 2. The first concerns the CSR that appears for the first time in line (17), namely *Louis XIV*. In the English subtitle, it has been transposed as the proper name of a globally known historical figure (sociopolitical element). The problem lies in the interpretation of the following joke in line (18) by Tamuken, who speaks of a generic *shop*. From the rendering in the target language, it appears that the translator probably did not fully grasp the cultural connotation of the proper name. In Japan, it is common for commercial establishments, such as so-called *Cabaret Clubs* (or *Hostess Clubs*)—nightclubs where it is possible to drink together with young girls—to have exotic names that

symbolically refer to stereotypes of cultures other than Japanese (Lo Cigno 2022a). A simple online search for *Cabaret Clubs* in the Tokyo area is enough to find names, often related to French, such as *Club Gemme*, *Club Carrier, Club Lion*, *Verle* and, among others, *Louis XIII.*[4] Given this cultural premise, we can consider the translation of the term *mise* (Line 18) with a generic *shop* as inappropriate; it would have been better to proceed by specification with *club*, thus also compensating for the lack of connotation in the proper name *Louis XIV*. The element that contributes most to the semantic ambiguity person/club name, however, is to be found in the continuation of Kanō's joke (Line 17), namely the question *aite iru*? The problem arises from the homophony of the verbs *aku* (to open) *aku* (to be free), which in the respective suspensory form combined with the auxiliary *iru* marks a state, or the result of an action. In orality, the two meanings are only distinguishable depending on the context:

1. （店は）今日あいている？ *(mise wa) kyō aiteiru?*
2. （あなたは）今日あいている？ *(anata wa) kyō aiteiru?*

In the case of sentence 5, the theme is *mise* (shop, club, restaurant...), so the interpretation of *being open is* preferred. In sentence 3, since the theme is *anata* (you), we understand that the question should be interpreted as *are you free?* In the absence of such linguistic premises, it is almost impossible from the translation to pick up on the comedy in Kanō's question, which plays with a kind of *nonsensical* humour until line (21), when it becomes clear that he was imagining a dialogue with the real Louis XIV.

The second problem in the sequence closely follows that of Tamuken's gag discussed above. In the joke from line (23) Tamuken again twists the interpretation of the name by staging a situation in a *Cabaret Club* where a girl named Ruriko would be working. In doing so, he employs a famous gag in the world of Japanese comedy, namely the *Ja-arimasenka* from the mind of the now deceased Charlie Hama (born Nishioka Masao). Leaving aside the discussion of the translation of the gag as a culturally specific element addressed above, in contrast to Tamuken's *Cha*, with his *Ja-arimasenka* (at the linguistic level, a phonological modulation of the grammatical locution *ja arimasenka*, which, when anticipated by a proper noun/name, summarises the effect of surprise at being confronted by something/someone)[5] Charlie Hama had achieved success at a media level: he was the winner of the most significant phrase of the year 1991[6] and contributed to the popularity of the comedy shows organised by Yoshimoto

[4] Clubs with the 'Louis' sign can be found all over Japan.

[5] In the case of the joke in question, in Italian it could be rendered as: 'But look who we have here, dear Ruriko.'

[6] Reference is made to the prize awarded every year since 1984 to the most emblematic word/phrase/quotation of the year, the so-called *Shingo hayarigo taishō* (Neologism Prize - fashionable word). The winning words include quotations from TV

Kōgyō. It is precisely in such background that we should find the implication of Takahashi's joke in line (24); he recalls Tamuken for using the gag, however it is not clear whether this is out of respect for an important personality in the history of Japanese comedy or because it is simply such a famous gag that it is trivial. We can observe that the translator choses again a transference by means of the English expression of astonishment *My, my* (lines 23 and 27). However, it is not clear to what extent this can be considered an effective strategy in the preservation of a humorous component so rooted in both the comic micro-context and the Japanese socio-cultural context. The repeated quotation of the gag, in fact, might suggest to the viewer that it is a relevant element, but the lack of knowledge of the comic background—of something that could be called the common sense of Japanese comedy—would almost certainly lead to only a minimal understanding of the humour component. The sentence *I think we're trying to avoid the 'My, my' bit* (Line 27), in fact, where the CSR is simply transferred, cannot acquire meaning on its own. Here again, it might have been effective to intervene with an explication or even a lexical recreation, preferring a functional approach capable of maintaining a percentage of comic charge in the dialogue.

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dramas, statements by politicians, comedians and other show business personalities, words that originated on social networks, among young people... For information on the 2024 competition, please consult the award's official page: https://www.jiyu.co.jp/singo/ (last accessed 5/12/24).

N°	*Talking*	*Japanese*	*English*
28	Akiyama	*Gōrudo menkyo?*	He had a gold licence.
29	Kobayashi	*Nande aitsu gōrudo yanen?*	How is that possible?
30	Junior	*Are made gōrudo ya tte.*	He had a clean state until then.
31	Akiyama	*Yatsu, gōrudo menkyo yattansuka?*	He had a gold licence?
32	Junior	*Aitsu, gōrudo menkyo.*	He had no driving offences.
33	Takahashi	*Karite kitansuka?*	You borrowed it from him?
34	Junior	*Un.*	Yeah.
35	Jinnai	*Aitsu, LINE no aikon kaetan shitteru?*	Do you know he changed his social media icon?
36	Akiyama	*Kaetansuka?*	He did?
37	Jinnai	*Kaeteta.*	Yeah.
38	Akiyama	*Nani?*	What is it now?
39	Jinnai	*Pīpo kun ya tte.*	*Pipo-kun.*
40	Kobayashi	*Keisatsu no?*	The police mascot?
41	Jinnai	*Keisatsu no.*	Yeah.
42	Kobayashi	*Chōatsuteki ya na.*	That's provocative of him.

Table 3. Scene 3 – *Gold licence and accident* (Season 5, episode 4, minute 22:04*).*

In the third scene, the first problem appears in line (28). However, we should make two preliminary remarks to fully understand the comic aspect of the exchange shown in the table 3. In the scene, we can observe Junior showing the real driving licence belonging to the comedian Tsutsumishita Atsushi, who is not present in the room. In June 2017, he had caused a car accident under the influence of sleeping pills. Only four months later he had crashed again, this time into a rubbish collection truck, and was obliged by Yoshimoto Kōgyō to suspend his public activity as a comedian for a year. In addition to this premise—once again from to the micro-context of the world of comedy—it should also be pointed out that the Japanese system for driving licences provides for a colour classification: green (basic, lasts a maximum of three years), blue (less than five years of driving, or for those who have committed offences), gold (those who have not committed offences in the five years prior to renewal).

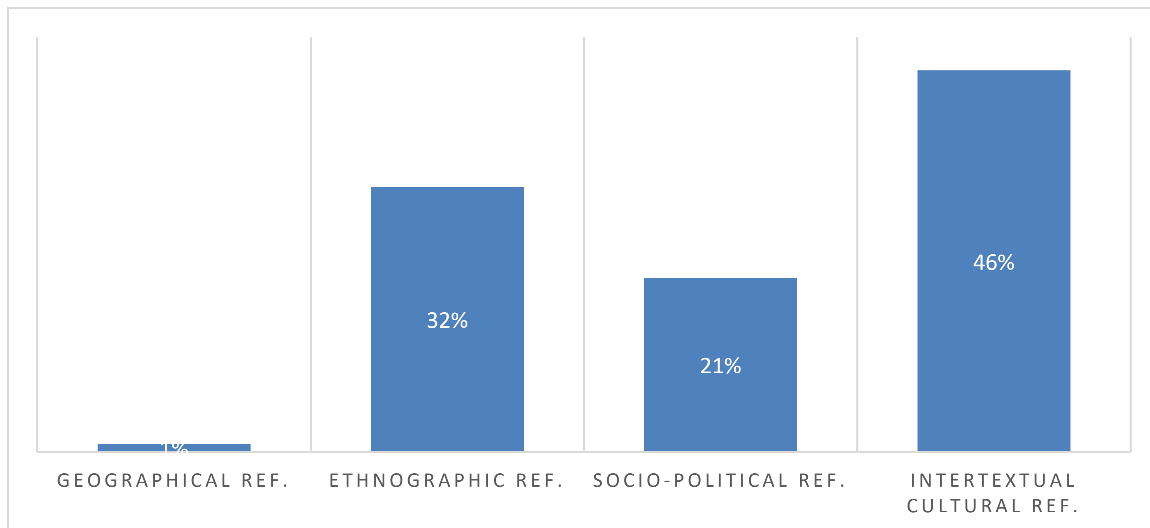
At this point, it becomes possible to understand the dialogue that develops mainly from line (28) to (32), where Akiyama and Kobayashi are surprised that someone like Tsutsumishita holds a golden licence. In the first instance (Line 28), the CSR is transferred, in line (29) omitted, while in lines (30) and

(32) it is made explicit by specification. While the problem of the Japanese driving licence system is solved, there remains the pronoun are (literally, that fact) rendered with then, which refers to Tsutsumishita's accidents, a very well-known fact when analysed within the micro-context of the world of comedy. In translation we cannot find any kind of explication, as no explanatory pop-ups appear on the screen. In fact, the viewer will be able to guess that the Japanese gold licence is awarded to those who have committed no offences but will miss the internal reference to the case which builds up the entire dialogue.

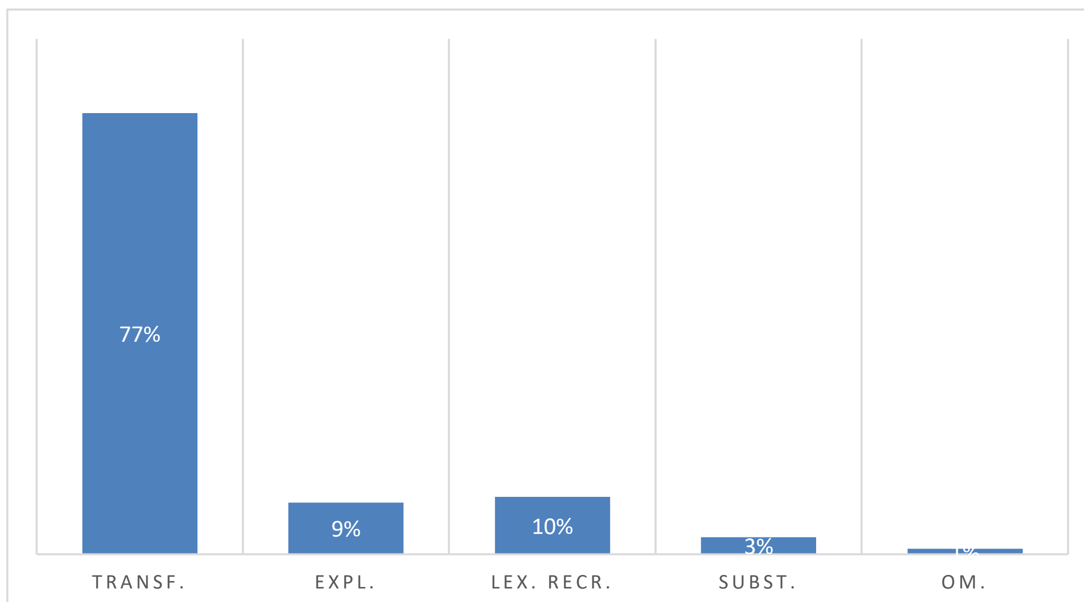
In line (36) we have an explication by generalisation: the name of the most widespread social network in Japan, *Line*, is rendered as a generic *social media*, while the name of the police mascot is transferred. It is a proper name of onomatopoeic derivation (in Japanese, *pi-po* identifies the sound of police sirens) combined with the appellation *-kun*, normally used for people of the male gender, sometimes also as a pet name. The translator gets around this problem in line (40) by opting for an explication with the addition of the term *mascot*.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the English-language subtitles of *Hitoshi Matsumoto presents Dokyumental* revealed in general a faithful, *source-oriented*, and mostly semantically correct rendering of the jokes. At the same time, it has also highlighted several problems related to the comic context of the dialogues, as well as the prerogatives of Japanese-style humour. Indeed, the success of translated verbal humour does not necessarily depend on the quality of the translation (Chiaro 1992: 83). It is very often the case that the receiver of the target culture is completely unaware of the socio-cultural aspects of the source culture, and this concept seems to be a timely reflection of the result of the analysis proposed here. The following is a numerical perspective of the CSRs encountered and the related translation strategies based on the categorisations of Díaz Cintas and Remael (2021) and Dore (2020).



Graph 1. Culture-specific references.



Graph 2. Translation strategies of CSRs.

As shown in Graph 1, out of 152 total recurrences, most of the CSRs found in *Matsumoto Hitoshi presents Dokyumental* concern intertextual references (46%), among which, as already explained in the scene analysis, were also quotations to the micro-context of Japanese comedy. This would seem to confirm one of the characteristics of Japanese comic dialogue pointed out by Ōshima (2006), i.e. the tendency to resort to narratives experienced by the individual. At the same time, ethnographic references also stand out (32%) with the high presence of proper names of show business personalities, the indirect target of jokes. Regarding the translation strategies found in the English subtitles and summarised in

Chart 2, it resulted in a rendering decidedly faithful to the *source-language* (77% transferences), where any attempt at functional translation (Dore 2020) is almost never taken into consideration. Given the high percentage of intertextual references, the strategy adopted by the translator could have been acceptable with an adequate apparatus of notes, or pop-ups for audio-visual translation (Vitucci 2016), necessary to understand the cultural context. In the case of the series considered for this study, however, no explanatory notes were identified. This, combined with an often punctual but too literal rendering of the prototext, makes the full comprehension and enjoyment of the show complex for a hypothetical viewer unfamiliar with Japanese culture. Bucaria (2007) has already pointed out that with a source language-focused translation strategy comic nuances are inevitably difficult for the *target audience* to understand; thus, we can conclude by assuming a similar result in the case of the programme discussed in this article. This results in a failure to convey humour as well as a missed opportunity for cultural enrichment, leading to wonder whether the translator may have been afraid to attempt a more functional translation approach (Chiaro 1992: 85).

With this study, I wanted to shed light on the translation solutions adopted to convey of an audiovisual product far from the European canons to highlight how contemporary Japanese comedy makes large use of CSRs that an overly faithful linguistic rendering cannot fully convey. The analysis revealed also the importance of elements of the Japanese comic micro-context, a sort of common sense in the strict sense that is very frequently present in the conversation. Such elements may represent a category of CSRs that is fundamental but not considered in the taxonomies proposed in the literature and difficult to catalogue if we consider, for example, the *Real-world cultural references* of Díaz Cintas and Remael (2021). However, if analysed from the perspective of *centrality* (Pedersen 2011), they undoubtedly represent the pivot of the comic load of the communication and thus require more attention in translation. As noted in the *Dokyumental* dataset, they cannot be limited to simple transpositions but will require a precise synchronic and diachronic sociocultural examination of the terms as well as an adaptation that, in most cases, will probably have to take the form of a functional approach. With a view to future research, it will be necessary to verify in more contexts and with a broad spectrum of data whether this is indeed a non-negligible category for the purposes of more detailed analyses and whether it can be considered unique to the Japanese comic context or not.

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