

## REALIA IN SUBTITLING – AN INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTER

**Elena Violeta TĂNASE**

*Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania*

**Abstract:** The present study aims at providing an analysis of various translation strategies used by subtitlers in the translation of realia or culture-specific references. The corpus consists of excerpts from Series 8 of the American sitcom Friends. Culture-specific references are analysed in terms of their degree of transculturality and are classified into: proper names, names of places, objects, food and drinks, references to books, movies, TV shows, etc. The analysis indicates, on the one hand, that the degree of transculturality of culture-specific references varies according to the profile of the target audience and, on the other hand, that in audiovisual translation the main purpose of foreignizing and domesticating strategies is to mediate an intercultural encounter.

**Keywords:** culture-specific references, audiovisual translation, translation strategies, domestication, foreignization

### 1. Introduction

One of the most problematic issues in audiovisual translation is what Chiaro terms “culture specific references” (CSRs) (2009, 156), namely “entities that are typical of one particular culture, and that culture alone, and they can be either exclusively or predominantly visual (...), exclusively verbal or else both visual and verbal in nature” (ibidem). Several other authors share the concern that CSRs might burden translators with insurmountable challenges in their attempt to mediate between cultures. Thus, Nathalie Ramière defines “cultural specifics” in terms of “references predictably shared by most members of the source culture” (2006, 152), while Aixelá uses the label “culture-specific items (CSIs)” to denote “those textually actualized items whose function and intertextual load in a source text cause a translation problem due to either the non-existence of the referred item in the target system or to its different intertextual and cultural implications.” (1995, 110). David Katan (2009, 79) speaks of “culturemes” or “culture-bound terms”, while Ana Fernández Guerra (2012, 2) refers to these cultural items in terms of “realia” that include “objects, customs, habits and other cultural and material elements that have an impact in shaping a certain language.” Extensive studies have also been dedicated to the cultural challenges faced by translators in the translation process (Dejica, 2013).

When it comes to translation strategies in audiovisual translation it is notoriously easier to draw lists of dos and don'ts than to provide prescriptive translation solutions. However, the contrastive analysis of a corpus comprising transcripts of the original dialogue and the subtitles for DVD of Series 8 of the American sitcom “Friends” (a total of 24 episodes) has indicated that, despite apparently insurmountable translational hurdles, the intercultural encounter in subtitling is possible and often quite successful. In order to analyze how different types of realia make the transition from the source to the target language I operated with the distinction provided by Pedersen (2005, 2)

between different degrees of transculturality that can be attributed to culture specific references. Moreover, given the nature of the corpus, culture specific references are also analyzed in terms of humour production and reception, in close connection with one of the most important parameters to be taken into account in audiovisual translation, namely the profile of the target audience.

## **2. Types of realia and corresponding translation choices**

### **2.1. Proper names**

Humor deriving from proper names is culture bound, its decoding depending on the knowledge and information the audience has on the specific personalities hinted at. Most proper names are obviously rendered through retention (conservation, in Aixelá's terms), namely through either repetition / loan transfer / cultural borrowing (Russel Crowe, James Brodin, Ed Begley Jr., Lee Majors) or slight orthographic (or grammatical) adaptation (Barbarei Streissand).

Proper names that qualify as culture-bound references in the corpus under analysis include names of real-life personalities or names of fictional characters, as well as names derived from common nouns and nicknames. Most names of real-life personalities do not represent challenges for the translation proper, as they are treated as transcultural references. Paradoxically, such references contribute to the success of humor due to their transculturality, yet they are also to blame for the short life of a sitcom, since they can only appeal to audiences for a limited period of time. The name of a certain actor, band or TV personality 'rings a bell' as long as its referent is still active in the source culture, yet in a matter of a few decades the reference might become obscure even for the source-language audience.

Certain proper names are, of course, more culture-bound than others: it is very likely that the average Romanian viewer could easily recognize names such as Barbra Streissand, Stephen Baldwin, Rockefeller or Lee Majors and associate them with specific fields, traits, activities, etc. On the other hand, names of famous professionals such as Annie Leibowitz or Walter Alvarez would rather qualify as what Pedersen terms monocultural references (bound to the source culture and less identifiable to the majority of the TT audience). Although these names could successfully be rendered through techniques involving pragmatic or cultural explicitation (fotografa Annie Leibowitz, profesorul Walter Alvarez) corpus indicates a clear bias towards foreignization, proving that the subtitler has a specific target audience profile in mind (regular consumers of sitcoms, with a fairly good command of the source language and previous exposure to the source culture) and avoids understressing or patronizing the target viewers. The names of fictional characters might qualify as either transcultural (Captain Kirk) or monocultural (Lenny and Squiggy, Sanford) references. Their degree of transculturality might vary according to the age of the (target) audience, for instance: a teenage viewer is still likely to comprehend the Star Trek reference in Captain Kirk, yet less likely to associate Fred Sanford from Sanford and Son, which ran in the 1970s, with the image of a sarcastic, irascible junk dealer. Chandler's line "I married Fred Sanford" is from a scene in which he opens Monica's secret closet, where he finds a pile of unused objects, in no apparent order (Monica being a cleaning addict). After this quote, Chandler proceeds to sing the Sanford and Son theme song, which is in itself an extratextual microcultural reference (that is bound to the source culture, but too

specialized or local to be within the encyclopedic knowledge or both the ST and TT audiences).

The corpus also provides examples of names that contain a 'punny' element. In such cases the subtitler obviously tries, more or less felicitously, to render the wordplay in the target language. The rendering of such names involves partial translation and sometimes hybrid translation techniques that combine literal translation of the core pun element with the retention of the ending of the name, like in the case of the *Disgustingtons - soții Dezgustătorington*. Such solutions might run the risk of confusing the target viewer who has to cope with a fast reading pace and the decoding of one punchline after another. While it might work perfectly well for a viewer who has already grasped the joke from the original dialogue, it may also invite a viewer with no command of English to re-read the caption and possibly miss the next line. Nevertheless, although maybe graphically burdening for the reader, it indicates the presence of humor and it justifies for the target viewer the canned laughter sequence associated with it.

A few examples are indicated in the table below:

<b>Original dialogue</b>	<b>Subtitles</b>	<b>Observations</b>
<b>Chandler:</b> <i>Who are you? Ansel Adams?! Get outta here!</i>	<i>Cine te crezi, esti Ansel Adams? Dispari!</i>	- monocultural reference – retention; - <b>Ansel Easton Adams</b> was an American photographer;
<b>Joey:</b> <i>Easy there Captain Kirk.</i>	<i>Ușurel, căpitane Kirk.</i>	- transcultural reference – retention;
<b>Rachel:</b> <i>So would I. You wouldn't think that Annie Leibovitz would forget to put film in the camera.</i>	<i>Ai fi crezut că Annie Leibowitz n-o să uite să pună film în aparat.</i>	-monocultural reference – retention;

**Table 1.** Culture-specific references: proper names

## 2.2. Names of places

The next type of realia that makes the subject of analysis, names of places, brings local color and contributes to intercultural communication by getting the target viewers accustomed to details related to the original setting and geographical background of the characters. Due to the general sitcom format, characters are confined into a somehow closed space, they do not really move or travel too much, everything happens in either an apartment, a coffee-shop or the streets of Manhattan. Names of places therefore mostly refer to New-York restaurants, pubs, stores, public buildings, streets, etc. The observations contained in the table below refer to the degree of transculturality of the culture-bound references and the translation strategies applied to them, in the attempt to show that this specific type of realia is basically treated from a foreignizing perspective in subtitling.

An interesting phenomenon, brought about by globalization and which applies to most audiovisual products, is the fact that certain references that could be considered monocultural a couple of decades ago (such as names of hotel or restaurant chains, for instance) have turned into transcultural references. This aspect invites us, on the one hand, to revisit and update the translation of certain products that are re-aired, while on the other hand it requires a temporal perspective in the analysis of translation

quality (translation solutions involving explicitation or addition that might seem outdated or patronizing now were justified a while ago, when the reference was considered incomprehensible for the target audience).

The corpus analysis also indicates that names of places representing transcultural references are almost exclusively rendered through loan transfer, official equivalent or slightly shifted direct translation procedures. A significant part of monocultural references (mostly names of restaurants, hotels, schools) are also rendered through loan transfer since any attempt of the subtitler on naturalizing these references would definitely run the risk of losing credibility. This specific category of references helps in localizing the action and are not usually part of the punchlines, requiring thus less intervention from the subtitler when dealing with humor. Names of stores are rendered by means of more interventional strategies, usually generalization, occasionally combined with explicitation or addition (Ann Taylor's – magazinul pentru femei, The Arcade – sala de jocuri, Pier One – magazin, Arby's – foisor, Sunglass Hut – magazinul) while street names are translated literally (of course, the numbered and lettered American street system might strike the target viewer as an incomprehensible monocultural reference, yet repeated exposure to this type of occurrences actually help him/her get an accurate picture of the system) with occasional explanatory techniques (27&7 – 27 colț cu 7).

Original dialogue	Subtitling	Observations
<b>Mrs. Bing:</b> Oh yes, Dennis is directing a new <b>Broadway</b> show.	Regizează un nou spectacol pe <b>Broadway</b>	- transcultural reference – retention;
<b>Joey:</b> I shoulda never walked into that <b>Sunglass Hut!</b>	Nu trebuia sa intru in <b>magazinul</b> ăla!	- monocultural reference – generalization;
<b>Dr. Green:</b> I think I may be able to book <b>The Plaza</b> on short notice.	Cred că putem închiria <b>Plaza</b> , chiar dacă i-am anunțat târziu.	- transcultural reference – shifted direct translation (the definite article is dropped);
<b>Ross:</b> Aw forget it, it's from <b>Pier One</b> .	Nu contează, l-am cumpărat din <b>magazin</b> .	- monocultural reference – generalization

Table 2. Culture-specific references: names of places

### 2.3. Material realia: objects, food and drinks

A good insight into the source culture is provided by a category of realia related to the material source culture: objects. While culture-specific references to names of persons or places are, as shown above, subject to rather foreignizing translation approaches, references to objects seem to require a larger usage of explanatory translation techniques, as indicated by the examples below:

Original dialogue	Subtitles	Observations
<b>Phoebe:</b> Ooh! A <b>Salami Buddy!</b>	Un aparat pentru <b>salam!</b>	- monocultural reference – explicitation;
<b>Rachel:</b> Well... Umm, I got <b>TiVo</b> .	Am <b>TiVo</b> .	- microcultural reference – loan transfer ( <b>TiVo</b> is a digital video recorder (DVR) developed and marketed by TiVo Inc.);
<b>Phoebe:</b> It's a <b>Ms. Pac-Man machine!</b>	E <b>jocul Miss Pac-Man</b> .	- monocultural reference – loan transfer of the name + explicitation ( <i>machine – jocul</i> );
<b>Ross:</b> Okay, okay. Oooh, ooh maybe I rode in on a <b>Harley</b> .	Poate am venit călare pe un <b>Harley</b> .	- transcultural reference – loan transfer;

Table 3. Culture-specific references: objects

Culture-specific references to food and drinks are quite numerous, mainly because the 'action' is set in a coffee house, one of the characters is a chef and most get-togethers of the characters happen in the Central Perk café, around Monica's kitchen table with Monica cooking for her friends or in restaurants. Joey is a notorious food lover and he constantly enters the scene either munching on a sandwich or some sort of pastry or fantasizing about food. Most references to food and drinks that can be perceived as transcultural (many of which are references to the French or Italian cuisines) are rendered in translation by retention or calque. It is difficult to assess whether the subtitler's choice is entirely fueled by a constant bias towards foreignization or simply required by the viewer's exposure to the original dialogue and the visual extratextual elements. The actual resonance of certain terms (Fettucini Alfredo, Mahi Mahi, enchilada) invites the translator to the use of loan transfers, anticipating thus the viewer's expectation to detect the peculiar term in the captions. Although these references could easily qualify as microcultural when considered separately, the visual props give both the source and the target viewer enough extratextual information to motivate their perception as transcultural, or at least bicultural (taking into account the similarities between Romanian and languages such as French, Italian or Spanish). It is only fair to assume that the same episodes, provided they were subtitled this day and age, would contain even more loan transfers, since the average Romanian viewer has a more consistent exposure to translated cookery shows.

Food-related references containing brand names are mainly rendered through generalization or explicitation: the specific item is replaced by category or/and additional information is included (Nutter-Butter – bomboană, Wonton – mâncare chinezească, Mashuga Nuts – nuci pralinate, Powerbar – ciocolată, Tootsie Roll – baton, meatball sub – sandwichul, Valium – calmant). A mild tendency towards domestication can be detected in the treatment of food or drinks-related terms that might be considered specific to the source culture (cuisine) alone, but which have an approximate correspondent in the target culture. Cultural substitution can be observed in examples such as: yams – cartofi, steamed vegetables – legume sote, latte – cafea cu lapte, blue cheese – brânză mucegăită, custard – cremă, bagel – covrig/covrigel, etc. Although this analysis is not based on the game of spot-the-error it is difficult not to remark that it sadly seems that the more sophisticated the menu, the more eager the translator to fill in the blanks with whatever substitutes, as if in the effort to embrace the foreign, the target viewer might be willing to accept anything. Paradoxically, a too obvious bias on foreignization might occasionally be just a poor excuse for sloppiness in translation. However, regardless of any inherent inconsistencies, the CSRs related to food and drinks are among the richest in terms of local color and consequently represent key elements in the cultural encounter between the source culture and the target viewers. The visual props and the multitude of recurrent extratextual elements are quite useful in mending translation failures so that the depiction of the source culture in terms of eating habits has a successful transition towards the target culture.

#### **2.4. Intertextual references**

Many humorous instances are based on intertextual references to movies, movie characters, books, songs, TV shows and so on. The degree of transculturality of these references varies first of all according to the distance in time between the airing

of the sitcom and the period the element referred to (movie, book, show or song) was successful in the source culture. As in the case of other culture-bound references discussed above, they are mostly likely to become microcultural in time. The analysis indicates that retention remains the preferred strategy for transcultural or monocultural references to movies and song titles, with a few exceptions of titles that are translated literally because the following punchlines are built on their meaning. Although in a few particular instances the subtitler's efforts are awkward (*Viața e minunată* for *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Nu e superbă?* for *Isn't she Lovely*, *Cum arăți în seara asta* for *The way you look tonight*), it is obvious that the intention to render the comic effect prevails over accuracy. Many inconsistencies can also be noted in the translation of movies and books titles, for which the subtitler seems to opt for an 'on-the-spot' literal translation despite the fact that the Romanian 'official' equivalent is easily accessible from public trustworthy websites: *Masacrul texan cu fierăstrăul* instead of *Masacrul din Texas*, *Iepurele de Diftină* instead of *Iepurașul de Catifea*, *Viața Noastră* instead of *Zilele din Viața Noastră*. These less accurate solutions might point out to the tight deadlines subtitlers usually face. The lack of consistency in translating the same intertextual reference that occurs repetitively (*Days of our Lives* and *Viața Noastră*) can also be blamed on the fact that the translation of a series is rarely performed by a single subtitler.

The example below indicates that despite the subtitler's best efforts, the intertextual references that are too deeply rooted in the source culture risk to remain obscure for the target viewers who are not familiar with the original product alluded at:

Original dialogue	Subtitles	Observations
<b>Ross:</b> Look I'm sorry Pheebes, I can't do it.	Îmi pare rău, nu pot.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- intertextual allusion to <i>Roxanne</i>, the famous song by English rock band The Police, written by lead singer and bassist Sting;</li> <li>- the pun is based on homophony and consequently the comic effect is only available for those members of the target audience who can perceive the homophonic association;</li> <li>- the acoustic extratextual element (Phoebe reproducing the tune and the Italics in the captions) offers some kind of compensation;</li> </ul>
<b>Phoebe:</b> Yes you can! <b>Sting</b> says so himself!	Ba da, o spune și <b>Sting</b> .	
<b>Ross:</b> What?	Poftim?	
<b>Phoebe:</b> (singing) <b>Rossss can!</b>	<b>Ross poate.</b>	
<b>Ross:</b> Look Phoebe, I'm sorry it's just...	Îmi pare rău, dar...	
<b>Phoebe:</b> (singing) <b>Rossss can!</b>	<b>Ross poate.</b>	
<b>Ross:</b> Phoebe, I...	Phoebe...	
<b>Phoebe:</b> (singing) <b>Rosss can! Give me the tickets! Ross can give me the tickets!!</b>	<b>Ross poate să-mi aducă bilete.</b>	

**Table 4.** Intertextual allusions

Even if a luckier and more inspired subtitler would have dealt better with the Ross can pun alluding to Sting's famous *Roxanne*, a target viewer who does not

recognize the tune is likely to miss the joke anyway. The same might hold true for a contemporary young source-language viewer: despite the fact that intertextual references are probably more jocular than other types of references, they tend to fade in time and become obsolete or obscure for both SL and TL audiences and are thus responsible for the relatively short life of a sitcom.

### 3. Conclusion

The borderline between domestication and foreignization often becomes blurry in audiovisual translation. The target language audiovisual text represents just a fragment of a cinematic experience that the viewers embrace after willingly 'suspending their disbelief' and where 'self' and 'other' are by no means mutually exclusive. Cultural mediation through translation is neither unidirectional, nor a static phenomenon, but a cultural encounter. The translator is not there to drag a culture towards the other, but to facilitate their encounter midway. Audiovisual products are nowadays designed for international audiences and their success is partly ensured by their being equipped with a heavy load of transcultural references (Tănase, 2016).

Humor has always travelled between cultures and will continue its intercultural journey. Audiovisual translation is just one of its newest high-performance vehicles. As in most other aspects of life, the advent of technology brings along the advantages of higher speed and increased safety together with the disadvantage of missing a beautiful scenery here and there. But at the end of the day, this journey brings people together, regardless of how far apart they might think they are.

### References

1. Aixelá, J.F. 1995. "Specific Cultural Items and Their Translation". In Peter Jansen (ed.) *Translation and the Manipulation of Discourse*, CETRA, pp. 109-125.
2. Chiaro, D. 2009. "Issues in Audiovisual Translation". In Munday, J. (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Translation Studies*, London/New York: Routledge, pp. 141-165.
3. Dejica, D. 2013. "Mapping the Translation Process: The Cultural Challenge". In H. Parlog and L. Frentiu (eds.), *Translating Across Cultures: BAS 21st Annual Conference*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. pp. 11-28.
4. Dejica, D. & G. Hansen, P. Sandrini, I. Para (eds.). 2016. *Language in the Digital Era. Challenges and Perspectives*. Warsaw/Berlin: De Gruyter Open.
5. Fernández Guerra, A. 2012. "Translating Culture: Problems, Strategies and Practical Realities" in *Art and Subversion*, No. 1, Year 3, 12/2012, available online at <http://hrcak.srce.hr/116870?lang=en>.
6. Katan, D. 2009. "Translation as Intercultural Communication". In Munday, J. (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Translation Studies*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 74-92.
7. Pedersen, J. 2005. "How is culture rendered in subtitles?" available online at [http://www.euroconferences.info/proceedings/2005\\_Proceedings/2005\\_Pedersen\\_Jan.pdf](http://www.euroconferences.info/proceedings/2005_Proceedings/2005_Pedersen_Jan.pdf)
8. Ramière, N. 2006. "Reaching a Foreign Audience: Cultural Transfers in Audiovisual Translation" in *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, Issue 6, July 2006, pp. 152-166.
9. Tănase, E.V. 2016. "Extratextual Elements in Subtitling – The Battle of Linguistic and Cultural Codes" in Dejica, D. & G. Hansen, P. Sandrini, I. Para (eds.), *Language in the Digital Era. Challenges and Perspectives*. Warsaw/Berlin: De Gruyter Open, pp.137-148.