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# Translating Humorous Literature

Translation Strategies in *Come vivere in un appartamento* by K. R. G. Browne and H. W. Robinson

## Abstract

*How to Live in a Flat* is a book written in 1936 by Kenneth R. G. Browne and illustrated by Heath W. Robinson, a well-known artist of the age, famous for having illustrated Hans Christian Andersen's books but also for his sketches and drawings of fabulous machines and gadgets invented to solve everyday little problems in a cumbersome and improbable manner. This book is the first of a series produced by the two artists; each volume of the series has the form of a handbook full of suggestions and advice for specific hobbies (*How to Make a Garden Grow*, 1938) or to deal with the problems related to marriage and married life (*How to be a Perfect Husband*, 1937). Translating these texts tackles three types of difficulties and constraints: first, their chronological and cultural distance (England between the two World Wars); secondly, the humorous and ironical style used by Browne, as a writer, and by Robinson, as an illustrator; finally, the presence of illustrations which depict episodes of the narrative, thus creating a sort of dialogue between the written and the pictorial texts. This study stems from my translation into Italian of the first book of the series, *How to Live in a Flat*, and intends to discuss the translation choices I made in order to recreate the equivalent humorous effect in the target text and on the target audience, which are both culturally and chronologically distant from the source text.

**Keywords:** *English linguistics, translation studies, translating humour, W.H. Robinson, English literature*

## 1. Introduction

**H***ow to Live in a Flat* is a text written by Kenneth R. G. Browne (1895-1940) and illustrated by Heath W. Robinson (1872-1936), renowned English cartoonist, illustrator and artist, famous for his drawings in some editions of Shakespeare's works and Andersen's fables and for his whimsical machines invented to achieve simple tasks. The two worked together for several years and produced a series of four humorous volumes focusing on daily life of the 1930s. Each book in the series has a title that begins with "How to ..." (*How to Live in a Flat*, 1936; *How to be a Perfect Husband*, 1937; *How to Make a Garden Grow*, 1938; *How to be a Motorist*, 1939) and

is presented as a handbook full of advice given in an ironic and hilarious way in order to solve the problems of everyday life. Heath Robinson, with his drawings, recreated tools and machinery made up of objects of common usage and assembled with ropes and pulleys to create a series of improbable machines useful for solving the problems addressed in each manual. In their texts, the two authors offer a bizarre glimpse at the life in England between the two Wars, whose daily problems are nevertheless familiar also to the contemporary reader. However, bringing the text to the contemporary age may appear as a rather complex task, not only due to the chronological and cultural distance from the source text, but also given the humorous and ironic style of its authors, who, through their words and drawings describe a different reality from that known to the modern target reader. The illustrations that accompany the texts not only enrich them, but become a single bundle with the narrative, providing a pictorial reference to the words; moreover, they are in a dialogical position between the text and the reader by echoing the episodes told with humour. Addressing its translation means recognizing and resolving the complexity of a text endowed with a style interwoven with purely English irony and humour, full of puns, idiomatic phrases, and citations from literary and popular texts or elements of the English culture of the time. In the linguistic-cultural transposition that a translation presupposes, translating humour becomes rather difficult, because it requires a certain level of adaptation of the target text, primarily intended to achieve the same effect as the source text. Thus, the present study intends to take into account the peculiarities of the text by Browne and Robinson and examine the translation process, the strategies I used as a translator, and their humorous effect when translating into Italian the first book of the series, *How to Live in a Flat*.

## 2. The multifaceted nature of humour

Although humour is a human prerogative (Raskin 1985), it differs from individual to individual, from culture to culture and from era to era, therefore it is one of those translation aspects that are particularly problematic when looking for a principle of equivalence that supports every translation. Studies on humour are vast and of different nature: humour can be studied as a component of interlingual communication (Hua 2014; Ziv 1988) or a purely linguistic and pragmatic expression (Attardo 2014; 2002; 1994) with its relative translation implications and constraints (Chiaro 2010; 2005; 1992).

As a social phenomenon, humour is linked to general and universal themes but also to specific cultural characteristics of certain societies. It is a reflection of the mentality of the members of a given society and sometimes humour and its effect (laughter) are built around historical events

that have shaped a particular community. In fact, the purpose and degree of comprehension of humour changes directly with the degree to which members of a community share a socio-cultural background (Raskin 1985, 16). Thus, if the participants of a communicative event are not familiar with the social and cultural context within the humorous discourse, they will not be able to decode the semantic information correctly and the main indicators of the comprehension of the humorous joke (i.e. the laughter and the resulting good mood) will not be present (Gogová 2016, 13). In semiotic terms, humour can be defined as a specific type of semiosis, where the sign is related to other signs in unexpected or unlikely associations (Rusnák 2002). For this reason, there are different classifications of humour (Norrick and Chiaro 2009; Chiaro 1992). It is possible to make a first distinction between *supportive* humour and *contestive* humour on the basis of the pragmatic orientation of the content (Holmes and Marra 2002). For example, in supportive humour, participants contribute or reinforce the assumptions or arguments of previous contributions (Hua 2014, 37). Humour can therefore facilitate social cohesion, as it promotes solidarity within a group. Additionally, humour can also be used to release pressure (particularly in the workplace) and circumvent topics that are difficult or embarrassing to deal with. Avner Ziv (2010) suggests considering humour as a process to create mutual relationships, which consists of three elements: the humourist (the author of humour), the audience and the object of humour. Two of these three elements can sometimes be found in combination with each other but can generally be distinguished from each other. In the case of a book, the author plays the role of the humourist, the readers constitute the audience and the subject is the particular combination of characters and situations described.

From a psychological-social point of view, humour can be considered in relation to the single individual or to the single individual within a social group. In particular, humour fulfils five fundamental functions (Ziv 1984): aggressive, defensive, intellectual, sexual and social function. Aggressive humour is used to feel superior, hit others and hide aggressive drives by manifesting them in a socially acceptable way. Humour used defensively is a way to face reality, accept and overcome challenges and decrease tension in an attempt to ridicule what is frightening or threatening. Intellectual humour, on the other hand, has the function of entertaining and creating new meanings through absurdity or inconsistencies, as in the case of Browne and Robinson, while sexual humour allows the individual to openly mention sexual desire without incurring social censorship. Finally, social humour, linked to satire, serves to establish when social behaviour is acceptable or not.

Vandaele (2013, 148) identifies two main aspects which define humour: the superiority theory, that is a feeling of superiority given by a social or physical distance where the speaker feels

more important, and the incongruity theory, which focuses on humour as a contradiction of the cognitive schemes to which we are used. So, the comic effect is a reaction to the unfulfilled expectations of the listener. The first classifications of humour were based on the formal linguistic characteristics considered responsible for the origin of the humorous effect, focusing on specific textual genres (jokes or film dialogues), without however considering the variety of contexts in which humour can emerge. Obviously, the difficulty of producing a classification of humorous genres arises from the fact that humour is almost omnipresent in any type of human interaction. A more organic attempt is proposed by Attardo (2008; 2001) in two different moments; in a first phase, the proposed classification was made up of five categories of genres, ranging from texts devoid of any form of humour to texts where humour is profusely present, or small texts embedded in each other as in sitcoms. In a second taxonomy, the categories were reduced to four, ranging from texts similar in structure to jokes and proper jokes to texts whose plot, based on serious events, have humour superimposed. According to this taxonomy, texts are classified on the basis of the function of humour in relation to the plot.

Since humour tends to emerge in most genres, Tsakona (2017) proposes a classification that takes into account the centrality of humour within humorous texts, in particular how expected or unexpected the presence of the humorous element is. The four categories of humorous genres are so composed: texts in which humour is an obligatory component of the genre to which they belong, therefore created mainly for the enjoyment of the public (jokes, comedies); texts in which humour is an optional but expected feature of a genre that often includes humour and whose purpose, among others, is to create a humorous effect (literary texts such as the text in question); texts in which humour is an optional and unexpected feature of the genre, that is, it can occasionally emerge in a completely unexpected way (for example, in a news report); finally, genres in which humour is never or hardly present and is, therefore, an atypical characteristic of the genre.

### ***2.1 Humour as a linguistic phenomenon***

From a linguistic point of view, Raskin's (1985) early studies led to the development of the Semantic Script of Humour (SSTH), focused on comic lines and jokes. According to Raskin, humorous jokes can be considered as such if they satisfy two fundamental conditions:

1. the text is completely or partially compatible with two different scripts;
2. the two scripts with which the text is compatible are in opposition to each other.

Scripts are sets of information that each speaker has cognitively acquired in an experiential way and through which the surrounding world is decoded. Therefore, the script becomes broadly the type of knowledge that everyone has about the world in which they live; hence the strong cultural component that characterizes humour. The two scripts can contain lexical (strictly linguistic) and non-lexical (encyclopaedic nature) information and are connected to each other through links of a semantic nature (Attardo 1994). The linguistic ambiguity, which triggers laughter, is caused when the scripts evoked in the comic text are in opposition. In 1991, Raskin and Attardo theorized an expansion of the SSTH, the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH), through which, thanks to the application of new parameters, it is possible to identify the differences between punch lines that can be semantically identical, but which differ at other levels. The GTVH was devised in an attempt to offer an analysis tool for the linguistic study of humour on a large scale. Five new elements are added within the GTVH theory: Language (LA), Narrative Strategy (NS), Target (TA), Logical Mechanism (LM), Script Opposition (SO), which make up the Knowledge Resources (Attardo 2002).

Language (LA) is the parameter concerning all the linguistic aspects of the text, both as the national language of the author and as stylistic choices made in composing a punch line. According to Attardo (2002, 178), the interlingual transposition does not interfere with the transposition of the meaning of the text: independently of the language used, the differences in joke similarity do not appear to be a problem in the transposition and in the pragmatic force expressed by the meaning, provided that we manage to convey the meaning of a joke. The problem, however, arises when transposition is applied to those texts that ground their comic effect on the signifier, such as puns: in this case, the opposition of the scripts lies in the sense of the words used or in the way in which they are used, so a transposition, even though only interlinguistic, could compromise the comic effect expressed. The Narrative Strategy (NS) indicates that each line falls within a narrative organization, in the form of dialogue or narration, or conversation. The Target (TA) identifies the target of the humorous text and usually refers to stereotypes and clichés to identify their aspects or characteristics, which are the object of derision. Situation (SI) refers to the scene in which the text is set. Again, the cultural component clearly plays a fundamental role in understanding a joke or a comic text and its punch line and poses problems at translation level. The Logical Mechanism (LM) indicates what Attardo (1994, 226) defines as local-logic: it is that process considered valid only within the text, which allows the user of the comic text to accept the passage between the two scripts. It is a subjective mechanism, like the real comic effect (Attardo 2002, 179): its success is determined by the application of this mechanism, which allows, once the ambiguity within the

text has been accepted, to reread it in opposition or overlap with the previous reading. Script Opposition (SO) refers to what was presented in the SSTH as an essential condition for a text to be comic. In the text by Browne and Robinson, the humorous effect is given by the two opposite scripts: the common situation described and the awkward and cumbersome solution offered to the reader. This works on a double channel: the narrative and the illustrations.

It is useful to consider the illustrations in the text as an example of “semiotically expressed humour” (Balirano 2013, 556-559), or semiotic elements, in addition to the purely linguistic ones, used for the construction of the humorous effect. Thus, we have a script of a visual nature; semiotic information that surrounds an image, a word or a sound and which can arise from the latter, separately or simultaneously. In the specific case, illustrations are closely linked to the written text and together they create and strengthen the comic effect on the source and target reader. However, they can represent a constraint for the translator, because they convey images of a different culture in an asynchronous historical period and they cannot be manipulated or adapted in any way.

## ***2.2 Translating humour***

Until about thirty years ago, studies concerning the translation of humour were almost non-existent and those few existing had a strictly literary approach or were focused on isolated cases such as the presence of puns. It was only in 2010 that the attention shifted from jokes to broader texts of a different nature, including advertising texts, comics and video games. The interlingual translation of texts that, by their nature, could be defined as non-serious, touches two cornerstones of translation theory: the concept of equivalence and the concept of translatability. The translation of humour presents problems similar to poetic translation (Chiaro 2017). In fact, poetry subverts conventional syntactic schemes: lexical elements take on unusual locations and there are frequent phonetic, lexical, syntactic and semantic repetitions. The question of equivalence, therefore, becomes more pressing in the translation of humour, as humour brings language to extremes that make interlingual solutions difficult to find. For this reason, many studies have argued on a theoretical level that the translation of humorous texts was impossible due to linguistic but also cultural characteristics (Dore 2020). In reality, this type of translation is possible, but the problem of translation equivalence remains, especially when we consider the linguistic but also the cultural transfer that humour entails. According to the pragma-linguistic approach (Hickey 1998), once the humorous artifice has been identified in the source text, the translator should create a target text with the same mechanism and, if necessary, neglect the semantic elements of the source text, thus translating in terms of dynamic equivalence (Nida

2000; 1964), in an attempt to reproduce the same effect on the recipients of the target text.

One of the most used humorous tools in Browne and Robinson's text is puns, which, as has been pointed out, pose complex translation problems. In reality, the very definition of wordplay is of a complex nature: Delabastita (1996, 128) uses the term wordplay in its broadest sense, including all those linguistic phenomena that involve the use of verbal structures that differ in meaning but which have similarities on a phonological or graphological level. Based on this definition, puns can be divided into four categories: homonyms, homophones, homographs and paronyms. Sometimes, puns are based on fixed expressions or idiomatic phrases, which are by their nature intralinguistic references linked to the culture of the source language (Pedersen 2005, 1). It may be useful to distinguish them into three categories (Moon 1998): anomalous locations; formulae (like proverbs or idioms); metaphors, more or less transparent. What unites the three categories is the variation that can occur at the lexical or systemic level (involving syntax and lexicon).

When translating humour, it is important to know where humour stands as a priority and what restrictions stand in the way of fulfilling the intended goals (Zabalbeascoa 1996). So, priorities and restrictions may change considerably from translation to translation and even between the translation and its source text, but most of all, humour is an area where translators need a certain amount of guidance and practice (Zabalbeascoa 2005, 205). At an operational level, the translator can resort to four strategies in order to reinforce this pragmatic approach (Chiaro 2010, 11-12; 2017, 423-425):

1. leave the verbal humour intact and therefore translate literally, respecting and reproducing the syntactic and lexical elements of the source text;
2. replace a play on words in the source text with a similar one in the target text, sometimes managing to obtain a formally equivalent translation in the narrative strategy, but with various obstacles to overcome in order to obtain the same effect as the source text;
3. replace the humorous element with an idiomatic phrase in the target language;
4. ignore the humorous element, but make a compensation for the loss suffered in terms of linguistic elements and final effect.

Therefore, translating a humorous text is possible since it is possible to convey at least part of the meaning of the source text and the effects of the source text through language and culture (Dore 2020, 41).

However, this process must take into consideration the expectations of the target culture of a certain type of text and of those that are defined as CSRs, Cultural Specific References, that is, that set of terms, elements, referents closely linked to the culture. Similar to puns, CSRs are quite complex to place in certain specific categories. Pedersen (2005) provides useful definitions, and their level of translatability depends on the accessibility of the CSR by the recipients in the source text and the target text. In very broad terms, certain CSRs can be considered transcultural, in the sense that they are easily recognizable by most recipients and can be understood thanks to generic encyclopaedic knowledge. CSRs can still be distinguished into monocultural, thus less identifiable by most recipients of the target text, and microcultural, which can only be correctly processed by a small number of people in the source culture. Another parameter to distinguish cultural references can be their position with respect to the text; in fact, they can be external, that is, present outside the fictional world in which they are located, or internal, thus existing only within the narrative text. Ranzato (2016) suggests two further big categories: references to the real world (references to the source culture, intercultural references, references to the target culture) and openly intertextual references, hidden intertextual references and intertextual micro-references.

In the presence of images, as in the case of a filmic product or an illustrated text, we are faced with a non-verbal text, but provided with cultural references that can be asynchronous or synchronous. Browne and Robinson's text clearly presents asynchronous cultural references, both verbally and pictorially, since they refer to a period chronologically distant from the recipients of the target text. As can be clearly deduced, the problems posed by a humorous and illustrated text are many and of different nature and taxonomy, as are the translation strategies studied (Baker 2018; Antonopolou 2004; Leppihalme 1997). More organically, in conclusion, a taxonomy of the strategies adopted may be made up of five categories (Dore 2020, 190-1): transfer (in the form of loans, literal translations, and calques), explicitation, neologism, substitution and omission, which are linked to a domesticating translation strategy and entail a certain level of adaptation of the source text.

### ***3. How to Live in a Flat***

Between 1932 and 1933 Heath Robinson drew a series of cartoons for *The Sketch Magazine* entitled "Flat Life," in which he outlined various machines designed to help people to make the most of the limited space available in the apartments of the period. This series of drawings was an inspiration for Kenneth. R. G. Browne and Heath W. Robinson for the first of a series of books they worked on for about three years. The embryo of the book can be found, later on, in



an article of *The Strand Magazine* entitled “At home with Heath Robinson” (Beare 2014), published in 1935 and written by Kenneth R. G. Browne and illustrated by Robinson, already famous with the title of “The Gadget King.” The illustrations, which showed ingenious ways of using useless objects, were titled “Rejuvenated Junk.” The article in *The Strand* marked the beginning of an artistic partnership between the two that ended with Browne’s death in 1940. The first book of the *How to...* series, that is *How to Live in a Flat*, not only expanded the original ideas about machinery, which were sometimes cumbersome but undoubtedly ingenious and humorous, but also showed the different ways in which it was possible to overcome the problems caused by the lack of space in the modern apartments and bungalows of the time. The humour of the illustrations comes from depicting the furniture and the architecture design of the 1930s in an extreme way. Between 1900 and 1939 there was a rapid expansion of the real estate sector, and several government interventions were implemented to regulate the phenomenon. The 1918 *Tudor Walters Report* established the standards for the design and location of council houses for the following ninety years; according to it, they had to be placed at a distance of twenty-one meters from each other with a density of twelve per acre. With the *Housing and Town Planning Act* of 1919, new homes began to be built to replace slums (Burnett 1990). In addition, the government reduced rents, and this caused the prevalence of apartments with three bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom and a sitting room. These new buildings were very far from the traditional mansion houses typical of the English aristocracy. Many social commentators of the time disliked these changes, but while the pessimists branded this new industrial and economic thrust as dehumanizing and decadent, Robinson’s illustrations seem to celebrate the innate human capacity to cope with difficulties. Browne and Robinson did not intend to write a satire against the British aristocracy, but rather to describe the working bourgeoisie. Nowadays, many of the solutions proposed for the management of home space are effectively exploited to cope with modern apartments that are increasingly reduced in size. Beds that disappear inside wardrobes, condominium systems for waste collection, central heating and furniture that, if necessary, can be transformed into new furnishing solutions are no longer a novelty.

### ***3.1 Translation analysis***

The book consists of eleven chapters, each with a title that anticipates its content and above all, in many cases, imprints the ironic and humorous style that permeates the entire volume. In fact, it is difficult to isolate the elements that contribute to the humorous effect, which originates in the lexical and syntactic choices, rich in cultural connotations and in their reference to the illustrations scattered throughout the narrative.

Source Text	Target Text
Dedication	Dedica
The evolution of the flat	L'evoluzione dell'appartamento
Economy of space	L'economia degli spazi
Furniture	Mobili e arredi
Pets and pets' corners	Gli animali da compagnia e i loro spazi
Sport and social amenities	Lo sport e altre amenità
Converted houses	Gli appartamenti ricavati da ville
Service flattery	I residence
Bungaloid	Bungaloidi
The darker side of flat life	Il lato oscuro della vita da appartamento
Tailpiece	Conclusione

**Tab. 1:** Title of the chapters and their translation

From a brief reading of the titles in the source text, it can be deduced that Browne's humour, together with Robinson's drawings, is made up of puns, neologisms, quotations and idiomatic and cultural phrases. For example, *converted houses* refers to the internal subdivision in apartments of the noble palaces, and the term *bungaloid*, whose root is *bungal*—from *bungalow*—implies an incomplete or imperfect similarity to the indicated object thanks to its derivational morpheme *-oid*—“similar to, resembling” (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary). In the first example, the proposed solution entails an expansion of the term *house*, which in Italian hardly describes the typical British house (detached, semidetached or terraced), more often connoted with the chosen Italian term *villa*. The choice to translate *bungaloid* was simpler, because I opted for a calque from English to maintain the humorous tone of the original. In the case of *service flattery*, reference is made to the residence, intended as a place of residence equipped with all comforts, including the cleaning of the living space. The pun lies in the word used, *flattery*, whose root refers to the word *flat* (apartment), but whose denotative meaning is actually *flattery* or *adulation*, to emphasize how pampered the inhabitants of a modern residence of the time were. Inevitably, this pun was lost, but then the overall humorous effect was regained within the chapter.

The text opens with a dedication to the reader and to those who made it possible to publish the book, namely “agents and/or real estate agencies, auctioneers, surveyors and experts” (2015, 6),

without whom the apartments, the main theme of the book, could not, according to the author, exist.

(1) Dear Sir:

But for you, this book might never have seen the light. Of what avail to prate of flats, if you are not at hand to negotiate the let? We want the best homes; you have them. It is your grim task to reconcile those two irreconcilables—the landlord (to whom all tenants are destructive carpers) and the tenant (to whom all landlords are rapacious skinflints). That landlords are so seldom torn apart by maddened tenants, and tenants so seldom hamstrung by infuriated landlords, is largely due to the skill with which you contrive that hardly ever the twain shall meet. (2015, 6)

The opening of the book offers an example of the author's style and the humorous devices that are used during the narration.

(2) Gentili Signori,

Se non fosse per voi, questo libro non avrebbe mai visto la luce. A che serve disquisire sugli appartamenti, se non si è avvezzi a negoziare sugli affitti? Vogliamo le case migliori: voi le avete. È vostro il triste compito di mettere d'accordo i due incompatibili: il proprietario (per il quale tutti gli inquilini sono dei cavillosi deleteri) e gli inquilini (per i quali tutti i proprietari sono degli avidi taccagni). Che i proprietari siano così di rado fatti a pezzi da inquilini esasperati e che gli inquilini siano così di rado messi con le spalle al muro da proprietari infuriati è dovuto principalmente all'abilità con cui fate in modo che quasi mai i due si incontrino. (2020, 7)

The comic effect is therefore achieved through the opposition of two scripts: the professional setting, that is the lexical fields of housing, and the interpersonal exchanges, that is the difficult relationship among people. The style is made up of terms of common use and rather technical ones (*landlord* and *tenants*) which, however, are loaded with characteristics connotated in a humorous way through the use of an informal adjective for the former and of a more literary one for the latter. Finally, the use of *twain*, an archaic form for *two*, contributes to give an almost epic tone to the interactions between the landlords and their tenants, but it was not translated as such. In the Italian translation, the same sustained tone was maintained to unleash the comic effect also on the target reader, using the same linguistic devices, in tone and formality. Towards the end of the dedication, the first of several English literary citations appears; it is a reference which is most likely recognizable to readers of the time, albeit modified in content in order to maintain the comic effect.

(3) “Letting, surveying, valuing onward through life he goes. Each morning sees some lease

drawn up, each evening sees one close...” (2015, 7)

- (4) “Tra affitti, misurazioni, perizie, egli percorre la strada della vita. Ogni mattina un contratto di locazione redatto, ogni sera lo vede concluso...” (2020, 8)

The quote is taken from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem, *The Village Blacksmith* (1842):

Toiling,--rejoicing,--sorrowing,  
Onward through life he goes;  
Each morning sees some task begin,  
Each evening sees it close.

The comic effect in the text is given by the comparison of the harsh life of a blacksmith in a village in America with that of a house seller and by the parody of a lyric text, whose main object is the simple but honest and desirable existence of a common worker. So, the parallelism brings the image of an employee forced to act as an intermediary between the landlord and his tenant. In this case, once the original verse was traced, the elements modified in the original text were then replaced in the target language, with reference to the real estate semantic field.

### 3.2. Cultural Specific References (CSR)

For greater simplicity and organization, a subdivision of the verbal characteristics that trigger the humorous effect and their Italian translation was made based on their nature: CSRs and puns and neologisms.

- (5) [...] and people have been living in houses ever since, apart from annual fortnight at Southend or Deauville an on occasional spell in gaol. (2015, 10)
- (6) [...] e le persone da allora vivono in case e villette, a parte quei quindici giorni all’anno a Southend o Deauville\_e qualche occasionale permanenza in prigione. (2020, 12)
- (7) But the majority of these [“the stately homes in England”] have now been converted into country clubs or dog-racing centres. (2015, 10)
- (8) Ma poiché la maggior parte di queste case sono state trasformate in circoli sportivi o centri cinofili, non ci interessano in questo momento. (2020, 12)
- (9) The parlour-maids have turned ash-blonde and migrated with shrill cries to Elstree, the cooks have married the butlers, and the butlers are living a life of ease on their accumulated tips. Today even ‘tweenies are hopelessly shy on the wing, while

housemaids- even of the ham-handed type so highly esteemed by the Potteries—are as hard to find as a new excuse for evasion of income-tax. (2015, 13)

- (10) Le domestiche si sono fatte biondo cenere e si sono trasferite con dei gridolini acuti agli studi cinematografici di Elstree, le cuoche hanno sposato i maggiordomi e i maggiordomi vivono una vita agiata grazie alle mance che hanno accumulato. Al giorno d'oggi perfino le sguattere non si trovano nemmeno a pagarle a peso d'oro, mentre le cameriere, anche quelle dalle mani di burro molto stimate dai nostri maestri ceramisti, sono tanto difficili da trovare quanto una nuova scusa per evadere le tasse. (2020, 15)

These three examples, taken from the first chapter, are rich in elements that are not only culturally but also chronologically distant from the target reader. The comic effect in the source text is ensured by the knowledge of cultural references and the connotative meaning that they evoke. In the first case, *Southend and Deauville* are two seaside resorts whose reference can also be understood by the contemporary reader, while the reference to *country clubs* or *dog-racing centres*, two cultural elements almost non-existent in the target culture, have been translated with more generic terms.

The third example is perhaps the densest: there is the presence of two cultural references to two well-defined places in the source culture, *Elstree* and the *Potteries*. *Elstree* was the neighbourhood where the first British film studios were once located, while the *Potteries* refers to the area of the Midlands where the six major ceramic production centres are located. In both cases, it was necessary to clarify and then paraphrase their equivalent in the target language. *Parlor-maids*, *housemaid* and *tweenies*, an archaic term to indicate the maid's or cook's helper, were translated using the generic terms that indicate a different rank. The expression *ham-handed* is an idiomatic phrase that indicates a clumsy person, for which the equivalent idiomatic phrase in Italian was used, maintaining the anatomical reference (*hands*) and the reference to food (*butter*). Finally, the idiomatic expression *shy on the wing*, of American origin, would indicate something difficult to spot, such as a bird or an animal, hence the choice to use the Italian idiom phrase so close to the meaning of the original.

- (11) The chief difference between the flat-dweller and the Earl of Totheringham (pronounced "Tum") is that the latter's home (Tum Towers, Ruts.) contains separate room for every conceivable purpose and occasion, viz. a dining-room, a drawing-room, a morning-room, a smoking-room, umpty-three bedrooms, a still-room, sundry bath-rooms, a billiard-room, a ball-room, a gun-room and even a little room at the back of the hall for keeping butlers in. [...] Thus any member of his Lordship's family who feels a sudden urge to dine, draw, spend a morning, smoke, go to bed, be still, wash his neck, play billiards, dance a fandango, shoot himself, or borrow a dicky can indulge his whim

in privacy and solitude—or in a pair of swimming-trunks, for that matter. (2015, 18)

- (12) La differenza principale tra l'abitante di un appartamento e il conte di Totherringham (pronunciato "Tum") è che la casa di quest'ultimo (le Tum Towers) ha una stanza a parte per ogni scopo e occasione immaginabile, ovvero una stanza da pranzo, una per il disegno, una per la mattina, una per fumare, tre e qualcosa stanze da letto, una stanza per stare in piedi, diverse stanze da bagno, una stanza da biliardo, una da ballo, una delle armi e persino una stanzetta alle spalle dell'ingresso per tenervi dentro i maggiordomi. [...] Così, qualunque membro della famiglia che senta il bisogno improvviso di cenare, disegnare, trascorrere la mattina, fumare, andare a dormire, stare in piedi, lavarsi il collo giocare a biliardo, ballare un fandango, spararsi o prendere in prestito uno sparato della camicia può assecondare il suo capriccio nella privacy e nella solitudine, o in un paio di calzoncini da mare, non fa differenza. (2020, 20)

This short excerpt is an excellent example of the humorous style that permeates the entire book. In this case, the comic effect originates from the reference to an elusive count, owner of a building so large that it was renamed *Tum Towers*, and to a list of all the rooms available to carry out the most diverse activities, even the most unusual. In the first part of the extract, therefore, there is a strong nominalization, ensured by the continuous repetition of the word *room*, while in the second part the nouns are replaced by the corresponding verbs. The translation choice therefore follows the stylistic choice of the source text, thus respecting the original function of the drawing-room, rather than its modern equivalent (living room). The choice of avoiding repeating the word *room* and inserting the pronoun *one* occurred during proofreading, but probably the unusual presence of the word *room* would have amplified the related humour.

- (13) In the life of every flat-dweller there are moments when a visiting acquaintance—or, worse still, a visiting relation—glances at the clock, utters a low moan of dismay, and announces that he/she has missed his/her last train/tram/omnibus back to Hampstead/Balham/Chorlton-cum-Hardy. (2015, 20)
- (14) Nella vita di ogni abitante di appartamento ci sono momenti in cui un conoscente in visita, o ancora peggio, un parente in visita, dà un'occhiata all'orologio, emette un basso gemito di sgomento e annuncia di aver perso l'ultimo treno/tram/autobus per Hampstead/Balham/Chorlton-cum-Hardy. (2020, 22)
- (15) Also his natty one-piece Sculleryette, which proves that even an ancestor who was torn apart at Tyburn for throwing a currant bun at Nell Gwyn<sub>may</sub> subsequently have his uses. (2015, 31)
- (16) Anche la sua elegante Retrocucinetta<sub>in</sub> un unico pezzo dimostra come possa essere

riutilizzato persino un antenato mandato al patibolo a Tyburn per aver tirato una pagnotta alla celebre attrice Nell Gwyn. (2020, 33)

- (17) There is a well-known saying, attributed by some to Confucius and by others to the anonymous genius who composed the by-laws of Battersea Park, to the effect that a flat without furniture is like sage without onions, to without for, or Snelgrove without Marshall—inconceivable, in other words. (2015, 35)
- (18) C'è un celebre detto, che alcuni attribuiscono a Confucio e altri al genio sconosciuto che redasse lo statuto di Battersea Park, secondo cui un appartamento senza mobili è come il cacio senza maccheroni, il davanti senza il dietro, o Fortnum senza Mason; in altre parole: inconcepibile! (2020, 37)

The previous examples contain strong cultural references that have remained almost intact in the target text, at least as regards the reference to specific geographic locations, by means of a foreignizing strategy. Sculleryette is one of the many neologisms coined for Robinson's inventions and contraptions, which will be covered in the next section. The reference to Nell Gwyn needed an explication through the wording "famous actress," otherwise incomprehensible to the reader of the target language. Finally, in the last example, the humour arises from the unusual grouping of elements that usually occur in pairs. In translation, *sage and onions* were replaced with an Italian cultural equivalent (*cacio con i maccheroni*), while Snelgrove and Marshall, a famous department store of the time, was replaced with a more contemporary equivalent in the source culture.

- (19) It goes without saying that the first essential for a service-flat is a reliable lift—or "elevator", as it is laughingly called by American, with their passion for *le mot juste*. (2015, 98)
- (20) Inutile dire che la prima cosa fondamentale per un appartamento in un residence è un ascensore sicuro, o "elevatore", come dicono ironicamente gli americani con la passione per *le mot juste*. (2020, 96)

In this example, the absurdity from which the comic effect originates is in the explanation of the use of a different lexeme in British English and American English. Since replacing elevator with a synonym (i.e., freight elevator, *montacarichi*, albeit it entails a different function) would have lost both the reference and the humorous effect, I opted for a calque.

### 3.3 Puns and neologisms

In addition to the use of cultural references, the text widely uses puns and neologisms, especially in naming the various inventions that are presented and illustrated in the narrative. Again, I intend to provide an overview of the strategies I used in specific examples.

(21) [...] a flat is simply a portion of a house that has been converted but not entirely convinced. (2015, 13)

(22) [...] un appartamento è una porzione di una casa che è stata convertita ma non interamente convinta. (2020, 15)

The pun in this case is quite clear, as it plays on the meaning of the term *converted*, which also refers to religious conversion and is fortunately similar in Italian, thus making literal translation possible.

The following example is slightly different.

(23) [...] but the knowledge that he can do so is liable (as Freud points out in his Hard-Boiled Egos, or Short Cuts to the Loony-Bin) to play havoc with his complexes and produce unsightly spots on his subconscious. (2015, 20)

(24) [...] ma sapere di poterlo fare è sufficiente (come sottolinea Freud nel suo Ego sodo o Scorciatoie per il manicomio) per generare un caos tra i suoi complessi e creare antiestetiche macchie sul suo subconscio. (2020, 22)

The reference to Freud probably stems from his exile in London since 1933, and the controversy of his publications, which were not immediately and universally well received. The pun exploits the sound similarity between ego and egg in the common noun phrase “boiled eggs.” In Italian, there is no correspondence between the terms egg and ego, but I have relied on the association of meaning given by the same collocation of the adjective *sodo* with the word egg (moreover, a sort of assonance with *uovo sodo* and *ego sodo* can be noticed). The term loony bin, humorous and rather informal, has been translated as *manicomio* (asylum). As agreed with the editor, I opted for a neutral Italian equivalent which could not be considered offensive in any way, instead of *psychiatric clinic* or the informal *madhouse* (Italian literal backtranslation: *a cage of mad people*).



- (25) And, as Roger Blenkysoppe, the medioeval poet, puts it: Whenne worries doe come,/Comes ye payne inne ye tumme./ Whenne ye mynde isse atte reste,/ Thenne a manne mays dygeste. (2015, 50)
- (26) E, come dice Roger Blenkyskoppe, il poeta medievale: Allor quando giungono le cure,/giunge allo stomaco il dolore./Allor quando la mente a riposo sta,/è allora che omine digesta. (2020, 50)

In this example, the source text refers to an alleged medieval poet and plays with the reproduction of verse close in morphological form to what could apparently be Middle English. The translation strategy I used was to reproduce an Italian that could resemble the vernacular, creating an ideal cultural parallelism between the source and target text; hence the choice of concluding the poem with the word *omine* and inventing the verb *digesta*, as if it were a form deriving directly from Latin. The reference to other languages, more or less fictitious, is also the subject of the following example, where an elusive Welsh proverb is translated into English.

- (27) There is, or should be, an old Welsh proverb, *Cwm bwlch, llanfestiniogywm*, which means, approximately, that all work and no play make Jack a dull boy. And what applies to Jack—whoever he may be—applies equally to Mr. Simpson, as many a flat-dweller is called. (2015, 67)
- (28) C'è, o dovrebbe esserci, un antico proverbio gallese, “Cwm bwlch, llanfestiniogywm,” che approssimativamente significa “solo lavoro e niente divertimento rendono Jack un ragazzo annoiato.” E ciò vale per Jack, chiunque egli sia, vale anche per Mr Simpson, cognome diffuso tra gli abitanti di appartamento. (2020, 67)

The simplest solution was to include the Welsh quotation in the target text and to translate the proverb in a literal way, because in any case its meaning is clear even to the target reader. The term *dull*, in fact, means “not interesting or exciting anyway” (Cambridge Dictionary), and I considered to translate it with the Italian adjective *annoiato* to explicit the effect on the subject (Jack) and the need for him to find a hobby.

- (29) Such ponds are easily stocked with gold-fish, which can then be fished far from the surrounding balconies. [...] Aye, and by the goldfish too, for even a henna-tinted sardine must occasionally tire of wambling round and round a pond, with no excitement other than the bi-weekly ant's-egg. (2015, 74-75)
- (30) Questi laghetti possono essere facilmente riempiti di pesci rossi per poi pescarli dai balconi circostanti. [...] Sissignore, e anche per il pesce rosso, perché persino una sardina colorata con l'henné deve di tanto in tanto stufarsi di girare in tondo in uno

stagno, senza nessun altro tipo di diversivo a parte un uovo di formica ogni due settimane. (2020, 72-74)

In this example, the comic effect of the pun arises from the fact that *henna-tinted sardine*, on the one hand, recalls the image of a small fish typical of pond or fountains (although in Italian gold fish are called *red fish*) and on the other, the expression *red herring* is an idiom that means “something misleading.” In the Italian translation, I preferred to play on the evoked image and therefore on the association of ideas that binds an artificially coloured sardine to the goldfish, considering that there is no cultural equivalent of an idiom containing a reference to a goldfish in the target language.

- (31) Nor is this the only use to which the modern flat-balcony—not to be confused with a balcony-flat, which is an entirely different thing—can be put by an intelligent tenant. (2015, 76)
- (32) Questo non è il solo uso che un inquilino intelligente può fare del balcone del moderno appartamento, da non confondere con l'appartamento-balcone, che è proprio tutt'altra cosa. (2020, 74)

The source text exploits the fact that English noun phrases can be modified through the use of a noun in pre-modifier position, thus creating a sort of chiasmus. Due to the structure of the target language, it was not possible to use a calque of the first element, but the syntactic link had to be made explicit through the use of a preposition. With respect to the second element, I opted for a hyphenated compound noun.

- (33) In other words, the only difference between flats and bungalows is that the latter—like a conscientious magistrate—are completely detached. (Indeed, having very little in the way of foundations, some bungalows are liable to become too completely detached by sudden tempests, but we will go into that later). (2015, 108)
- (34) In poche parole, l'unica differenza tra gli appartamenti e i bungalow è che questi ultimi, come un giudice coscienzioso, sono completamente distaccati. (Infatti, avendo ben poco in termini di fondamenta, alcuni bungalow tendono a distaccarsi troppo a causa di improvvise tempeste, ma tratteremo questo aspetto tra un po'). (2020, 106)

In this last example, the pun originates, once again, from the polysemy of the adjective detached, which in English means physically detached (as is the bungalow in the text) but also temperamentally (as attributed to the figure of the conscientious judge). Moreover, there is also a reference to a type of house typical of Anglo-Saxon countries, the detached house. Probably,

only the most attentive target reader would be able to associate the image suggested in the source text, but the choice to use the equivalent term *detached* seems to ensure the desired comic effect.

Finally, Table 2 offers an overview of the neologisms invented to describe Heath Robinson's cumbersome but amusing machines and contraptions.

Source Text	Target Text
Page 20: Dibedroom (DÌbèdroom)	Page 22: Stanza da Pranzoletto (pranzolétto)
Page 22: Babedroom	Page 24: Stanza da bagnoletto
Page 31: Sculleryette	Page 32: La Retrocucinetta
Page 36: Robinson Chair-Emptier	Page 38: Lo Svuota-poltrone Robinson
Page 45: The Dresser-Piano	Page 46: Il comò-piano
Page. 47: Combination Bathdesk, or Deskbath	Page 47: Vascascrivania o Scrivaniavasca Combinata
Page 48: Nucrachair	Page 49: La Schiacciasedia
Page 60: The Parrot Chair	Page 61: La sedia del pappagallo
Page 62: Rabbitarium	Page 62: Conigliario
Page 68: Roof-golf or "Roolf"	Page 68: Golf sul tetto o "golfetto"
Page 92: "Garden-hoggers"	Page 90: "Quelli del giardino tutto mio"
Page 100: Concertina Grub-Hoist	Page 98: Montavivande a Fisarmonica
Page 101: Breakfast Parlourette	Page 99: Saletta per la colazione
Page 103: Rubbishifter/Skulltoaster	Page 101: Scivolaspazzatura/Tostapane Cranico
Page 111: Hero-Extengalow (Heath Robinson Extending Bungalow)	Page 109: H.R. Est-Bungalow (Bungalow Estensibile Heath Robinson)
Page 118: The "Modesty" Seaside Bungalow	Page 117: "Pudore" per il Bungalow a mare
Page 128: Robinson Head-Buffer or Dome-Protector	Page 125: Cuscino-Paracolpi o Proteggi-Cranio Robinson

**Tab. 2:** Machinery and equipment translation

The examples in the source language show that neologisms often arise from the blending of two pre-existing words (*dibedroom*, i.e., dining-room and bed-room) or from the addition of

derivational morphemes (*scullerryette*, i.e., scullery, a small room close to the kitchen in old houses which is used to wash dishes, with the suffix *-ette*, probably of French origin, used to elegantly indicate something small, along the lines of the modern term *kitchenette*). Similarly, where possible, the same morphological process was followed. Thus, I translated *rabbitarium* (a word denoting a place to keep rabbits, from *rabbit* with the suffix *-arium*, similar to the word *aquarium*) with *conigliario* and *nucrachair* (chair to open walnuts comfortably) with *schiacciasedia*. In the case of *roof-golf* or *roof* (i.e., the game of golf on the roof of an apartment building), I decided to play on the blending of golf and roof (*tetto* in Italian) and create the term *golpetto*, which in Italian may refer to a small jumper. As for *garden-hoggers* (referring to the problems that arise in having to share a garden with the other tenants of a building), I used a paraphrase starting from the meaning of hog (a selfish, greedy, or slovenly person, in its informal use).

#### 4. Conclusion

As shown in this essay, translating a humorous text is a difficult task for the constraints that it may present. In the case of *How to Live in a Flat*, the chronological distance and the different cultural setting are important elements to be considered in the translation process. The analysis of humour and of the stylistic and linguistic characteristics of this very dense text, in which the purely linguistic and cultural elements of humour are fully intertwined with each other, has allowed me to highlight the comic strategies used in the text by Browne and Robinson. The presence of humour was a further constraint, because, in the first place, it was fundamental to recognise the punch line and the humorous elements, the two scripts in opposition, and then act accordingly, in order to convey the equivalent meaning and reproduce the same humorous effect on the target readership. The focus, then, was on the recipients of the text, contemporary readers who might be distant from the culture of the source text, especially as far as humour is concerned. As described in section 2, humour is a common human trait but differs from age to age and from place to place; the country described by Browne and Robinson has specific connotations. Therefore, the strategies I adopted in the translation are those suggested by previous studies on the translation of humour: calques, loans and neologisms were the main solutions adopted. In the case of cultural references, the translation was aimed at a cultural equivalent or at reducing the feeling of foreignization in favour of an overall domestication technique.

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