Culture-bound humour in English-language dubs: A reception study

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Abstract: Non-English-language TV series currently abound on streaming platforms. Alongside new mainstream, foreign-language TV series, mainstream English dubs of feature films and series are increasingly popular (see Hayes, 2021; Sánchez-Mompeán, 2021; Spiteri Miggiani, 2021). Against this backdrop, dubbing audiovisual programmes poses challenges to translators, and (audiovisual) translation scholars such as Dore (2010, 2020), Pedersen (2011) and Ranzato (2006, 2016) have previously established that cultural elements do not always travel seamlessly across languages and cultures. This difficulty can be even greater when translating comedies, often driven by cultural dimensions such as regional stereotypes, local knowledge and national jokes (Zabalbeascoa, 1996). Inspired by reception studies on the translation of audiovisual humour (Fuentes, 2003), we hereby propose an empirical study on the perception of culture-bound humour in English-language dubs. Previous studies have already established the benefits of English-language dubs in language-learning settings (Ogea Pozo et al., 2023) and the teaching of reverse translation (Botella Tejera et al., 2024) but were conducted exclusively with undergraduate students. The present study sets out to ascertain the preferences of a non-expert viewership (*N*=146) and places greater emphasis on culture-bound humour in English-language dubs. This study thus builds on the lessons learnt and analyses the perception of general audiences who are exposed to short clips containing instances of culture-bound humour. Ultimately, this study showcases how experimentation can gauge audience preferences, as far as translating culture-bound humour for English dubbing is concerned, to inform current translation practices and ensure that target audience needs and preferences are taken into consideration.

Keywords: Audiovisual translation, English-language dubbing, reception, perception, culture-bound humour.

1. Introduction

In a world characterised by globalisation and technological advancement, the consumption of audiovisual material – be it films, series or any other kind of videos – transcends geographical boundaries, giving audiences access to diverse cultural narratives produced in various languages. Series, for instance, serve as

potent vehicles for the dissemination and exchange of cultural values, traditions and ideologies. Often marked by linguistic or culture-specific humour, socio-political commentary and cultural idiosyncrasies, series offer viewers an immersive experience into new and unfamiliar cultural landscapes while fostering a sense of connectivity and understanding.

Central to the widespread dissemination of these audiovisual productions is the advent of streaming content platforms, which have democratised their distribution and enabled viewers worldwide to enjoy a vast repertoire of content from different linguistic and cultural contexts, usually made available through more than one modality of audiovisual translation (AVT). In this respect, dubbing has traditionally been the most widely consumed form of AVT in several European countries (Chaume, 2012), but in recent years the popularity of this practice has outgrown its realm, thereby reaching new audiences. In the Anglosphere, dubbing, hitherto limited to cartoons, has recently gained traction in the mainstream, especially since Netflix started offering some of its original content dubbed into English in 2017 (Hayes, 2021). This shift has led to significant changes in the media localisation industry, including more versions of the same programmes and the incorporation of linguistic variations in English-language dubs (Chaume, 2018; Hayes, 2021; Hayes and Bolaños García-Escribano, 2022).

The preferences of audiences, hereby understood as a "collective entity" that includes many different types of viewers (Gambier, 2018, p. 55), heavily determine the success that audiovisual products may have. Hence, reception studies have traditionally been used in AVT to determine the popularity of certain translated programmes as well as to establish the connections between translation quality and audiences' fondness for certain films and series. As Božović (2019) suggests, audiovisual content is primarily designed for its target audiences, who are no longer confined to passive roles. In an age where users can actively express their opinions on social media, audiences can swiftly influence the success or failure of a film or series within a matter of hours (Di Giovanni & Gambier, 2018). As Orrego-Carmona (2021) explains, translators are very much exposed to criticism when mistakes are made and audiences do not enjoy the translations, and this is mainly due to the vulnerability of AVT practices, especially in subtitling because of the simultaneous presence of the original dialogues and the written translations on the screen (see Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 77). Audiences' reactions to the same content can also vary greatly across both space and time. This is particularly evident when programmes contain a substantial degree of cultural specificity, so it is pivotal that AVT scholars engage in experimental studies focusing on those audiovisual texts with a sizeable component of culture and humour, in order to better understand how such content is perceived and received across different linguistic and cultural contexts.

In this paper, we examine the preferences of lay audiences who are exposed to an English-language dub of a popular Spanish series. This study focuses on the dubbing of culture-bound humour and thus uses humour-bound cultural elements as seen in seven video excerpts from the first season of Netflix's original comedy series *Valeria* (Benítez, 2020). An online survey completed by 109 valid respondents informs this study and forms part of a long-term project building on prior research (see Section 4). Unlike earlier studies, this questionnaire was not tied to language learning and was answered by highly proficient English language users, offering an insight into perceptions of culture-bound humour in English dubs of Spanish series.

2. Reception and perception in dubbing practices

Reception studies abound in dubbing, but few experiments have focused on the reception of different types of English-dubbed audiovisual content with global audiences. As claimed by AVT scholars such as Di Giovanni (2018) and Orrego-Carmona (2018), reception research has grown exponentially in recent years, and many studies have aimed to explore topics such as non-professional practices (Orrego-Carmona, 2016), technical conventions (Szarkowska et al., 2017) and even machine translation (Guerberof Arenas et al., 2024), among others. As highlighted by O'Sullivan (2016, p. 270), reception studies chiefly stem from a pressing need "to do much more audience research in order to understand viewer responses to available modalities of translation."

Although many audience-focused studies have often preferred the term *perception*, some of these works have included features pertaining to interpretation and appreciation and are therefore in the realm of reception (Di Giovanni, 2018). Perception is linked to the visual experience and what is impressed on the eyes when watching a film, referring to the processes whereby viewers perceive uninterpreted sensory impressions before any act of interpretation (Gambier, 2018; Goldstein, 2008). However, as Gambier (2018, p. 56) explains, "studying reception means to investigate the way(s) in which [audiovisual] products/performances are processed, consumed, absorbed, accepted, appreciated, interpreted, understood and remembered by the viewers, under specific contextual socio-cultural conditions." Arguably, a translation inevitably leads to differences in the reception of the relevant audiovisual content, as well as the subsequent impact on viewers.

Reception and perception studies have contributed to the growth and maturity of AVT as a discipline and have thereby provided "significant and stimulating insights into the world of the receivers, their preferences and needs" (Di Giovanni & Gambier, 2018, p. 10). Inquiry into the reception of translated audiovisual content encompasses both "an individual and a social dimension" (Orrego-Carmona, 2018, p. 377), as studies necessarily delve into the reactions of individual viewers as well as the collective preferences of specific communities. As Gambier (2018) states, different variables related to viewers are often taken into consideration for reception studies (e.g. age, sex, education, reading skills and habits, oral and reading comprehension in the mother tongue, video consumption habits, and command of foreign languages, among others). When it comes to dubbing, several authors have emphasised the ludic aspects of film viewing, stating that dubbing provides more satisfaction than subtitling thanks to the "less disrupted and more involving nature of the hedonic experience itself" (Perego et al., 2015, p. 3). According to authors such as Kovačič (1995), Chesterman (1998, 2007), Gambier (2009) and Fox (2016), there are three main types of reception: response (perceptual decoding), reaction (psycho-cognitive aspects) and repercussion (attitudinal aspects), the latter being the main pillar of this study. This study focuses on the viewers' preferences and habits, and the way the external sociocultural dimension influences the impact caused on them.

When it comes to audiovisual texts, both translators and lay viewers have to process a series of codified signs (which may be divided into verbal and non-verbal, aural and visual elements). These have been articulated in a certain way to achieve a particular effect on the target audience, such as humour. Consuming a dubbed version in a new socio-cultural framework means that the repercussions can vary, especially when combined with the challenge of addressing cultural and humorous elements. In this respect, Chiaro (2008)

criticises literal translations of humorous passages as they may become incomprehensible or unfunny for the target audience. Fuentes (2003) underlines the importance of a high-quality translation and accurate synchronisation for the reception of localised products, contending that the ultimate purpose of AVT is to meet viewers' expectations. In the case of comedies, the purpose is for viewers to have fun (Chiaro, 2010). For this reason, translators should focus on the different connotative and cultural load of semiotic codes and their influence on the transfer or adaptation of humour, especially when culture-specific references "are not part of the viewers' cognitive encyclopaedia" (Denton & Ciampi, 2012, p. 405), so that the explicit intention of the text is conveyed. Moreover, Fuentes (2003) argues that viewers from different linguistic or cultural backgrounds may perceive either the same or a completely different sense of humour for a variety of reasons, so their interpretation of the audiovisual text may differ. In a similar vein, this study aims to discover whether different interpretations of the humour found in *Valeria* (a series contextualised in a specific culture) have been produced when translated into a foreign language.

3. Culture and humour in dubbing practices

AVT scholars have traditionally paid close attention to cultural elements, as they determine the portrayal of storylines and visuals as they are framed within a particular regional, social and cultural context. According to Ranzato (2011, p. 7), cultural elements are used "to convey the colour and the flavour of texts as well as to characterise their style." Mainly thanks to streaming platforms, series and films are now distributed globally and are thereby reaching larger and more diverse audiences than ever before, so they can also be seen as the perfect catalysts for the dissemination of foreign cultures.

Culture is inextricably bound to humour. The latter is produced within a communicative and social context and relies on both the language and the culture in which it originates (Santana, 2005). In this sense, Dore (2020) points out that humour is partly natural and partly acquired, and it is influenced by personal and social factors. As Martínez Tejerina (2016, p. 73) argues, "all people laugh, but not for the same reasons, nor in the same situation, nor at the same references." Therefore, humour may have different meanings in different social and cultural contexts (Dore, 2020). In this regard, we share Martínez Tejerina's opinion when she sees a contradiction in the sense that, being humour a universal phenomenon, it is enclosed by definite cultural and linguistic borders. What is more, this phenomenon is not necessarily limited to a specific society or community, small groups and subcommunities may also have distinct ways of conceptualising humour.

Based on the insight into how communication is influenced by culture suggested by Samovar et al. (2012), we may identify some of the distinguishing features of humour developed in each socio-cultural context. Thus, humour is learnt – as it is associated with the process of enculturation – and is transmitted through and it is symbolic insofar as it resorts to words, gestures, and images to convey a cultural meaning and comicalness. Moreover, humour is dynamic, as it evolves by adopting new ideas, inventions, and changes, some borrowed from other cultures, and it is ethnocentric because it responds to a strong sense of group identity.

When translating culture-bound humour for the screen, achieving a "reality effect" (Chaume, 2005, p. 12) is essential, so that the target audience can

perceive and understand the humorous components and react – whether in a similar or different way – to how the audience of the source language responded. In this regard, Botella Tejera (2017) suggests that translators should bridge the gap between the original audience and the target audience, whose knowledge, culture and ways of seeing the world are not necessarily shared. To ensure humour is effectively conveyed, she claims that translators must be able to identify the semiotic signs and their purposes, to find the mechanisms to attain the same effect on the target audience. However, some authors, such as Ranzato (2011, p. 7), contend that sometimes culture-bond elements are lost in dubbing since, as the author explains, "a thorough analysis of the dubbed versions of a number of films and TV series shows how these elements are often eliminated or heavily manipulated in the target text." Technical aspects and other constraints have to be taken into consideration when translating humour for dubbing, since the acoustic and visual synchronisation, as well as linguistic and cultural constraints, can significantly determine the transfer of humour (Veiga, 2009).

There are many different taxonomies for the translation of culture-specific elements, which are summarised by Dore (2019), who also offers a classification based on two macro-strategies depending on the degree of cross-cultural manipulation involved. The first one contains conservative techniques, divided into repetition, orthographic adaptation, linguistic (non-cultural) translation, extratextual gloss and intratextual gloss. Gottlieb (2009) reduces conservation techniques to retention and specification as source-oriented approaches. Franco Aixelá (1996) explains that some of these conservation techniques cannot be fully applied in dubbing, since synchronisation and spatiotemporal constraints make it impossible or very difficult to use some of them, such as glosses. The second macro-strategy is thus comprised of substitution techniques, which can be divided into synonymy, limited universalisation, absolute universalisation, naturalisation, deletion, and autonomous creation (Franco Aixelá, 1996). Although, in principle, substitution techniques can be used for the translation of culture-specific elements in AVT, the specific restraints and the subordination to the visual code should be taken into consideration. For this study, the techniques are adapted from Franco Aixelá (1996) and Gottlieb (2009), as illustrated in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Taxonomy used to design translation options in the questionnaire

Translation techniques	
Conservation	Retention
	Specification
Substitution	Limited universalisation
	Absolute universalisation
	Naturalisation
	Elimination

4. Methodology

Following previous studies on the perception of culture-bound humour (Botella Tejera et al., 2024; Ogea Pozo et al., 2023), we aimed to determine whether the results previously obtained in pedagogical environments – that is, with students of English and Spanish as foreign languages, respectively – would be mirrored in an experiment with lay audiences. For this purpose, an experiment was developed to expose participants to instances of culture-bound humour in translation and analyse the perceptions gleaned thereafter. An online survey was distributed through mailing lists and social media by several translation associations as well as through snowball sampling in an attempt to identify native speakers of English without a background in languages or translation through word-of-mouth referrals. The survey was completed by 163 participants, and there were exclusion measures in place to guarantee the validity and reliability of the data (see Section 4.3), so the results will focus on a sample of 109 respondents. This survey forms part of a long-term project, so the experiment draws from and expands on two previous studies (Botella Tejera et al., 2024; Ogea Pozo et al., 2023). The key difference from previous approaches lies in the fact that this questionnaire did not form part of a language learning experience and was filled in completed by non-native speakers of Spanish with an excellent command of English (including English native speakers). Our results can therefore be considered exemplary of the overall perception of culture-bound humour in English-language dubs of Spanish-language series that have a heavy component of culture-bound humour.

4.1. Rationale, experiment design and materials
The online experiment took the form of a self-administered questionnaire for non-Spanish speakers who were either native or proficient speakers of English. A total of seven clips, containing at least one humour-bound cultural element each, were selected from Netflix's original series *Valeria*. The clips were produced using two different versions: English dubbing and Spanish original with English and Spanish subtitles. The subtitles were exported using the original timestamps from Netflix's subtitle template and subsequently added to the dubbed version. As the English-language subtitles contained slightly different translations from the dubbed version, the subtitle templates were edited so that they reflected the dubbed dialogues accurately. Once the subtitle templates were finalised, the dubbed clips re-encoded to include both the dubbed dialogues (English) at the bottom and the original transcription (Spanish) at the top of the screen. Juxtaposing both the dubbed dialogues and the subtitles meant that any viewers who were not native speakers of English or those who were not too familiar with Spanish culture could understand the dubbed dialogues better and identify the cultural elements under examination.

For participants to focus on the items contained in each clip, the relevant cultural elements were highlighted using unconventional formatting (yellow colour and bold letters). By attracting respondents' attention to each item as well as by letting them watch the clip again, we aimed to ensure that their responses on comprehension, humour transfer and, ultimately, preferred techniques were well-informed and indeed a result of careful consideration.

Table 2: Humour-bound cultural elements and the translations from the Netflix dub

	Original dialogue (Spanish)	Dubbed dialogue (English)	Reference
Clip 1	- Con este *look* lo petas de C. Tangana. - ¿50 pavos para ir disfrazado de chungo?	- This is perfect for you to go as C. Tangana. - 50 bucks to look like a douchebag?	C. Tangana
Clip 2	Yo hice la comunión de marinerito.	I did my communion dressed in a sailor suit.	Hacer la primera comunión Traje de marinerito
Clip 3	- ¿Eres del Opus? - Yo no soy del Opus, eh.	- Are you a member of Opus? - I'm not a member of Opus.	Spain-founded Roman Catholic organisation Opus Dei
Clip 4	Cari, ni todos los gais escuchamos copla ni todos abrimos la relación.	My love, not all gays listen to copla, and have an open relationship.	Copla
Clip 5	- Cari, ¿por qué no compartimos un secreto ibérico? - No. ¡Operación bikini!	- OK, love, shall we share the pork fillet? - My bikini.	Operación bikini
Clip 6	Yo, sinceramente, nunca le he encontrado el punto a este tío. Ave María, ¿cuándo serás mía?	I never liked his music much at all. Ave Maria, when will you be mine?	Ave María song by Spanish singer David Bisbal
Clip 7	- ¿Team Bisbal o Bustamante? - ¡Pero qué pregunta! Team Chenoa hasta la muerte.	- Team Bisbal or Bustamante? - What a stupid question. Team Chenoa forever.	Operación Triunfo singers Chenoa, David Bisbal and David Bustamante

The clips were embedded in the online questionnaire so that respondents did not have to leave the survey platform and could also watch the videos multiple times while responding to the questions seamlessly.

Figure 1: Snapshot from Clip 2 depicting the relevant cultural element in bold and yellow highlight (Source: Netflix).

4.2. Data collection and ethical approval

The second section of the questionnaire was comprised of the seven clips described in the previous section, followed by four main questions that gauged the participants' reaction regarding 1) familiarity and identification of humour-bound cultural elements; 2) level of understanding of humour-bound cultural elements with or without the subtitles; degree of satisfaction with the transfer of the humorous load to the English-language dub; and 4) translation technique preferred if given the choice (see Annex 1). The questionnaire also aimed to utilise the demographics of the sample, including gender, age, educational background, languages, and place of residence) so that exclusions could be applied where participants did not meet the inclusion criteria (see Section 4.3).

The online questionnaire did not require participants to register or provide any kind of contact details and did not include questions containing personal or sensitive data. Participants had to confirm, in writing, that they were of legal age and were willing to participate in the experiment. The personal data gathered did not allow for the identification of any individuals, and the data was stored and processed using University College London's (UCL) approved cloud storage services. These measures are compliant with the ethical approval granted by UCL Ethics for the duration of the project (reference no. 21249/002).

Before the questionnaire was distributed, a pilot session was conducted with volunteers enrolled in a master's degree in AVT in the United Kingdom (UK). As the volunteers came from different educational backgrounds and world regions (including America and Asia), their input was key to ensuring that the questionnaire was both clear and suitable for its stated purpose. The pilot session allowed us to establish that the cultural elements could not be easily understood without a substantial (near-native) understanding of contemporary Spanish culture. We also endeavoured to avoid a potential Euro-centric biased approach by distributing the questionnaire globally and thereby including participants from all over the world.

4.3. Sample description and exclusions

The overall population was comprised of 163 participants who completed the questionnaire between December 2023 and January 2024. Incomplete responses as well as those given by native speakers of Spanish were automatically discarded. The full size of this study's sample is therefore N=146, including 108 (74%) females and 36 (25%) males as well as 2 respondents who identified as non-binary or preferred not to say. Participants' age ranges were categorised

depending on their age generation: baby boomers (n=5, 4%), gen X (n=19, 13%), gen Y or millennials (n=38, 26%), and gen Z (n=84, 56%). This age-based categorisation allows us to better gauge the respondents' perception and understanding of some cultural elements that are often dependent on personal experience. Only 7 respondents (5%) had previously watched Netflix's original series *Valeria*, whereas 12 of them (8%) had previously heard about it. Among the former 7 respondents, 4 rated it highly (*excellent*) and 3 thought it was *fair*; interestingly, the vast majority (6) considered it *funny*.

Among the respondents, 48 (33%) were native speakers of English. This fact relatively matches the number of respondents who have grown up or lived in an English-speaking country for at least five years (n=49, 34%). Non-native respondents consider themselves highly fluent (n=83, 57%, have an equivalent to C1–C2 proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR)[1] or relatively fluent (n=15, 10%, have an equivalent to B1–B2 proficiency according to the CEFR). Among the respondents, most do not speak (n=96, 66%) or have a very limited command of Spanish (n=21, 14%, had an equivalent to A1–A2 proficiency). There are 11 respondents (8%) who have an intermediate level of Spanish (B1–B2) and 18 (12%) who have an advanced level (C1–C2) of Spanish. This latter group is useful for identifying correlations between the respondents' command of Spanish and their understanding of on-screen cultural elements as well as adaptation strategies. Interestingly, 49 (34%) respondents come from or have lived most of their lives in Asia, whereas the vast majority (n=89, 61%) are Europeans. The number of respondents from other continents was negligible: 6 (4%) from North or South America and 2 (1%) from Oceania.

Because of the inner difficulties of collecting data beyond researchers' circles and networks, the vast majority of respondents (123, 84%) have a background in languages and translation, whereas eight (6%) do not have university studies in this field but are currently working in a related area, and the remaining 15 (10%) are the only respondents who have no educational background or professional experience in languages.

There were no control measures, but for the discussion of the results to allow for comparisons, further exclusions were applied (see Table 3). Aside from excluding those respondents who did not complete the questionnaire in full, as well as those whose mother tongue was Spanish, a decision was made to apply three more exclusions: 1) a very good command of Spanish (equivalent to C1–C2), 2) a lower command of English (equivalent to B1–B2 or lower), and 3) having watched the series in full. These additional exclusions meant removing another 37 participants, to wit 23% of the total number of survey respondents. However, we deemed this necessary to ascertain whether respondents' language proficiency would interfere with their perception of humour transfer and translation techniques.

Table 3 summarises the personal traits identified among the sample, which was divided into the Full Sample (FS), containing no exclusions, and the Selected Sample (SS), containing the above-mentioned exclusions.

An initial analysis of both samples showed that the results are proportional and therefore comparable. A glance at the means across the different responses revealed that most values remained practically the same or showed only a slight variation of 3.5% or less (see Annex 2). The most noticeable differences related to the comprehension of the dubbed version with subtitles, which was 23%

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[1] The CEFR is a document prepared by the Council of Europe that is used to describe language proficiency across different languages. See: https://www.coe.int

without exclusions (FS group) and decreased to 19.50% in the SS group and one of the techniques (absolute universalisation was preferred by 18% of all respondents in FS but only 15% of SS respondents). In the rest of the responses, most means coincided or varied very little (1–2%).

In light of this, and although the odd comparison is established between both groups, the results in Section 5 will mainly report on the SS group (N^{ss}=109). As per the literature on reception studies in Section 2, the respondents' traits (i.e. age, languages, studies and place of residence) were used to conduct a Pearson chi-square test and examine any correlations that would help establish which personal factors can determine the perception of dubbed clips, especially in terms of comprehension and enjoyment.

Table 3: Participants' personal traits

	Full Sample (FS)	Selected Sample (SS)
Participant's Spanish fluency	N^{fs}=146 96 (66%) not fluent 21 (14%) A1–A2 11 (8%) B1–B2 **18 (12%) C1–C2**	N^{ss}=109 81 (74%) not fluent 18 (17%) A1–A2 10 (9%) B1–B2
English fluency	48 (33%) natives 83 (57%) C1–C2 **15 (10%) B1–B2**	37 (34%) natives 72 (66%) C1–C2
Residence	43 (30%) currently live in an English-speaking country 6 (4%) have lived in an English-speaking country for at least 5 years 97 (66%) do not live in an English-speaking country	31 (29%) currently live in an English-speaking country 5 (5%) have lived in an English-speaking country for at least 5 years 73 (67%) do not live in an English-speaking country
Studies and experience	123 (84%) university studies in languages or translation 8 (6%) no university studies but have experience in languages and translation jobs 15 (10%) no university studies or professional experience in languages or translation	90 (83%) university studies in languages or translation 7 (6%) no university studies but have experience in languages and translation jobs 12 (11%) no university studies or professional experience in languages or translation
Familiarity with series	**7 (5%) have watched the series** 12 (8%) have heard of the series but have not watched it 127 (87%) have neither watched nor heard of the series	7 (6%) have heard of the series but have not watched it 102 (94%) have neither watched nor heard of the series

5. Results and findings

For the sake of clarity and space efficiency, this section will not report the frequencies and other statistical data obtained in SPSS (see Annex 2). Instead, it will include the main findings in the form of commented diagrams.

5.1. Quantitative data

Most participants were either unfamiliar with the cultural elements that appeared in the videos (60%) or unsure (22%) whether they were familiar with them. Among the seven elements, the ones in Clip 3 (*Opus Dei*), Clip 5 (*bikini diet*) and Clip 6 (*Ave María*) were those that respondents recognised the most (32%, 45% and 24%, respectively). Arguably, the first one refers to a Catholic organisation that might be recognised by anyone familiar with modern European history and Christian beliefs, while the second and the third references can be inferred from the visuals.

There did not seem to be many correlations between respondents' age, languages, studies or residence once the Pearson chi-square test was performed. The factor that showed several correlations, though exclusively in certain questions, was respondents' proficiency in Spanish as a foreign language: Clip 2 ($p = 0.033$) and Clip 4 ($p = 0.003$). As a case in point, for those with some knowledge of Spanish (3 out of 10 with an intermediate level), the reference in Clip 4 (*copla*) was familiar, compared to only 2 out of 81 respondents with no fluency in Spanish. Having said that, 5 out of 28 respondents who had a basic or intermediate level of Spanish selected *not sure* compared to the much higher proportion of 21 out of 81 respondents with no knowledge of Spanish.
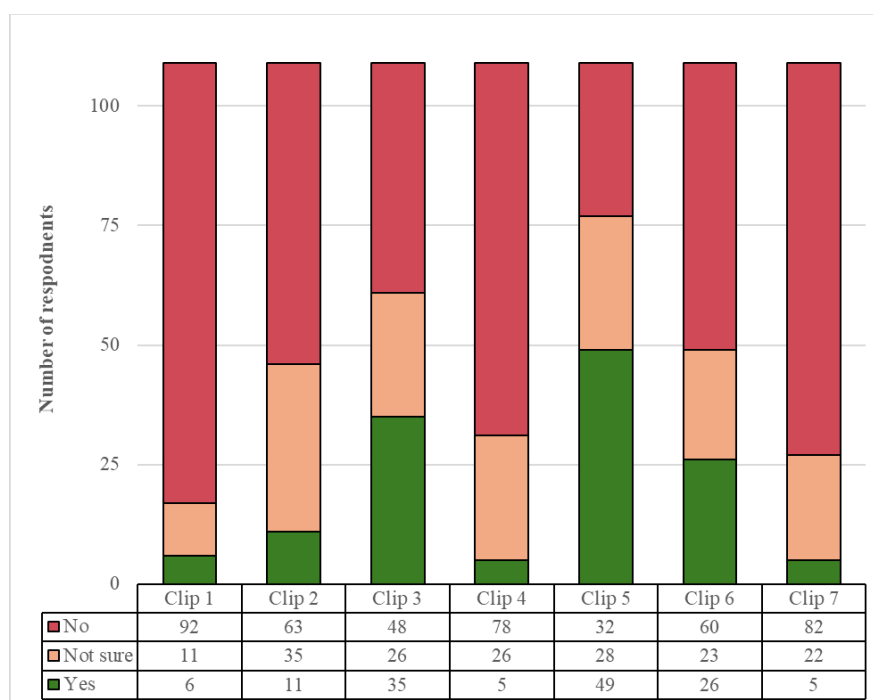

	Clip 1	Clip 2	Clip 3	Clip 4	Clip 5	Clip 6	Clip 7
No	92	63	48	78	32	60	82
Not sure	11	35	26	26	28	23	22
Yes	6	11	35	5	49	26	5

Figure 2: Respondents' familiarity with the relevant cultural elements from the clips

The results reveal a somewhat weak understanding of the cultural elements. Even though the clip was dubbed and subtitled in English by professionals, the number of viewers who required subtitles to fully understand

those references was still relatively high (27%), and the proportion of viewers who claimed to not understand them at all was even higher (54%), with some clips showing a clear dissatisfaction (e.g. Clip 1, Clip 4 and Clip 7). The only reference that was seemingly better understood was the *bikini diet* (Clip 5), probably because of the use of the generic term and the support offered by the visuals. The latter explanation was verbalised by some respondents (see Section 5.2).

Only a couple of correlations were found between the respondents' native languages (p = 0.041 for Clip 1) or language proficiency in English and their overall comprehension of the references with or without subtitles (p = 0.039 for Clip 4 and p = 0.015 for Clip 6). Even though more than half of the native speakers (25 out of 37) reported that they did not understand the cultural element from Clip 1 (*C. Tangana*), they were more likely, proportionally speaking, to understand it when compared to non-natives: 7 native speakers out of 37 compared to 3 non-native speakers out of 72. Whereas 25 respondents (out of 81) who were not fluent in Spanish understood the *bikini diet* (Clip 5) reference, only 6 understood what *copla* (Clip 4) is and more than a third failed to understand the cultural element without the subtitles. Surprisingly, out of the 10 respondents who had an intermediate level of Spanish as a foreign language, only 3 understood the reference *copla* and only 6 understood the *bikini diet* without having to resort to the subtitles. This indicates that there is not always a correlation between language proficiency and awareness of humour-bound cultural elements, especially when the visuals are of little use (i.e. *copla*).
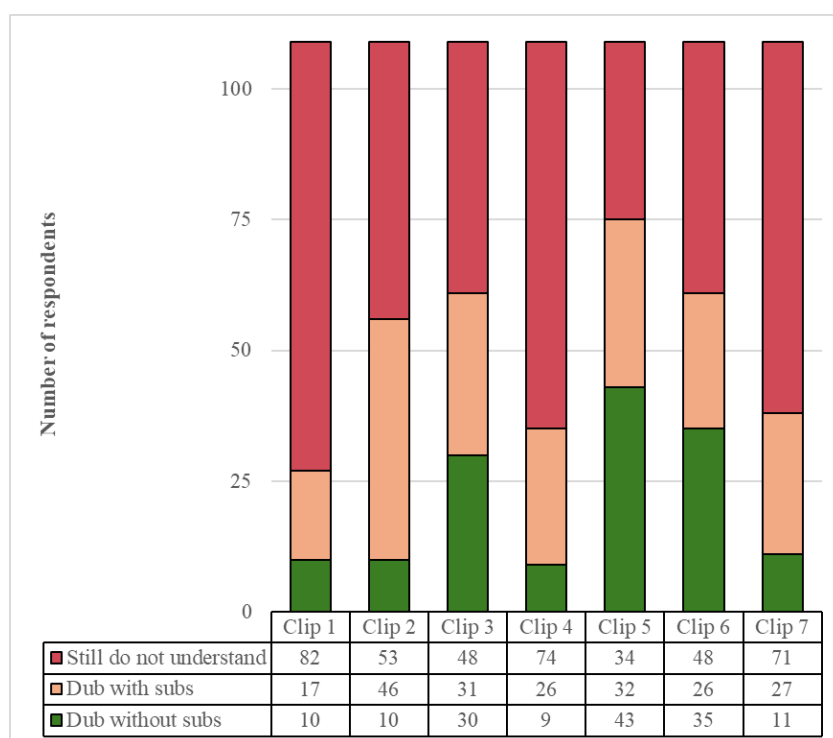

	Clip 1	Clip 2	Clip 3	Clip 4	Clip 5	Clip 6	Clip 7
Still do not understand	82	53	48	74	34	48	71
Dub with subs	17	46	31	26	32	26	27
Dub without subs	10	10	30	9	43	35	11

Figure 3: Level of understanding of cultural elements with or without subtitles

When asked whether the transfer of humour was successful in the English-language dub, most of the answers could be categorised as *neither agree nor disagree* (33%), closely followed by *agree* (31%). A much greater proportion of respondents, however, were dissatisfied with the English dub in terms of

humour transfer (41% of dissatisfaction compared to 35% of satisfaction) overall.

A few correlations were found in personal traits such as gender identification in Clip 2 (p = 0.26) and age in Clip 4 (p = 0.002) and Clip 6 (p = 0.03). Male and non-binary respondents were more likely to (completely) disagree that the humorous component had been successfully transferred to the English-language dub of Clip 2 (*primera comunión*). In both Clip 4 (*copla*) and Clip 6 (*Ave María*), respondents who were 43 or older tended to (completely) disagree, whereas the answers of younger respondents mostly selected *neither agree nor disagree*, which may indicate that they were probably unfamiliar with the reference itself. That said, more young participants *agreed* the humour of Clip 6 was transferred well compared to Clip 4. Interestingly, the language factor threw a double correlation in Clip 7 (*Operación Triunfo* singers), both in terms of native English language (p = 0.03) and fluency in English as a foreign language (p = 0.03), indicating that native speakers were more likely to enjoy the dub when compared to non-native speakers.

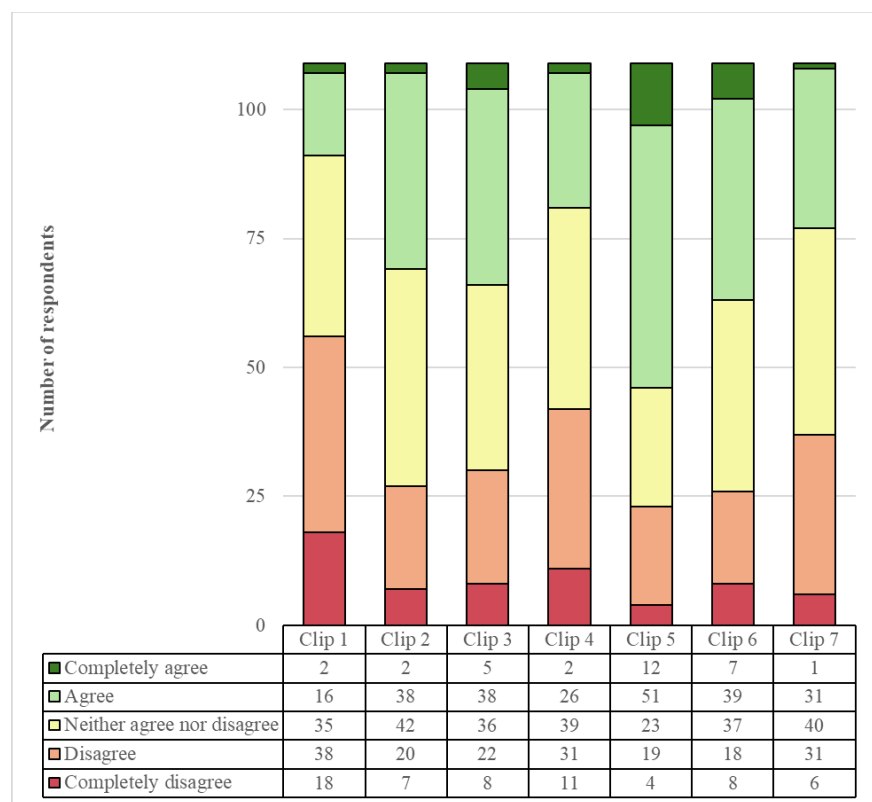|	Clip 1	Clip 2	Clip 3	Clip 4	Clip 5	Clip 6	Clip 7
■ Completely agree	2	2	5	2	12	7	1
□ Agree	16	38	38	26	51	39	31
□ Neither agree nor disagree	35	42	36	39	23	37	40
□ Disagree	38	20	22	31	19	18	31
■ Completely disagree	18	7	8	11	4	8	6

Figure 4: Degree of satisfaction with dubbed clip's transfer of culture-bound humour

Respondents chose alternative translations for each clip, and the proposals were ranged depending on their reflecting the conservation of the elements (*retention* and *specification*), an adaptation (*limited* and *absolute universalisation*) or a substitution (*naturalisation* and *elimination*).

There was a disparity of opinions, and as illustrated in Figure 5, *retention* was the technique that was more widely preferred (191, 25%), which could be due to the resemblance with the dubbed version or the audiences' preference for retaining the cultural essence of audiovisual products in dubbing. The fact that *no answer* was chosen 119 times (15.50%) might be an indication that several

respondents might not have fully understood some references because of their Spanish fluency (or have not understood the reference whatsoever). Interestingly, 45% of the respondents chose a substitution technique, with *absolute universalisation* being the most popular among these.
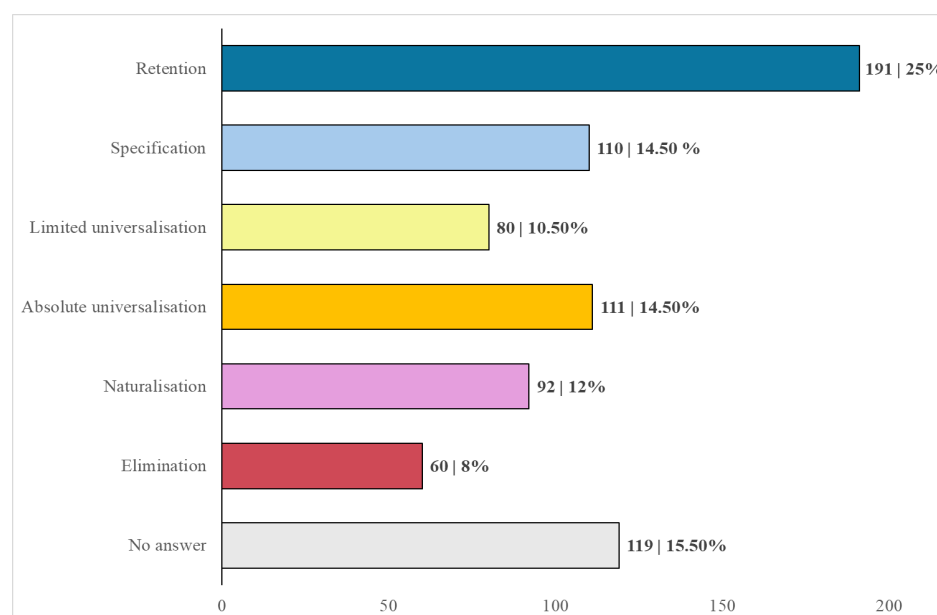

Figure 5: Respondents' preference for translation techniques in percentage values

Translation being a context-dependent practice in which there are no one-size-fits-all solutions, the respondents' preferred translation techniques varied greatly depending on each instance (see Figure 6). For example, substitution techniques prevailed in the scenarios with less universal elements such as *C. Tangana* (Clip 1) and *copla* (Clip 4), whereas the *bikini diet* (Clip 5) was considered more universal and thus understandable, so there was an overall agreement to retain it in the target version.

Several correlations were found between the audiences' preferred translation technique and gender. This was the case for Clip 2 (p = < 0.001), Clip 4 (p = 0.045) and Clip 7 (p = 0.33). This is a compelling finding, not least because those cultural elements regard sexuality and feminism. Indeed, in Clip 2, one of the characters explicitly says she dressed like a boy when she did her first communion; in Clip 4, a gay man makes a joke about gay stereotypes; and in Clip 7, the female protagonist makes a feminist riposte to her male friend. In Clip 2, the higher proportion of answers coincides between respondents who identify as female (24 chose *retention* and 15 chose *N/A*, out of 77) and male (11 chose *retention* and 6 chose *N/A*, out of 30), but a higher proportion of the former chose *absolute universalisation* (16) compared to the latter (3). The only non-binary respondent chose *elimination*, which only coincides with another 7 respondents (3 female and 4 male). In Clip 4, those same female respondents were much more likely to select *naturalisation* (18) or *absolute universalisation* (15) compared to male respondents, whose answers were more diverse and equally distributed across all techniques. This suggests that viewers' gender might affect their translation preferences and overall approach to cultural adaptation, though this statement would require further substantiation and is not the main aim of our study.

Strikingly, the only correlation between the respondents' educational backgrounds and their preferred translation techniques was found for the more universal element *bikini diet* from Clip 5 (p = 0.007) – those with a background in languages or translation (90) were far more likely to choose certain techniques such as *naturalisation* and *elimination* (12 and 4, respectively), compared to none of the other 19 respondents. As for similarities between both groups, *retention* and *specification* were chosen by 37 and 27 respondents with a background in languages or translation as well as 4 and 3 respondents with no education or professional experience in the industry, both of which account for approximately one third of responses. Several additional correlations were found between the regions where respondents lived and their responses to Clip 2 (p = 0.10), Clip 3 (p = 0.038), and Clip 6 (p = 0.009). We may argue that this could be explained by the higher proportion of Asian respondents (37 in total) who were unfamiliar with the references and hence did not understand them (13 in Clip 2, 7 in Clip 3, and 9 in Clip 6). Even so, another interesting fact is Europeans' (67) slight preference for *retention* in Clip 2 (28), Clip 3 (24) and Clip 6 (27), not least because though the first two religion-related references were probably more popular or less opaque, the third one refers to a pop song from the early noughties that is arguably less well-known among non-Spanish viewers.
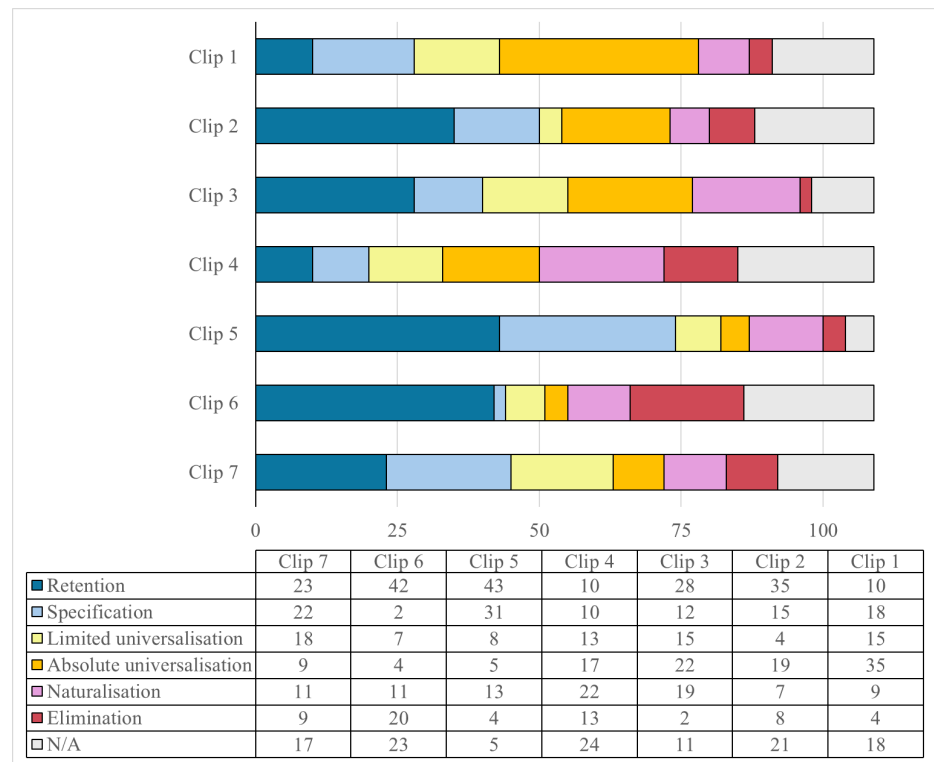

	Clip 7	Clip 6	Clip 5	Clip 4	Clip 3	Clip 2	Clip 1
Retention	23	42	43	10	28	35	10
Specification	22	2	31	10	12	15	18
Limited universalisation	18	7	8	13	15	4	15
Absolute universalisation	9	4	5	17	22	19	35
Naturalisation	11	11	13	22	19	7	9
Elimination	9	20	4	13	2	8	4
N/A	17	23	5	24	11	21	18

Figure 6: Preferred translation techniques for each clip

5.2. Qualitative data

Participants were invited to answer one open-ended question to explain and justify their answers. Out of the total sample of 146 (FS), only 46 respondents (32%) answered this question to justify their choices and to offer their views on the dubbed clips. Their answers were carefully reviewed, and Nvivo was used to establish comparisons and identify recurrent trends. Once the categories and

nodes presented in Table 4 were created, the answers were manually analysed and tagged so that they pertained to at least one of the below nodes.

Table 4: Qualitative data organised in categories and nodes

Category	Node	Frequency
Viewing preferences	Preference for subtitling over dubbing	5
Comprehension of and familiarity with source culture	Positive perception	3
	Negative perception	14
Attitudes towards content adaptation	Target-oriented preference	7
	Source-oriented preference	10
Translation-specific strategies and approaches	Importance of context and visuals	12
	Importance of target audiences' needs	3
	Importance of reduction	2
	Issues caused by literal translation	3

The 59 references in Table 4 reflect the similarities that were identified in the sample. The fact that there are more references than respondents indicates that some of them produced longer statements and addressed more than one topic. The fact that some respondents verbalised explanations for quantitative answers also means that a disparity of opinions could be observed. Such differences pose a challenge to properly glean similarities in the perception of culture-bound humour, but they also indicate that, as explained in the next section, much of AVT specialists' work, as that with other professionals within the translation industry, remains highly subjective and open to external criticism given the vulnerability caused by this type of translation, as explained in Section 1.

The qualitative analysis also reveals that many respondents thought that the retention techniques used in the dubbing somehow detracted from the quality of the clip, thereby affecting comprehension of the source culture and the transfer of the humorous passages. Some participants argued that the dub was "ambiguous" (participant id 119) and that "translations may get the humour across but the voices don't" (participant id 6). These comments somehow aligned with the negative perception harboured by several participants, who thought that when the viewer is unfamiliar with a certain reference "the entire meaning is lost" (participant id 9). Many respondents also stressed the fact that, as non-native speakers of Spanish, they had a very limited understanding of the cultural elements and that "humour is almost completely lost in the dubbed version because it requires that the target audience be familiar with the Spanish culture" (participant id 125). As one participant put it, "as a native English speaker, this is so far from sense [sic] of humour and I didn't find it funny as I don't understand what they say" (participant id 107), though it could also be argued that native speakers of Spanish may have a similar reaction to those instances of culture-bound humour even if they can fully understand them. The three respondents who showed a positive perception of their comprehension acknowledged their understanding of Spanish culture and yet argued that the

translations assumed "a certain level of pre-existing knowledge of the source culture" (participant id 73). There were around twenty references to translation-specific strategies and approaches. Over half of those referred to the importance of the visuals, such as the context, and the characters' gestures. One of the respondents stated that "replacing them would be problematic because we have some visuals (posters of bands), so there would be a disconnect between what is said and what is shown" (participant id 51).

Respondents also commented on the fact that the adaptation of cultural elements and humour often oscillates between a closer adherence to the source culture (literal approaches or conservation) or more adaptation to the target culture (creative approaches or substitution). Whereas some argued that "more references to the target culture would help reach a higher level of humour in the dubbed version" (participant id 158), some others argued "I want the Spanish cultural references to be preserved in the translation, even if I don't know them" (participant id 150). There were around ten arguments for the retention of cultural elements as a means to make viewers more aware of the relevant culture and provide them with the opportunity to learn something new. However, some comments (e.g. "it would have been better if there were explanations to the culture-specific items using subtitling", participant id 112) fly in the face of professional practice. Indeed, professional subtitlers and dubbing translators cannot add translator's notes or explanations as described by Franco Aixelá (1996) with reference to the use of glosses which was not appropriate for audiovisual texts. They must therefore make context-dependent, informed decisions on whether instances of culture and humour can be maintained, and in what way.

6. Discussion

The results revealed that a vast majority of participants had very little or no understanding of humour-bound cultural elements in the English dub with or without the subtitles (54%), with only 27% of respondents understanding references thanks to the subtitles and a perhaps negligible 19% being able to understand references through the dubbed dialogue alone. These results are in line with the fact that most respondents were unfamiliar with or at least unsure whether they were familiar with the humour-bound cultural elements (82%). They are also in line with the fact that a third of respondents were unsure the humorous component had been successfully transferred in the English dub. Unsurprisingly, after applying the exclusions it became obvious that fewer respondents understood references using the dub alone (19% in SS versus 23% in FS), reflecting a lack of familiarity with the references (82% in SS versus 78%). the findings reveal that those respondents who were not relatively fluent in Spanish struggled to grasp certain elements of the culture-bound humour in the programmes when dubbed. It should be noted that in this study a third of respondents were native speakers of English (48 in FS versus 37 in SS) compared to two-thirds of non-native speakers (98 in FS versus 72 in SS) who were very fluent in English.

As illustrated in Table 5, lay audiences' perceptions differ very little from the ones reported previously in Case Study 1 (Ogea Pozo et al., 2023) and Case Study 2 (Botella Tejera et al., 2024). The translation techniques summary (see Figure 5 in Section 5) indicates that respondents showed a slight preference for substitution techniques (45%) versus conservation techniques (39.50%). Previous findings, however, revealed a stronger preference for conservation

techniques, namely 49% in Case Study 1 and 45.50% Case Study 2). The lower preferences for these techniques observed in the current study may have a twofold explanation: firstly, the sample in case studies 1 and 2 consisted of undergraduate students of English-Spanish and Spanish-English translation with a very high command of both languages; and, secondly, in the study reported on here (Case Study 3), the language and educational background factors meant that the *no answer* option was chosen in 16% of all cases.

This study has revealed a significantly lesser preference for *specification* compared to previous studies (14.50% versus 21%), and *naturalisation*, which also shows a lower value (12% compared to 15% and 18%, respectively). In light of this comparison, a logical assumption would be that respondents who do not know the references prefer to choose *no answer*, and that those who do understand the references and would like to retain the flavour of the original would opt for *retention* (hence aligning with the overall strategy of the English dub).

Table 5: Comparison of translation technique preferences across studies

		Case Study 1 (Ogea Pozo et al., 2023)	Case Study 2 (Botella Tejera et al., 2024)	Case Study 3 (this research)
		57 undergraduate students (English native speakers)	55 undergraduate students (Spanish native speakers)	109 lay viewers (non-Spanish native speakers)
Conservation	Retention	28%	24.50%	**25%**
	Specification	21%	21%	**14.50%**
		49%	45.50%	**39.50%**
Substitution	Limited universalisation	9%	15%	**10.50%**
	Absolute universalisation	17%	15.50%	**14.50%**
	Naturalisation	15%	18%	**12%**
	Elimination	10%	6%	**8%**
		51%	54.50%	**45%**
Other	N/A	-	-	**15.50%**

It should be noted that all humour-bound cultural elements from the excerpts came under the first category (*retention* as a form of cultural conservation), so it can be argued that the translators aimed to retain the flavour of the original Spanish culture in the English dub. However, as revealed by the above comparison of all studies, there was a slight preference for substitution techniques when adapting foreign content to English dubs. The fact that a larger proportion of respondents chose substitution techniques in the current study of English dubs – thereby echoing the results obtained by Božović (2019) – may

mean that respondents were not happy with the current conservation approaches that AVT specialists seem to follow when localising comedy series into English, which perhaps resemble the subtitles too closely.

The qualitative results set out in Section 5.2 further show that the elements analysed were found to be below par in terms of both culture comprehension and humorous effect in the target language. Considering that viewers watched authentic clips with professional dubbing translations, this result could be deemed far from desirable and would therefore suggest that there is need for greater reflection on how foreign references are being adapted in English-language dubs, and the extent to which retention techniques are useful to convey instances of culture-bound humour.

7. Conclusion

This paper has reported on a study on the reception of culture-bound humour in English dubs with a particular emphasis on audiences' perceptions of cultural and humorous comprehension and transfer. Based on the extant literature, we propose triangulating the results of this study with those of our previous experiments to establish the similarities and propose a way forward.

This study has revealed that most respondents experienced significant difficulties in understanding instances of culture-bound humour in the English-language dubs to which they were exposed. They also expressed some concern over the appropriateness of the humour transfer, which did not offer very good results overall, though these heavily depended on the degree of universality of the cultural elements (e.g. *copla* versus *bikini diet*). Many participants found that the English dub, together with the subtitles, was not sufficient to understand the cultural elements that had been preserved in the target version using *retention*. Arguably, this means that the lack of localisation of cultural elements in this comedy series, as required by Netflix[2], is not entirely successful in English. What is more, the study has revealed that a sizeable proportion of participants (46%) would instead prefer substitution techniques. This fact, together with the 16% of respondents who did not reply to this question, indicates that the preference for conservation techniques was obvious. We have also argued that the fact that *retention* was the technique used in Netflix's official dubbed and subtitled versions may have influenced the respondents' preferences, since 26% chose *retention*.

This research echoes the findings of other AVT scholars such as Božović (2019). The overall approach maintained by translators when transferring culture-bound humour in English-language dubs and subtitles surely stems from their awareness of the vulnerability caused by AVT practices (see Orrego-Carmona, 2021) and is encouraged by localisation providers and end clients (e.g. Netflix); however, this finding is not entirely aligned with the findings of other scholars such as Hayes & Bolaños García-Escribano (2022), who have previously suggested that the dubbing of Netflix's Spanish series and films into English often results in the standardisation of the original accents. This disparity suggests that there is a mismatch between the techniques applied by script translators (for instance, when adapting humour-bound cultural elements) and the actual voice performance and delivery of English dubs, where the voice actors emulate accents as instructed by the dubbing directors. Reception and

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[2] Netflix's position on the localisation of cultural references can be found here: https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com.

perception studies can offer a much-needed (albeit limited) introspection into audiences' preferences in the form of experiments. The characteristics of the participants of this study, most of whom had some experience in languages or translation, constitute a limitation that we would like to acknowledge. Additionally, the sample size and the number of clips constitute another limitation, which makes it impossible for to generalise based on the findings. Therefore, future in-person experiments with considerably more non-native speakers with no knowledge of languages or translation would be welcome to continue gauging audiences' perceptions of English-language dubs.

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