Violence in the funny pages

By Julian Wilder

If there is one thing that is tied to its mother culture it is humor. Political humor's ties to its source culture are perhaps even stronger than "ordinary" humor's because the topics of political jokes are inherently tied to a specific socio-political environment. So when the time comes to translate political humor, violence in translation is unavoidable because it is necessary to rewrite or at least modify the original joke or pun to make it work in the target language and target culture[1]. Violence in the translation of politically themed comic strips is heightened by the fact that in a strip a translator does not have to deal only with textual elements, but he also has to work with and around the graphical elements of the stip. This paper will analyze how violence presents itself in the translation of comic strips using the Argentine strip *Mafalda* and its French translation[2] as a point of reference due to the fact that while politics are an important theme in many of its strips, *Mafalda*'s humor has been successfully translated to many languages in many different countries. Part of the analysis will also be dedicated to reflect on whether all types of violence occur for the same reasons and whether violence is always justified or if there are cases where external reasons force the translator to increase the violence of his work.

Before starting to analyze how violence can be seen in the translation of the strip, some basic information on the strip will help understand why it proved to be popular enough to warrant a translation. As mentioned before, *Mafalda* is an Argentine strip written and drawn by Joaquín Salvador Lavado (better known by his pen name, Quino) that ran from 1964 to 1973. The strip stars a 6-year-old girl named Mafalda and her friends and family, all of whom represent different aspects of Argentine society. The strip has been translated to over thirty languages and is still

[1] "The substantive nature of humor, like that of language, varies across cultures: what is mocked may vary from one culture to another" (Apte, 178). Modifications or rewrites are then supposed to bridge the differences between the nature of humor in the source- and target cultures so the joke is funny in both of them.

[2] Specifically, the 2000s Glénat edition will be used as it is the most readily available.

very popular in Latin America, Europe, Quebec, and Asia, and lead to two animated shorts series (which for the most part adapted different strips) and two movies: the first one was released in 1981 and collected the animated shorts, and a second original movie by Cuban filmmaker Juan Padrón released in 1993. The few times Quino has gone back to his most famous character since the strip finished have mostly been to promote human rights, the most famous occasion being an illustration on the Conventions on the Right of the Child for UNICEF in 1976.

Mafalda, who is deeply concerned about humanity and world peace and constantly rebels against the current state of the world, sets the pace of the strip which contains a lot of political and social commentary directed not only at Argentine society but also at Western society in general. The political aspect of the strip was not unusual when it was being published as most Latin American strips dealt with these topics, something that continues to various degrees to this day. Unfortunately, their sometimes explicit political content is also the reason why many strips published during the mid- to-late 60s and early 70s did not last longer: during this period many military governments rose to power all over the continent with the objective of eradicating "subversive elements" in society through the use of violence and censorship.

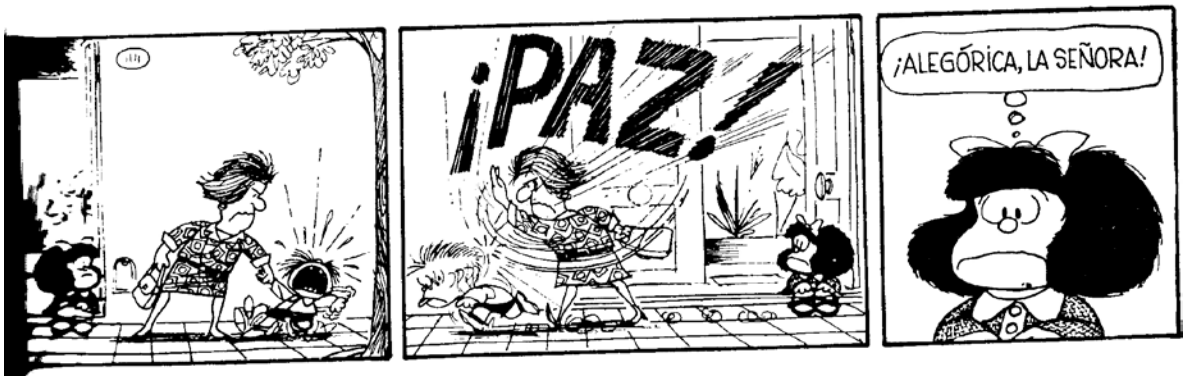
Ironically enough, *Mafalda* sometimes used the tense political climate of its time as a source of humor. In one strip, for example, Mafalda walks past a graffiti that says *¡Basta de censu* (Enough censorsh-!) which prompts her to think *O se le acabó la pintu, o no pu termi por razo que son del domin publi* (He either ran out of pai, or he couldn fini for reaso which are publicl kno). The humor of this strip worked in its original context and can work in translation for the same reason, because it is putting a childish spin on the very serious topic of censorship. Unfortunately this social commentary sometimes placed the strip in an awkward position socially as "[n]ationalist sectors that dominated the Left in the early 1970s felt that its over and implied demythifying commentaries on national foibles and pretensions were too 'cutesy' and timid, while conservative segments tended to see the strip's perspective on everyday middle-class Argentine life as 'smart-aleck'" (Foster, 54). The fact that the strip did not link itself strongly to either of these political sectors ended up helping it later on.

Because the strip's political content was not particularly critical of political sectors on the right or left it could be accepted to a certain degree by both of those groups, and also because its humor is not very aggressive, foreign publishers can accept it more easily as they do not have to fear their readers being offended. Amanda McDonald adds that a reason for the popularity of foreign comics in the French market is that French readers are "less worried about the economical relation of part to whole and more concerned to acknowledge the plurality of culture, to show that there is no French culture, but rather French cultures" (McDonald, 192). This means that foreign comics are popular in France because French readers do not focus only on the foreign elements of the strip but try to see how those elements resonate in their own culture, something that would not be possible if they were offended by the strip's politics.

While the strip was originally published in a politically violent climate, the violence discussed in this paper is not a product of that but a part of the translation process. In "The Translator's Invisibility", Lawrence Venuti defines translation as "the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target-language reader" and then adds that "this difference can never be entirely removed" (Venuti, 18). Violence in translation then is the forcible replacement of one cultural system for another that is required to make a translation work, but it is an imperfect replacement because traces of the original always remain, something which reveals the initial violence. French translations of *Mafalda* remove of modify elements of its source culture as they would not be understandable for French readers but they do so without fully removing all traces of that culture, which means that the strip is still seen as a foreign cultural product which has been made to work in French culture.

One must keep in mind that although violence is an inherent part of the translation process it does not always occur in the same degree or for the same reasons. For example, when translating a simple Spanish sentence such as *feliz cumpleaños* into English (happy birthday) the only violence on a meaning level is the replacement of the original language system for the target language system. On a deeper level the replacement is more violent as Spanish and English

speaking cultures celebrate birthdays differently, but on the more surface level of meaning this is a relatively peaceful translation. Now, compare that level of violence with the level that would exist on the translation of this *Mafalda* strip:



Here the joke relies on the relationship between the drawing of the mother slapping her crying son, the onomatopoeia which reflects the sound of the slap, and Mafalda's closing thought (which roughly translates as "allegorical lady!"). Unfortunately the meaning of Mafalda's thought is totally lost unless one understands that *paz* is Spanish for "peace", and so the humor comes from the juxtaposition of a violent act and a peaceful word which, when spoken, sounds similar to the sound created by the aforementioned violent act. Because the French word for peace (*paix*) does not sound very similar to a slap, the translator would have three options when translating this joke: rework the joke in some way to include the onomatopoeia as is, edit the onomatopoeia to replace the Spanish word for a French word which sounds similar and has a similar meaning, or a combination of the previous two options. A translation of this strip then would be much more violent regardless of which option the translator chooses, because he is either changing the textual element joke and its original meaning or he is changing the graphical elements of the strip. If the translator leaves the original onomatopoeia in the translation then the violence would not just be higher, it would also be more noticeable as there would be a visible remnant of the original.

In the field of comics translation theory a translation made within the limitations created by the relationship of a comic strip's cultural, textual and graphical elements, such as the one in the previous example, is called a constrained translation. In their article on loss and gain in the translation of comics, Maria Grun and Cay Dollerup define constrained translation as "translations that are, for practical or commercial reasons, spatially limited […] [Comics] are limited spatially in that translations must fit into balloons or panels, and in that they have a specific objective. The comics under review are funny and must make the written words (in source- as well as target texts) conform with the pictures in order to 'function' adequately" (Grun and Dollerup, 198). So comics are constrained in four ways: by the relationship between the text and the graphical elements[3] (if a translation does not correspond to what a character can be seen doing then it is not acceptable), by the graphical elements themselves (translations of dialogue must fit into a word balloons), by the function of the strip (a strip is supposed to be humorous, so if a translation is not funny then it is not acceptable) and by commercial reasons (a translation that requires heavy graphical editing would not be accepted by a publisher who cannot pay someone to make the necessary changes). These limitations also apply to other elements of the strip such as the name (e.g. in Spanish speaking countries the American strip *Peanuts* was renamed *Snoopy* to make it more marketable to children). Violence in comics translation is fueled by these limitations, as a translator may have to heavily modify strips to be able to work within them[4].

When a translator is forced to modify a strip because of commercial reasons one can see an interesting perspective on how to balance the loss and gain in the translation process of a comic

[3] Scott McCloud calls this relationship "interdependent word/picture combination" and defines it the following way: "words and pictures go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone" (Mccloud, 155). This means that both elements are just as important because they are dependent on each other.

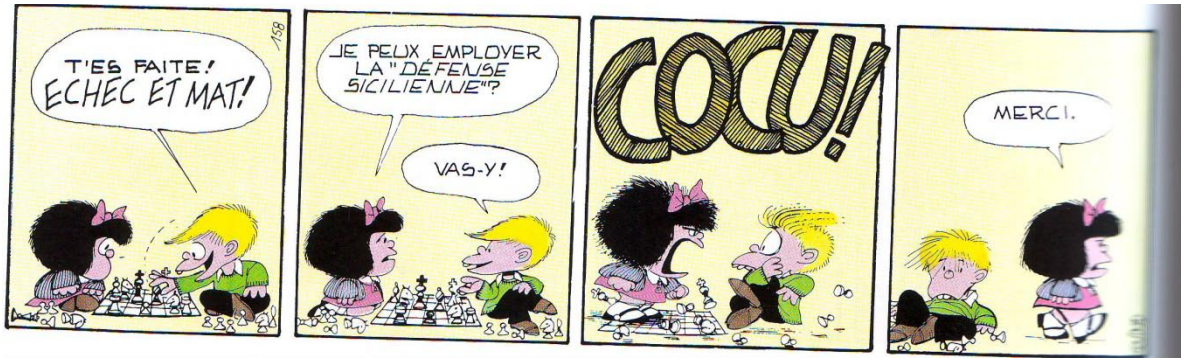
[4] Something similar happens in the subtitling process of films or television show, where translations are limited by what is being translated and by the subtitling system being used. For more information on this topic see Markus Nornes' "For an Abusive Subtitling".

strip. In the previous example of how the *paz* strip could be translated into French, all the losses caused by the violence in translation can be said to be balanced by the fact that the strip either gains a new meaning after having been translated or, more importantly, by the fact that maintaining the humor of the strip is the main objective in the translation of humor. So, if I can justify changes in the translation process under the umbrella of maintaining the strip's humour, then why is it any worse to justify a change in the focus of the strip to make it reach a wider audience? Commercial reasons may sound less noble than literary reasons, but they are just as important because, as mentioned, before if the strip does not sell then it will not be published.

In her book on translation of humour Brigid Maher discusses how a lot of translators of humor think that functional accuracy is more important than semantic accuracy, meaning that they think that "retaining the humor should be a priority, even if this means changing the meaning of a pun or nonsense word" (Maher, 6). If one thinks the main function of a comic strip is not to be humorous but to sell or entertain a wide audience, then this is a valid justification for the violence behind commercially oriented changes: retaining marketability should be a priority, even if this means changing the focus of a strip or some of its elements.

If one wants to justify commercially driven violence another way then it is helpful to use Grun and Dollerup's ideas of loss and gain in translation. While some theorists, like Eugene Nida, talk only about loss and gain, Grun and Dollerup mix these categories and instead of talking about pure gain they talk about gain with and without loss. They say that "'gain without loss' is found when the target-language text is more specific than the source-language text" (they give the example of how the English word "cousin" indicates family relationship but not gender while the Danish equivalent does) and "'gain with loss' is found in cases in which there are no 1:1 lexical equivalents in the source- and target languages, and where translators succeed in producing translations that have more facets than the original while at the same time being consistent with the totality of the translation" (Grun and Dollerup, 198). So, if one sees commercially based violence under this lens then one could say that it is a case of gain with loss: you lose elements of the original but as long as you remain consistent to the changes you have made then you have gained both a new audience and a new way to see the text.

Sometimes though, the loss present in the translation of a strip can be greater than its gain because of the translator's inability to fully understand the strip's joke. For example, in one strip Mafalda is reading the phone book and notices how common the last name "Pérez" is. When the joke has to be translated to other languages or cultures the last name probably has to be changed because "Pérez" may not be a common name in the country where the translation is going to be published. In the French translation the translator replaced "Pérez" with "Dupont", a common surname in France. In this case the translator understood that the joke is based on the commonality of "Pérez" as a surname in Argentina and replaced it with one appropriate for a French audience. A violent act to be sure, as it erases the original culture behind the strip, but a justified one, as it allows the translation to work in a French environment and balances the loss and gain. Now, compare the violence present in the replacement of a surname with the violence present in this strip:



After Felipe calls checkmate Mafalda asks if she can use the Sicilian defense[5]. Once he agrees she proceeds to yell and, having scared Felipe, simply walks away and thanks him. So, does the joke work in French? At a glance one would have to say it does. But the real question is why does Mafalda yell *cocu* after asking Felipe if she could use the Sicilian defense? *Cocu* is a French word which can be translated as "sucker" and which has no connection to the chess

[5] This is an actual popular chess move that has existed since at least the 1600s. The move could be considered to be part of the recurring joke that Mafalda and Felipe do not really know how to play chess as this move is used at the beginning of a game, not after someone calls checkmate.

move. The explanation for this can be found in the original, where Mafalda yelled *mascalzone!* It does not matter whether the reader knows what the word means (it can be translated as “rascal” or “scoundrel”), what is important is that an Argentine reader would recognize it as Italian and understand the connection between the name of the chess move and what Mafalda is yelling.

Why did the translator change the onomatopoeia without changing the balloon in the previous panel then? As mentioned before, *cocu* has not relationship to the chess move or to Italian language or culture, so the change is not only bizarre, but it is also incredibly violent because the original word would have worked in French just as well as it did in the original. While in the original Mafalda was making a pun with the name of the move, in this translation she is calling Felipe a sucker for believing that she was actually going to use that move, a completely different joke.

A possible reason for the violence in the translation of this strip is that the translator misunderstood the joke. As mentioned before, *mascalzone* is Italian for scoundrel, so it is possible that the translator thought Mafalda yelled at Felipe because she thought he cheated in some way and so now she wants to make him feel cheated. This is certainly a somewhat dubious reason for the change as it would require the translator to believe that Italian was widely spoken in Argentina and used in comic strips, but it does speak to a source of violence that is not justifiable: if a translator knows little of the culture where the strip was produced then he may modify it and erase the source culture from it, something that is inexcusable because if a translator is working on something as bound to culture as humor then he must know as much as possible about the source culture. If the translator works on a text produced by a culture which he does not know then the resulting violence caused by his misunderstanding of that source culture would result in a loss of elements of that culture which would not be balanced by the gain of new meaning or by elements of the target culture, so those changes would not be justifiable.

While a change brought about because of a misunderstanding on the part of the translator is unjustifiable, if the translator changes a strip to make it fit the target culture then the change is

justifiable. In the *cocu* strip mentioned before, another possible explanation for the change in the onomatopoeia could be how French people see Italians. Italians are seen by the French as rude and loud, so it could be said that the connection between the chess move and Mafalda's yell is that she is being rude and loud, just like anyone from Sicily would be. What Mafalda is yelling has then been translated to make the stereotype clearer. This is also a somewhat dubious explanation for the change as it assumes all French readers have the same view of Italians, which would be less likely if the intended readers are very young, but unlike the other explanation this time the change would be justifiable. Under this lens the joke relies on a cultural notion that is entirely French, which means the violence has been used to fully adapt the joke to its target culture, something that makes this an example of justifiable violence. This strip is interesting then because it allows us to see how important it is to have a justification for any violence.

As it has been explained before some of the limitations that bind the translation of comic strips are commercial and while changes brought about by these limitations are very varied they all have the same justification behind them: they help make the strip more marketable and increase its sales. We have already established that this is a perfectly valid and justifiable reason to modify a strip (if a strip does not sell then a translation is not necessary) but it does not mean that any and all kind of modifications are acceptable. The key to understanding which modifications are acceptable and which ones are not is to look at whether the publisher remembered to take into account the elements that make up the strip before approving any commercially based changes. If the publisher has not then the changes are most likely not justifiable.

One example of commercially based changes that could be said to have ignored a graphical element of the strip can be seen thanks to Glénat's decision to color *Mafalda* for this edition. The only reason the original strip was in black and white is that most newspapers in Argentina did not switch to color until the 1990s. While the coloring could perhaps be seen as a violent change (it erases an element of the strip which connects it to the time when it was produced) it is the result of technical progress, so it can be said to be justified, especially as all coloring changes follow the patterns set by the animated shorts and movies which were approved by Quino and so

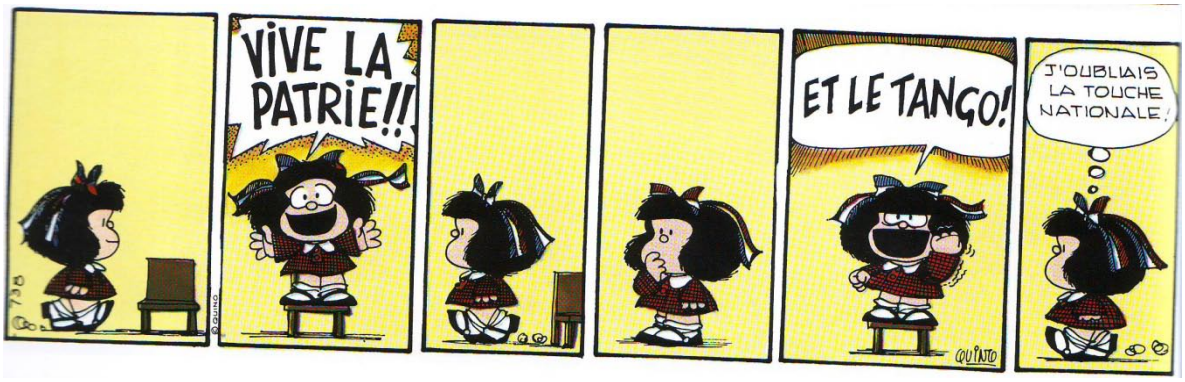
are faithful to the original. Furthermore, Glénat's decision to color the strips are justified by the fact that most Western comics published in France are in color, as opposed to *manga* which is usually published in the original black and white.

Color comics are popular in France because they follow the style set by René Goscinny's *Asterix* and Hergé's *Tintin* known as "clear-line style". Scott McCloud says this style "combines very iconic characters with unusually realistic backgrounds. This combination allows readers to mask themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating world" (McCloud, 42-43) and further adds that "[i]n black and white the ideas behind the art are communicated directly. Meaning transcends form. [...] In flat color forms themselves take on more significance" (ibid, 192). *Mafalda* does not follow this style as closely as *Asterix* or *Tintin* do because a lot of strips include little to no background and the color tends to only make the characters more noticeable. This may have been Glénat's intention when they tried to imitate this style. The backdrop of the strip (its Argentine setting) becomes less important. Meanwhile, the characters, which are the more marketable element of the strip, become more real to the reader who can more easily relate to them.

The 2000s Glénat edition could be said to go against another of the strip's basic elements in a very obvious way: the name they gave to the each volume in this edition. Whereas in the original collection the third volume is simply called "*Mafalda* Volume three", in the Glénat edition the volume was given the title *Mafalda Revient* (*Mafalda* Returns). Once again this change shows the impact that *Asterix* and *Tintin* have on the French comics market as each volume in those series has a similar naming scheme (series name + subtitle) and the collections of other Western comics have been modified to adopt that scheme. In the case of *Mafalda* one could say that this change appear to be misleading the reader into believing that *Mafalda* is a comic in the style of *Asterix* or *Tintin* or into believing that this is a more childish comic strip when it was originally

aimed at a more adult audience[6]. Once again the justification for this change boils down to commercial reasons. Adapting the collection to fit the more popular naming scheme used by the French publishing market enhances the strips marketability as it reminds potential buyers of *Asterix* and *Tintin* and increases the chances they will buy *Mafalda*.

Unfortunately in certain strips, such as in the following one, the commercially driven changes have not been properly planned among all parties involved in the translation-coloring process and have come into conflict with the strip's graphical elements.



In the second panel of this strip Mafalda yells "long live the homeland!" and in the fifth panel adds "and tango!" because, as she explains in the last panel, she "forgot the national touch". If the reader knows that tango is traditionally seen as Argentina's national dance then he or she would have no problem understanding this joke. Unfortunately in this case the coloring created a big problem: why would Mafalda add tango as a national touch if her ribbon sports the colors of the French flag? While tango may be popular in France it is far from being popular enough for her to use it as the national touch she wants to add to her proclamation.

[6] This can be seen more clearly in the English edition where the strip has been renamed *Mafalda and Friends*. Ironically though, that edition maintained the original naming scheme for each volume and did not include subtitles.

The reason for the contradictory nature of Mafalda's statement resides in the coloring of her ribbon. In the original Mafalda's ribbon is implied to sport the colors of Argentina's flag[7] but in the translation the colors were changed to those of the French flag[8], something that only has two possible explanations: one would be that Glénat decided as a general rule that whenever the Argentine colors appear in the strip they have to be changed to France's so the reader could see Mafalda as a French citizen and better relate to her, the second one would be that when they hired a colorist they did not inform him of the strips origin's and so he assumed this is a French strip and colored the ribbon accordingly. While extremely violent (as its Argentine origins are a big part of the strip and this erases them) the first explanation is somewhat justified if one assumes that Glénat was also trying to aim this edition at people who do not know the strip was originally written in Argentina and thanks to this change they can relate to the main character, but the problem comes when one considers that if tango is not traditionally seen as France's national dance then the fourth panel would just undermine the coloring change and alienate and confuse the reader.

The only explanation for the contradiction between what Mafalda is saying and what the reader can see is similar to the second explanation for the coloring change. The publisher did not bother telling the translator that the strip was going to be colored and so the translator did not know he had to adjust the strip and change "tango" for "baroque" to fit the new French context. This coloring error then simply has no justification as it could have easily been avoided. The error also reflects the fact that publishers tend to give much more importance to an increase in sales over maintaining the source culture in comic strips, regardless of whether this changes harm the strip or not.

[7] This type of ribbon (called *escarapela* (rosette) in Argentina) is a traditional patriotic symbol worn during national holidays, similarly to how red poppies are worn for Remembrance Day in Canada.

[8] Presumably Mafalda's ribbon sports the colors of the French flag because that would allow a French reader to more easily identify with her, thereby increasing the strip's marketability.

After considering all these examples one can see that although violence in translation is always unavoidable there are two variations of it: justifiable and unjustifiable violence. The former can occur for literary- (such as in the *paz* example) or commercial reasons (such as coloring the strip or adding subtitles to its collections) but the latter usually only occurs for a lack of knowledge or interest in the part of the people behind the translation. The *cocu* strip can be used to see both types of violence: the change in the onomatopoeia is unjustifiable if one assumes it is the result of the translator missing the point of the original joke, but if one assumes the onomatopoeia was changed to make it fit French views on Italians then the strip is a case of justifiable violence. In cases such as this whether violence is justifiable or not is dependent on how one analyses the strip in question.

But regardless of how much scrutiny a translator expects his work to receive, if that translator wants to produce a good translation, a translation that is as faithful as possible to the original text and respects what made it important enough to be translated, then he or she should always aim for justifiable violence. Justifiable violence manages to balance the loss created by the violent process of translation and respects the cultural aspects which have made a work important enough to deserve a translation. And also, if you are going to beat up a text you should probably have a good reason to do so.

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